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Being on the Brink of the Future: Jacques Derrida and Poetics of Waiting

Na pragu prihodnosti: Jacques Derrida in poetika čakanja

Abstract: Religious anticipations are generally manifested in the form of a messianic promise or an apocalyptic warning in a vision of impending judgment. The majority of the so-called secular philosophies mirror this kind of religious prognosis as well, sometimes resulting in a utopic or dystopic vision of the future and other times in a purely formal scheme that remains endlessly open towards the other, but practically does not offer any content at all. The future is often regarded (quasi)religiously since it cannot appear as such and become present. That is why Jacques Derrida methodically distinguishes between two modes of the future – for him, the established future (*le future*), the future of the time-tables that could be represented and anticipated, belongs to the present, while the »real« future (*l'avenir*) always remains and must remain in deferral. That is the reason that he almost exclusively describes the relation of expectation towards the absent future in religious terms: promise, call, covenant, and prayer. This paper contrasts his use of a messianic vocabulary with some influential contemporary philosophers, and takes into account a linguistic background of messianic thinking.

Key words: future, anticipation, deferral, Derrida, messianism, parabolic speech

Povzetek: Religijska pričakovanja so običajno izražena v obliki mesijanskih obljub ali pa preko apokaliptičnih svaril pred bližajočo se sodbo. Tudi večina tako imenovanih sekularnih filozofij odseva tovrstna religiozna predvidevanja, včasih kot utopične ali distopične vizije sveta, drugič pa nastopajo le kot gola formalna shema, ki ostaja neskončno odprta za drugost, a ob tem ostaja praktično nedoločljiva in brez sleherne vsebine. Prihodnost pogosto motrimo (kvazi)religiozno, saj ne more nastopiti kot taka in tako postati prisotna. Zato Jacques Derrida metodično razlikuje med dvema modusoma prihodnosti – zanj ustaljena prihodnost (*le future*), prihodnost urnikov, ki jo moremo reprezentirati in pričakovati, spada k sedanjosti, medtem ko »pristna« prihodnost (*l'avenir*) vselej ostaja in mora ostati v odlogu. Zato Derrida odnos pričakovanja z odsotno prihodnostjo skoraj izključno opisuje z religijskimi koncepti: obljava, klic, zaveza

in molitev. Pričujoči članek zoperstavlja njegov mesijanski besednjak nekaterim vplivnim sodobnim filozofom in premišljuje lingvistično ozadje mesijanskega mišljenja.

Ključne besede: prihodnost, pričakovanje, odlog, Derrida, mesijanizem, parabolični govor

The striking trait of our time is a widespread conscience that the future is achieved, realized, completed and abolished. There seems to be no future (needed) anymore: all that is left is an endless present full of presence. This belief seems to be a direct negation of traditional religions, since they are formed as concrete arrangements of futural time. Nearly all religions, in essence, function as a developed relation towards what is not here (yet), what we cannot see (clearly), the unforeseen. The Jewish version of relating to the future stands out and should be recognized as a significant source of western understanding of temporality. While the influence of Jewish messianism on Marxist futurology has been well researched, we will be interested in some of the other expressions of this worldview; we'll look at the relationship with the futural in some of the other aspects of contemporary philosophy. In this regard, we'll attempt to answer the seemingly simple questions: is the future over or it has it even begun yet? And how does our common language influence those perceptions of time and veracity of the future?

1. The End of the Future?

Alain Badiou identified the previous century as the century of waiting and, in that regard, the posture of being on the lookout as its most typical artistic figure; waiting thus becomes a cardinal virtue, because it is the only existing form of intense indifference (Badiou 2007, 20–24). The previous century fetishized the idea of waiting and indecisive expectations. However, is this sentiment still relevant today, when

»we are practically bereft of any thinking of time. For just about everyone, the day after tomorrow is abstract and the day before yesterday incomprehensible. We have entered a period of a-temporality and instantaneity; this shows the extent to which, far from being a shared individual experience, time is a construction, and even, we might argue, a political construction« (105).

The century should, therefore, be praised »for having borne the epic proposal of an integral construction of time« (106), says Badiou, talking about five-year plans that shaped the temporal vision of the Soviet regime, and regrets that this epoch of (political) time arrangements has come to an end.

Does the question of what the future holds remain a relevant philosophical topic today? In the age in which remarkable proclamations of »death of the future« have been made, the future seems to be more distant than ever. While those pro-

clamations rightly oppose the messianic character of philosophy, they too hastily discard the virtue of hope as an affirmation of what is still to come. Jacques Derrida tackled some of those afutural proclamations, notably the ones that were pronouncing the end of history, made by thinkers such as Francis Fukuyama (1992). In this context at the end of the previous century, Derrida formed the concepts of »waiting without waiting«, »messianism without religion«, and »messianic without messianism«. His insistence on the virtue of waiting (hope) and assertions that the future is always worth more were made despite the nondeterministic nature of his prognosis. He was well aware that the future could even be the worse, *arrivant*¹ could well arrive as a pure evil, but this (possibility) doesn't change the reality of hope, the future is always worth more, even though it is uncertain or better precisely because it is uncertain. The certain future is no future at all.

2. Deferral after Deferral: Derrida's Philosophy of Time

While the future is not here, it effects as a cause of uncertainty. Derrida expresses this with one of his most beloved examples, the incessant paradoxical forming of a context:

»A simple phrase takes its meaning from a given context, and already makes its appeal to another one in which it will be understood; but, of course, to be understood it has to transform the context in which it is inscribed. As a result, this appeal, this promise of the future, will necessarily open up the production of a new context, wherever it may happen [*arrive*]. The future *is not present*, but *there is* an opening onto it; and because *there is* a future [*il y a de l'avenir*], a context is always open. What we call opening of the context is another name for what is still to come.« (2001, 19–20)

»Still to come« is a crucial expression that translates Derrida's emphasis on the chain of the Latin word *venire*. His whole outlook on the future depends on the distinction between two modes of the future. The first one is the future (*le futur*) that will (surely) be; this future is predictable, foreseeable, this is a future of timetables. This future can be handled, controlled and programmed. But the second future (*l'avenir*), the future to come, is totally unexpected and unpredictable. It signals the otherness of the future and the otherness of the coming *arrivant*. *L'avenir* is the future that signals the coming of the other.

From his early works onwards, Derrida's attention was devoted to the question

¹ »I was recently taken by this word, *arrivant*, as if its uncanniness had just arrived to me in a language in which it has nonetheless sounded very familiar to me for a long time«, writes Derrida (1993, 33). The word signifies the neutrality of the future, we do not and we cannot know any specificity about the arriving. However, we must wait nonetheless or in spite of the situation. For the unknown we must wait wholeheartedly, otherwise nothing occurs. The *arrivant* does not carry any identity, it is completely undetermined, its time is future. In this abstracted figure of the coming the Levinasian influences can be found. For Levinas the other comes from the sphere of absolute secrecy and therefore overwhelm us with arrival (Klun 2013, 503–504).

of the future. In his »grammatological« phase, he deconstructed the image of language as a magical device that delivers the truth. He replaced the predominant logocentric scheme with an endless movement of *différance*, a play of traces that prevents everything from being in itself. There is always a work of spatio-temporality that disables every forming of being in itself. His critique of a firmly established hierarchical relation between writing and speech results in a reversal of a saussurian theme: the signifiers never arrive at a conclusion and reconciliation in a (transcendental) signified; all they do is distinguish between themselves, endlessly differentiating, thus forming an endless chain. In this regard, he always emphasized that to deconstruct does not simply mean to destroy a certain conception but to loosen the stiff and rigid structures that bind them, to deconstruct means to give concepts a future.

Therefore, all of Derrida's main concepts figure somewhere in the future; they are never a present given, since they belong to the experience of expectation. We are dealing with the questions of limits and overcoming, the questions of temporality and extra-temporality. The impossible approach towards otherness prevents everything from being in itself, »impossible therefore calls upon a figure that resembles a structure of temporality, an instantaneous dissociation from the present, a *différance* in being with-itself of the present« (1993, 17). Nothing can be in itself, since the flow of time prevents every firm identity.

This kind of deconstructive affirmation of the future is also the central part of recent work by John Caputo. He often repeats Derrida's insistence on future as *l'avenir*, on something that has yet to come and (spectrally) appears only as an absolute heterogeneity to the present. However, for neither of them does this situation simply imply that we are powerless and incapable; the aporia is not the end of the path but the beginning. While we certainly cannot willingly realize an event or make it true, we can make ourselves available for the event; we can be true to events and for them. The event is »what is simmering in the present, but still to come«, it is a promise and a threat at the same time. Moreover, what is true must be in the future; it must have a future, and that's why we must affirm it. »To say that something is true is to say that it has a future, and for us to be in the truth is to be exposed to that future« (Caputo 2013, 75–77). The future is, therefore, precious and always worth more; it carries the truth and salvation. »We stand in the truth to the extent that we stand exposed to the event, open to what we cannot see coming, putting ourselves in question and making ready for something for which we cannot be ready« (93).

Therefore, we experience time and the future as an aporia, and Derrida even describes deconstruction as a certain aporetic experience of the impossible. The most basic question that he poses repeatedly can be expressed as: Can we experience aporia as such? Who arrives and what arrives, is it possible? The arrivant is always in arrival, therefore, never here, never present and always absent, but not quite:

»This absolute *arrivant* as such is /.../ disarmed as a newly born child, it no more commands than is commanded by the memory of some origina-

ry event where the archaic is bound with the *final* extremity, with the finality par excellence of the *telos* or of the *eskhaton*. It even exceeds the order of any *determinable* promise« (Derrida 1993, 34).

The promise acts as the privileged modus for the appearance of the future, but not the determinable promise or hope, but the indeterminate one. The future as *l'avenir* is entirely outside of the imaginable horizon, cannot be expected, and must remain unexpected. No proof about the future can be attained; the undecidability is the constant mark of the unforeseen future. The future, in this sense, holds no truth; when we talk about the future, we talk on the limits of the truth and fiction, outside of truth that is (practically) embodied in the present. But faith can transgress this obstacle, because faith the truth isn't time-dependent; it isn't relative but an absolute. Faith works with »not yet« of the future and crosses it. Even though nothing is really present in fullness:

»The to-come precedes the present, the self-presentation of the present; it is, therefore, more »ancient« than the present. It thus chains itself to itself while unchaining itself at the same time; it disjoins itself, and disjoins the self that would yet join itself in this disjunction.« (2005, 37–38)

3. Weak Messianic Power

Many commentators (Jameson, Caputo et al.) have compared and associated Derrida's concepts of waiting in the form of »messianicity without messianism« with Walter Benjamin's messianic view of history. But this associating seems to be partially misguided, since their respective foci concern almost opposite aspects of time. While they both use the religiously connotated vocabulary, mainly the tropes belonging to the Jewish thought of the futural, they differ in their focus. Derrida, on the one hand, uses the concept of messianism for the basic rapport with the unforeseeable nature of the future, and the affirmation of what is always to come. For Derrida this appears as a necessary stance towards the otherness of time², which is always heterogeneous; that is why not only the future never becomes present, but the present itself remains always deferred.

Benjamin, on the other hand, forms a concept of »weak messianism«, some sort of reversed messianic power, a hope that is aimed at the past, a view of history that is completely antiteleological. This was aimed towards historicism of his time, mainly fascism, but also to some extent socialism (with its vision of hi-

² But not just the future; the present is also never here, and it always needs a supplementary time to form itself. A French linguist, Guistave Guillame called this »the operative time«, this is the time needed to form a time in our consciousness, a perception of time, that is always unperceived (as time), this time remains outside, but is at the same time necessary for the present time to exist as such. Giorgio Agamben used this notion to form a reading of Paul's messianic thought as a »time that remains« (2005). Inside the present there is always a little remainder of time, the »operative time«, time needed for forming of time. This is the impossibility of the present expressed in a psycholinguistic terms.

story as progress). His weak messianism is not concerned with future salvations but with redeeming the past.

»The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim.« (Benjamin 2007, 254)

We are the promised ones for which our ancestors prayed, he says. He portrays this with Paul Klee's monoprint *Angelus novus*, a picture of an angel of history that is looking back at a pile of catastrophes.³ The concept of the messianic, therefore, doesn't involve faith in future salvation, since primarily it doesn't even concern the future. This is, therefore, the opposite of Derrida's notion of the messianic without messianism, who even to an even greater extent than Benjamin refuses to give a detailed and certain content to the messianic promise, for him such content would dismantle the promise of the future itself. The messianism for Derrida, therefore, isn't a matter of the future or the past, since »The time is out of joint«, as we can hear Hamlet say. »To affirm the coming of the event, its future-to-come /.../ all of this can be thought /.../ only in a dislocated time of the present, at the joining of the radically disjointed time, without certain conjunction« (Derrida 1994, 17–18). The event is what we justifiably call »the impossible«; it cannot occur, because the conditions of possibility coincide with the conditions of impossibility; thus, it is paradoxical and self-preventing.

4. Endless (Jewish) Waiting

This passion for the secret and the future seems to be an echo of a Jewish messianism. In this regard, Derrida, just like Benjamin, surely fits in the family of Jewish intellectuals, so-called »cultural Jews«. Robert Gibbs writes about this topic and lists five specifics of Jewish philosophy. They are certainly interesting and although we could easily find exceptions for all lists of this kind, it holds a few interesting accents. For all »Jewish« philosophers:

»(1.) Truth is in the (messianic) future. (2.) The present is not true nor just. (3.) The past was not true, not the way it had to be nor the way it should have been. (4.) Messianic hope makes us criticize the present and the past.

³ »A Klee painting named ›Angelus Novus‹ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.« (Benjamin 2007, 257–258)

(5.) The study of the past, therefore, exposes the falsity of the present, and in particular, the false sense of limitations for change, for the chance of justice«. (Gibbs 2001, 120)

The listed facets are in line with the thinking of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Professor of Jewish history, who distinguishes Judaism (*judaisme*) and Jewishness (*judéité*). This is the difference between culture, religion, and nationality on the one hand (*judaisme*) and the Jewish essence, which is independent of Judaism and can exist independently of it, on the other (*judéité*). Judaism is timely; Jewishness is timeless. According to Yerushalmi's book on Judaism and Freud (1993), Jewishness does not even depend on the belief in God. What is essential is the experience of the future, opening up a relationship with the future. The Jew not only has the hope of the future but also the expectation of a forthcoming hope for the future. Freud's suppression of this is, therefore, says Yerushalmi, more anti-Jewish than his non-belief in God. Anti-Jewishness is nothing else than not believing in the future. The experience of the future-related promise and the obligation of memory linked to the past are not separated in Judaism; one is justified by another.

There is a deep underlying awareness of the fact that the messianicity always remains merely a promise that cannot be fulfilled running through the whole Jewish tradition. The realization of endless deferral of Parousia seems to be the main feature of Jewish version of secularization. Derrida uses those frameworks to describe the concept of chosenness; for him, it simply represents the future or more precisely a reminder of the future. The Jewishness is marked by:

»the absolute privilege, the absolute uniqueness in the experience of the promise (the future) and the injunction of memory (the past) /.../ the law has already presented and *inscribed* itself in the historical memory as an injunction of memory, with or without substrate, that the two absolute privileges are bound the one to the other. As if God only inscribed one thing in the memory of a *single people* and *entire people*: in the future, remember to remember the future.« (Derrida 1998, 76)

Remembering the future is an enormous task: the task of forming a language capable of futural expressions, the task of opening a poetical sphere of existence.⁴

5. Parables of the Future

Nietzsche famously declared that we would not get rid of God as long as we have a belief in grammar (2005, 170). It is not difficult to notice the theological foun-

⁴ We should mention the privileged place that modus of waiting holds in some of Heidegger's writings. He, for example, closely links waiting and *Gelassenheit*. But contrary to Derrida, who tries to present waiting as a joyful task, Heidegger describes the pure experience of time as fundamental boredom; he compares it with waiting for a train at the small deserted train station; he pictures an emptied scene of being forced to wait and do nothing else. (Heidegger 1995, 93–115)

dations of our verbal relating towards the elusive reality, of our symbolization of an eluding event. There is a glimpse of hope incarnated in the way we form our sentences; they are oriented towards the future. Nevertheless, the question remains: what is the most appropriate form to express a forthcoming event; how can we talk about the future? How should our language express our status of the ones who are awaiting; what is the proper literary form?

The New Testament is a union of Greek rhetoric and Jewish temporal thought. As such, it gives rise for a plethora of great new rhetorical devices. The closest to the discourse we seek seems to be a parabolic way of presenting the unrepresentable. To illustrate it better we will conceptually simplify it and oppose it to the kerygmatic teachings about the future. Parabolic allusions (as can also be found in Hebrew genre *Mashal*, an allegory) are the tremendous futural proclamations and the primary way of presenting the mystery of the Kingdom of God in the gospels. The time of the kerygmatic way of describing an event (for example, theological teachings of St. Paul) is now (present), while parables (for example the one by Jesus) describe infinitely later (future). This is because theological kerygmatic language always appears after the event, *post festum*, and parabolic language appears before, *ante festum*. Kerygma is a talk that deals with teachings, the parables with paradoxes, the eschatology is the mode of the former, while the latter performs a form of messianicity; the first one uses relatively clear, syllogistic propositions and logical language, while the second uses wild metaphoric expressions.

A parable, Ricoeur (2003) tells us, is a metaphorical process worked into a narrative form. As such, it offers new possibilities for a post-metaphysical expression of transcendence (Vodičar 2017). A parabolic metaphor, in the strangeness of its plot, institutes a shock that re-describes reality and opens for us a new way of seeing and being. The Kingdom of God is not »what happens« in the story but how we do not understand it: a misunderstanding that the parables provoke despite the completely coherent narrative. What happens, despite its everyday setting and circumstances, is not understandable; despite the perfect intelligibility, the parable brings only confusion. Even more, it is »extravagant«. This form of metaphorical process opens an otherwise matter-of-fact situation to an open range of interpretations and to the possibility of new commitments.

However, parables do not exist solely as a biblical genre; modern literature is obsessed with them, as we saw from diagnosis set by Badiou, the previous century was a century of the poetics of waiting, and the poetics of threshold. The completely new theatrical genre – a theater of waiting – did emerge; the threshold was the locus of the song, and the poetics were aimed at the ever-distant future. Why does this phenomenon called »poetics of waiting«, a renewed Jewish forming of future as an endless play of differences, appeal to modern man? The answer must be the parabolic logic inherent to the language. Derrida famously said about Kafka that his writings evoke more of the coming and futural [*fait surgir plus d'avenir*] (Derrida 2007, 34) than any other. This is the form of a parable, which perfectly reflects the parabolic nature of language. It hides more than it reveals; it brings

questions and confusion. Kafka's⁵ *Parabeln und Paradoxe* are opening the doors of the future in such a way that we have to constantly ask ourselves if we heard correctly, since the parabolic language functions as hinting, and not claiming,

»it is not even excluded that no one, no One, nobody, ever called any One, any unique one, anybody. The possibility of an originary misunderstanding in destination is not an evil, it is the structure, perhaps the very vocation of any call worthy of that name, of all nomination, of all response and responsibility.« (34)

This is worth emphasizing again: the unpredictability of the future for Derrida doesn't cause the paralysis of praxis; it even acts as a source of ethical demand.

All that remains is, therefore, a bare hope, stripped of every knowledge. This is the demarcation line between messianic and apocalyptic speech, while the latter knows much, in some cases even the date, it works as an unveiling, removing of the veil (Derrida 1984; Cixous & Derrida 2002), the former stays completely in the dark. Derrida is, therefore, quite compatible with Jewish revelation, although his expectation remains even more emptied of almost any determination. Jews regard themselves as the ones whose job is to prepare the path. The history of Jewish messianic hopes is a history that is full of confusion and disappointments. That is why they often regard their vocation as a tragic awareness that nothing is going to come. Derrida does not form a messianism, but only a messianicity without messianism. The messianic is anterior to each and every concrete messianism; as such it is even beyond deconstruction. The messianicity is an experience of the future, as such. This stance consists of affirming the promise without the content (the promised), the promise that is structurally inherent in language. For Derrida, the forthcoming justice remains impossible; the promise is the true sign of heterogeneity of the present that cannot be presented. This is clearly not in line with the orthodox Jewish stance on revelation, but he is near proximity to Maurice's Blanchot's *Writing of disaster*, one of the truly futural expressions of the previous century, in it we can find an amazing interpretation of the messianic essence as a nonoccurrence. The future is here but cannot be accepted as such; the same can be said for the present. When the Messiah arrives at the gates of Rome among the beggars and lepers, he is recognized (despite being incognito) and asked »When will you come?« His being there is, then, not the coming« (Blanchot 1995, 141–142). The Messiah guarantees nothing with his presence; the fact that he came and will come guarantees no presence whatsoever; it brings only the future. And the Messiah's answer backed up with an authority of a presence, »Look at me, I did come today«, cannot negate the obligation to wait and await. According to Blanchot, awaiting

»is not related to the future any more than it is related to an inaccessible past — is also the awaiting of awaiting, which does not situate us in a pre-

⁵ Regarding the short story *Before the Law* Derrida remarks, that with its possibility that there will always be other doorkeepers represents a perfect literary metaphor for the infinity of *différance* (1992, 211).

sent, for »k have always already awaited what I will always wait for: the immemorable, the unknown which has no present, and which I can no more remember than I can know whether I am not forgetting the future — the future being, my relation with what, in what is coming, does not come and thus does not present, or re-present itself.« (117)

To exist is to await (for the conclusion of existence, if nothing else), and that is why to exist poetically means to refer to the existence in the futural form: the impossible task to project ourselves therefore always remains ahead of us.

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