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# Unnameable Text: Life, Critique and Uncriticizability from Kant to Benjamin

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy in Comparative Literature.

## Declaration of Authorship

I, Christopher Law, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date:

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## Abstract

This project explores the idea of ‘uncriticizability’, a term used on rare but significant occasions in Walter Benjamin’s writing about literature, art, and criticism. Serving both as a framework for Benjamin’s recognition of the foundational crisis undergone by criticism in the late eighteenth century and as a cornerstone of his concerns about the possibilities and limits of criticism in the 1920s and early 1930s, uncriticizability plays a multi-faceted but often enigmatic role in the history and philosophy of modern literature and literary criticism.

The thesis begins by considering the diverse implications of Immanuel Kant’s entanglement of poetic form and organic life in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. After outlining recursive tensions in Kant’s attempts to find a place for poetry in the third *Critique*, I show how the theorists of early German Romanticism, rather than assuming Kant to have successfully closed his critical system, developed a theory that imagined literature’s ‘life’ as its infinite capacity for critical renewal in historically diverse contexts. Through close engagements with Benjamin’s early work on criticism and language, I offer a new reading of his doctoral dissertation, ‘The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism’, arguing that the idea of literature’s ‘criticizability’ here arises as a conceptual solution to a singular linguistic problem, which ‘uncriticizability’ is more likely to capture. In registering the continued relevance of pre-Kantian philosophies of nature, uncriticizability, however, simultaneously confronts literary criticism with its own, apparently inescapable grounding in myth. This argument is pursued through readings of Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* and Benjamin’s essay thereon, as well as a range of other literary, philosophical, and scientific texts, both exalted and obscure. The problem of uncriticizability, I argue, captures a trait shared between poetry and politics: like literature, politics is irreducible to the temporal conditions that render it fully comprehensible.

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## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used to refer to commonly cited texts throughout the thesis.

### Immanuel Kant

- AA *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Königliche Preussische [later, Deutsche] Akademie der Wissenschaften, 29 vols. (Berlin; Leipzig: George Reimer [later, Walter de Gruyter], 1900-)
- CJ *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

### Friedrich Schlegel

- KFSA *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. by Ernst Behler, Jean-Jacques Anstett and Hans Eichner, 35 projected vols. (Munich: Schöningh, 1958-)

### Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

- EA *Elective Affinities*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1971)
- WA *Goethes Werke. Herausgegeben im Auftrag der Großherzogin Sophie von Sachsen*, 143 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1887-1919)

### Walter Benjamin

- B *Briefe*, ed. by Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem, 2 vols. (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1978)
- C *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*, ed. by Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem, trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994)
- GS *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977-1985)
- SW *Selected Writings*, ed. by Marcus Bullock et al, 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996-2003)



## Introduction

### ‘Criticizable and Uncriticizable at the Same Time’

#### 1. Taking Sides: ‘Antitheses’

Among the plans for a project on literary criticism that Walter Benjamin sketched in the early 1930s can be found a table which appears to act as a schema for the ultimately abandoned enterprise. A number of terms are divided into two sides, under the headings ‘CRITICIZABLE’ and ‘UNCRITICIZABLE’ (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> At a first glance, it is obvious that one function of the table is to facilitate a simple opposition or comparison between a number of terms that punctuate Benjamin’s diverse corpus of writing on art and criticism. On one side, for example, is ‘primacy of truth-content’ (*Primat des Wahrheitsgehalts*), on the other ‘primacy of material content’ (*Primat des Sachgehalts*); ‘gloss’ is opposed to ‘quotation’; ‘originality’ to ‘convention’.

CRITICIZABLE		UNCRITICIZABLE	
Primacy of truth-content	{Judgment of taste	Primacy of material content	Table of contents
	Journalism	Inspired	Philistine
Truth-content as model [Vorbild]		Material content as primal image [Urbild]	Literary history
Gloss	Reaction	Quotation	Source of quotation
Strategic	Mass communication		
Society (Platonic)	Originality	Nature (Goethean)	Convention
Dominant	Presumptive	Serving	Dependent
Polemics (minimum of representation)	Rules	Representation (minimum of criticism)	Moderation

*Figure 1: ‘Antitheses’*

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Marcus Bullock et al, 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996-2003), II (1999), pp. 409-10; Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977-1985), VI (1985), pp. 169-70. The editors of Benjamin’s *Gesammelte Schriften* suggest that the table and its accompanying theoretical rubric act as a schema under which the project—of which they count eight surviving fragments—was to be organized. See the fragments (pp. 169-80) and the editorial notes (pp. 735-40) collected in the same volume. Throughout the thesis, further references to Benjamin’s work will be made to the English translation, when available (as SW), and then to the German original (as GS); both abbreviations will be followed by the relevant volume and page numbers.

A closer look reveals a slightly more complicated structure, however. Rather than being part of a simple dichotomy, each side of the table comprises two untitled sub-columns, and the terms on either side of these sub-columns also stand in some relation to one another. The relation between the sub-columns seems to be determined by a firmer principle, one of appearance and reality: in the hierarchy of the table, the lofty concepts on the left are liable to be deflated, at one glance, by the mundanity of the terms on the right. What appears under the heading ‘uncriticizable’ as ‘nature (Goethean)’, for example, might actually be simple ‘convention’; what appears under the heading ‘criticizable’ as ‘dominant’ (*herrschend*) could really just mean ‘presumptive’ (*anmaßend*). To this extent, in its subjection of the terminology of aesthetics and artistic autonomy to a much-needed ideological deflation, the table appears to practice a logic of demystification that has been common to literary criticism since at least the 1960s (and which has been challenged in recent years by an ethos of ‘reparative’ reading, issuing in calls for a post- or even anti-critical comportment with regard to literary texts).<sup>2</sup> In one of the texts grouped under Benjamin’s plans for the project—the ‘Program for Literary Criticism’—Benjamin appears to further espouse this demasking strategy: ‘The function of criticism, especially today: to lift *the mask of “pure art”* and show that there is no neutral ground for art. Materialist criticism as an instrument for this’ (SW2:292; GS6:164). In the same text, Benjamin points out the ‘false and unsustainable fiction that literary criticism today can still expect to derive its standards from pure aesthetics, and that criticism is basically nothing but the application of those standards’; the ‘time for aesthetics in every sense’, critics have failed to realise, has ‘gone forever’ (SW2:292; GS6:164). The organizational principle of ‘Antitheses’ might, so understood, contribute to this strategy. By showing what is supposedly natural to be merely conventional and by revealing what is apparently dominant to be merely presumptive, as well as through a cluster of other, similar unmaskings, the table visually expresses the ‘materialist criticism’ for which Benjamin is apparently advocating.

Whether any such claims can be derived from the table itself, however, is much less apparent. The ‘antithesis’ between ‘criticizable’ and ‘uncriticizable’, after all, does not seem to be ruled by this logic of demystification: the two terms, rather, are simply opposed to one another without any clear indication of a governing hierarchy. The unadorned simplicity of the antithetical opposition renders improbable the ability of a logic of demystification to reign over the whole fragment: it is by no means obvious that one term is supposed to be merely superficial and the other radically materialist. In the absence of any protocol for reading or interpreting the

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<sup>2</sup> See, for well-known examples of these tendencies, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2003), especially pp. 123-51, and Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

table, then, its heterogeneous contents—the terms and oppositions that are scattered throughout it—are lent a kind of accumulative but unpurposive pathos. This does not relegate the fragment to a mere curiosity, however. For Benjamin associated a similar effect with his massive and unfinished work on nineteenth-century Paris. In Convolute N, of what would come to be known as the *Arcades Project*, he writes:

The pathos of this work: there are no periods of decline. Attempt to see the nineteenth century just as positively as I tried to see the seventeenth, in the work on *Trauerspiel*. No belief in periods of decline. By the same token, every city is beautiful to me (from outside its borders), just as all talk of particular languages' having greater or lesser value is to me unacceptable.<sup>3</sup>

Benjamin's identification of the pathos of his thinking—manifested in his work's 'positive' relation to its material sources, and considered in an adjacent note as the 'indestructibility of the highest life in all things'—problematizes at least one premise that underscores a politically programmatic interpretation of the crisis undergone by literary criticism, and which acts as a propaedeutic for the development of a supposedly 'materialist criticism'.<sup>4</sup>

The premise in question, found in the 'Program for Literary Criticism', is the temporal one which dictates that the 'time for aesthetics' is 'gone forever'. In the context of Benjamin's 'Program', the meaning of this claim is apparently clear: the terminology and methods of philosophical aesthetics are no longer compatible with the way artworks are produced and perceived in modern capitalist societies; their materialist grounds—and alternatives—therefore, ought to be unveiled by criticism. Yet the 'Antitheses' table seems to query the assumption that the time for aesthetics is, or even could be, 'gone forever'. This questioning does not involve a *positive* assertion of the value of 'aesthetics', such as might defend it as an ahistorical and autonomous regime of reflection about sensory perception and judgements of taste, one that takes place before and above political, historical, and social concerns. Rather, the table's graphic dispersal of the terminology of Kantian and post-Kantian theories of art performs a less determinate function: it decouples 'time' from aesthetics. The table's non-hierarchical surface, in other words, challenges the notion that the 'time' of art could ever be fully determined by art's philosophical discourses, even those of aesthetics.

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), p. 458 (N1,6).

<sup>4</sup> *Arcades Project*, p. 459 (N1a,4).

If literary criticism undergoes a crisis in the late 1920s and early 1930s, this arises not only at a discrete historical juncture at which philosophical aesthetics suddenly become incompatible with the social and economic realities of a given time. Literary criticism's materialist crisis, rather, renders questionable every presupposition that the 'time' of art is compatible—that is to say, contemporaneous—with the time of aesthetics. As Benjamin states in 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility', a text whose attention to the material conditions governing the production and reception of art also questions the possibility of disinterested aesthetic pleasure, '[i]t has always been one of the primary tasks of art to create a demand whose hour of full satisfaction has not yet come' (SW3:118; GS7:378).<sup>5</sup> Whereas, at an individual level, the terminologies of 'pure aesthetics' are liable to be deposed and demystified, as occurs in the table's sub-columns, the overall antithesis between 'criticizable' and 'uncriticizable' casts doubt on the extent to which any generalizations can be made on the basis of such demystifications. The opposition between 'criticizable' and 'uncriticizable' thus flattens out the conceptual hierarchies that normally govern our practices of reading and understanding, including the ideas of time and history arising on the basis of such hierarchies. 'Materialist criticism' is one name for what occurs when this process gets underway, but 'pathos' is another. When the conceptual and temporal premises that normally condition the idea of criticism—and the idea of its crises—are suspended, the movement of reading is liable to proceed in any direction whatsoever.

*Unnameable Text* is a thesis about the field onto which the unpredictable relation between the terms 'criticizable' and 'uncriticizable' opens. In a text entitled 'Weimar', to be explored at further length in the thesis's conclusion, Benjamin describes the absolute contingency of the manuscripts that comprise Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's archive, located in the eponymous city. Arguing that the temporal uncertainty of such materials constitutes an 'unconscious rationality' of which even the temporal logic of the archive is unaware, Benjamin considers that the 'unnameable text' of Goethe's writing lies in a precarious, potentially fatal, position, in equal proximity to 'annihilation' and 'posthumous fame' (SW2:149; GS4:353-54; translation modified). This insight casts an uncommonly direct glance on a problem that occupies this thesis throughout, but which is normally perceptible only at the most marginal, and more often than not neglected, interstices of Benjamin's writing. Insofar as they are absolutely devoid of conceptual or temporal determination, Goethe's manuscripts, akin to 'patients in hospital beds',

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<sup>5</sup> For a compelling reading of this claim, see Jan Mieszkowski, 'Art Forms', in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. by David S. Ferris (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 35–53 (pp. 37-38). As Mieszkowski here argues: 'Art becomes art by making demands for which there is as yet no form or paradigm with which to situate or contextualize them'.

lie absolutely exposed, embodying ‘crisis’ in its most primary and determinable sense. This thesis seeks to argue that literary criticism, from Kant to Benjamin, is constitutively exposed to a similar crisis. As will be shown via readings of texts that span the period between the late eighteenth and early twentieth century, both exalted and obscure, it is only when literary criticism is not held to pre-exist its crisis—not held, that is, simply as a potential for criticism, as ‘criticizability’—that its material and temporal strangeness is allowed to come into effect. The possibility of reading texts in a way that does *not* presume their criticizability is what will be explored, throughout the thesis, as the idea of ‘uncriticizability’. This idea registers the crisis of poetic language, its irreducibility to the concepts, however minimal, that we form of it.

## 2. ‘Imperative to try to interpret this sentence’: Uncriticizability and Time

One manifestation of criticism’s crisis is the plight of evaluative judgement. In fragments and papers written as part of the planned project on literary criticism, Benjamin questions whether criticism still holds the willingness, desire, or ability to judge works of art. The fragment written under the rubric, ‘The First Form of Criticism that Refuses to Judge’ (*Erste Form der Kritik, die es verweigert zu urteilen*) redeploys terminology found in the ‘Antitheses’ table, opposing the presentation of ‘the critic’s own subjective viewpoint’—understood ‘in connection with reading’ (*im Anschluß an Lesen*)—to an ‘objective truth as the counterpart (*Gegenstück*) to this subjective view’ (SW2:372; GS6:170). Whereas the former finds expression in the subjective and even physiognomic pleasure of reading, the latter is said to chime with ‘Goethe’s insight that classical works do not really allow for their criticism’. This idea, however, gives Benjamin pause:

Imperative to try to interpret this sentence [*Unbedingt die Auslegung dieses Satzes versuchen*]. Various attempts: for example, that since classical works are the foundations of our judgments, they cannot be made its objects. But this is extremely superficial. Rather deeper: that the exegesis, the thoughts, the admiration, the enthusiasm of past generations have, in the most intimate way, materially bound the classical works together, have fully commemorated them and turned them into the mirror-images of later human beings—or something similar. (SW2:372; GS6:170; translation modified)

The necessity of interpreting the Goethean idea of the uncriticizability of classical works leads Benjamin into difficulty, as the faltering conclusion to this otherwise vivid final sentence suggests. Eager not to reinforce the idea that classical works condition our judgements—and

thus escape their dominion—Benjamin puts forward a hypothesis that no longer assumes the pre-eminence of judgement. To do this, however, he relies upon a peculiar temporal logic, manifested in an argument that that the material binding of classical works, enacted by the ideas and practices of ‘past generations’, somehow makes a claim on ‘later human beings’, of whom the texts become images.

The difficulty Benjamin encounters in expressing ‘Goethe’s insight’ is by no means an arbitrary or accidental one. Rather, it is symptomatic of the challenges that accompany all of his attempts to identify and define uncriticizability. As this thesis will argue, the problem of isolating and articulating the idea of uncriticizability, even when it is never named as such, is present from Benjamin’s earliest writings on criticism onwards. As well as perforating Benjamin’s corpus of writing about criticism, the problem also exceeds the historical parameters that condition it in this fragment, and which solicit the unlikely yet highly suggestive temporal solution at which Benjamin stutteringly arrives. Although this fragment repeatedly refers to ‘classical works’, uncriticizability’s explicit or implicit appearance in Benjamin’s writing does not pertain solely to texts of the ancients. On the contrary, as will be made clear toward the end of the thesis, particularly in its fourth chapter and conclusion, Benjamin operates with a subtly transformed conception of literary time. Particularly through his reorientation with regard to Goethe’s idea of the ‘ur-phenomenon’ (*Urphänomen*)—which is conceived of neither as an empirically discoverable object of research, nor as an ‘idea’ that is constitutively receding and so determines science as a future-oriented task—Benjamin elicits a revised notion of what an ‘ancient work’ could mean. As these remarks on Goethe’s ‘insight’ suggest, registering the origins of ‘uncriticizability’, like those of ‘criticizability’, is no easy task. Neither term appears in the dictionaries best placed to identify its provenance—Johann Christoph Adelung’s *Grammatisch-kritisches Wörterbuch der hochdeutschen Mundart* and the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm—nor do they appear directly in Goethe’s writing. By all accounts, the terms are Benjamin’s own.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, each term registers an aspect of the complex manner in which Benjamin inherits a constellation of problems that emerged—in equally complex figurations—in philosophical, scientific and literary discourses at the end of the eighteenth century.

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<sup>6</sup> Chapters 2 and 4, respectively, will devote particular attention to Benjamin’s constructions of ‘criticizability’ and ‘uncriticizability’, firstly by illuminating an under-investigated tension that accompanies his dissertation’s attempt to turn criticism into a concept, and secondly by reflecting upon Benjamin’s own citational practice, whose apparent unwillingness to cite Goethe reflects the decentred and occasional nature of Goethe’s theory of art and critical practice.

### 3. 'The *Fortleben* of the works': Criticizability, Romanticism

A radically expanded idea of 'ancient poetry' was, it should be noted, a key theme not of Goethe's, but of early German Romanticism. Indeed, this is recognized at length in Benjamin's doctoral dissertation, 'On the Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism', which cites words from Friedrich Schlegel to precisely this effect: 'it is no mere empty metaphor to say that ancient poetry [*alte Poesie*] is a single, indivisible, perfected poem' runs one of the fragments Schlegel published in the *Athenaeum* journal between 1798 and 1800 (cited in SW1:167; GS1:90).<sup>7</sup>

Benjamin, however, insistently maintains that the idea of 'uncriticizability' stands apart from the Romantic philosophy of art that gives rise to such statements. The afterword to his dissertation, indeed, opposes the early Romantic concept of criticizability to the Goethean idea of uncriticizability 'in principle'. What is meant, however, by each of these terms? If Benjamin remains keenly aware that early German Romanticism itself gives voice to a fundamentally transformed idea of 'ancient poetry', what separates this claim and its attendant philosophy of art, besides the assertive rhetoric of its enunciation, from Goethe's more hesitant 'insight that classical works do not really allow for their criticism'? One way of approaching this question, and of specifying the meaning of 'uncriticizability', is to first elucidate the meaning of its more accessible counterpart, 'criticizability'.

In the fragment quoted above, ancient poetry is described as a living, 'organic' whole, which is still in the process of becoming and which lives on in criticism. With this insight, Schlegel encapsulates a fundamental aspect of the theory of literature that he, along with other writers of early German Romanticism, inaugurates. The fragmentary writings associated primarily with Friedrich Schlegel, his brother A.W. Schlegel, Novalis, and the circle of writers based in Jena at the very end of the eighteenth century, are regularly understood to have instituted what Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe refer to, in a now canonical account, as a theory of the literary absolute.<sup>8</sup> According to such a theory, poetic production is absolute, since it is simultaneously literature and its criticism. With Romanticism, in other words, literature is not

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<sup>7</sup> The question of how best to translate the title of Benjamin's dissertation ('Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik') into English is a loaded one, for well-known reasons concerning the difference in status between the relation of 'art' and 'literature' in the Romantic period and in our own. Samuel Weber explains the difficulty and provides a sound reason for translating *Kunstkritik* as 'criticism' in his *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 330, n.5. Throughout this thesis, I use the terms 'art' and 'literature', and less often 'poetry' and 'fiction', more or less interchangeably. The primary reason for this is that I aim, as much as possible, to adopt the terminology of the texts under discussion, but my thesis is also concerned throughout with questions about language, which (especially for Benjamin) orient the term art toward literature.

<sup>8</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. by Philip Barnard and Sheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

determined by a theory, but is rather transcendently generative of its own theory. In and through the autonomous domain of literature, Romanticism's absolute thus overcomes the distinctions that continued to prevail in Kantian critical philosophy, even after the third *Critique* that promised their resolution: literature is undetermined by the dualism between the singular and the universal, the sensible and the intelligible, nature and freedom. Poetic production, insofar as it is simultaneously free and self-restricting—a condition, or simultaneous existence of conditions and non-conditions, associated with the fragmentary genre of Romantic production—is no longer conditioned by arbitrary rules for good composition, standards of taste, or societal norms. Rather, its criticism is immanent to it.

Benjamin's doctoral dissertation, an equally influential text in the twentieth-century recalibration of Romanticism, likewise understands the Romantic theory of literature to have transposed the Kantian subject's capacity for self-reflection onto the literary work. By attending first of all to Johann Gottlieb Fichte's attempt to overcome Kantian dualism by claiming that the 'I' posits itself as an absolute thesis—and thus sets off a chain of reflection with the non-'I', in which the 'I' ceaselessly leads back to itself—Benjamin considers how Romanticism both inherits and transforms this solution to the aporias of Kant's critical project. Rather than upholding the autonomy of the positing subject, the Romantics, according to Benjamin's reconstruction, understand every artwork to be a 'centre of reflection' (SW1:155; GS1:72). Such a reflection, in contrast to that proposed by Fichte, is "'I"-less', and so has no pre-determined prerogative to lead back to itself; rather, it simply unfolds in a 'medium of reflection' (SW1:134; GS1:40). Benjamin considers criticism to be the foremost name for this absolute medium, where individual artworks are referred to all others, and so become dispersed, mobile agents in the 'idea of art'. This capacity of artworks to be undergo an infinite 'potentiation' or 'Romanticization', Benjamin argues, constitutes their 'criticizability', which he considers as the defining feature of the early German Romantic theory of art and criticism: 'The entire art-philosophical project of the early Romantics can therefore be summarized by saying that they sought to demonstrate in principle the criticizability of the work of art' (SW1:178-79; GS1:110).

Schlegel's portrayal of ancient poetry as a living, 'organic whole' also demonstrates the extent to which the relation of art to its criticism was informed by emergent ideas of organic life in the late eighteenth century. The promise of an 'organic' relation between poetry and its criticism rests on an affinity between art and living beings, whose difference from mechanically determined products was the subject of the second part of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Arguing that 'the organization of nature is [...] not analogous with any causality that we know'—a reference that leads Kant to speculate, nonetheless, about the political implications of his



insight—Kant argues that organisms demonstrate a ‘reciprocal causality’, according to which the parts do not merely form the whole, but where an undetermined whole also appears to demonstrate an unprecedented, autonomous ability to organize and renew the parts.<sup>9</sup> The relation between poetry and its criticism, in the early Romantic uptake of Kant’s account of the kind of judgements appropriate for recognizing organic life, proceeds according to this part-whole relationship. In his dissertation, Benjamin shows a percipient awareness of this trajectory, citing the famous 116<sup>th</sup> Athenaeum fragment, in which Schlegel calls transcendental poetry—or criticism—the ‘poetry of poetry’; immediately afterwards, he references Schlegel’s essay on Lessing, which conceives of poetry as ‘the nature of nature, the life of life, the human being in the human being [*die Natur der Natur, das Leben des Lebens, der Mensch im Menschen*]’ (cited in SW1:170-71; GS1: 96). These remarks challenge us to reflect on how Romanticism, coming on the heels of Kant’s third *Critique*, reconceives of the relation between the whole and the parts, between criticism and poetry, to the extent that they are practically indistinguishable.

Benjamin’s fragments toward a project on literary criticism indicate that he is not just cognizant of the Romantic idea of art’s criticizability, and of its pedigree in both the ‘aesthetic’ and ‘teleological’ parts of Kant’s third *Critique*; they also suggest, more strongly, that he affirms and subscribes to this idea. The fragment on ‘The First Form of Criticism that Refuses to Judge’ argues that the opposition of the subjective and objective viewpoints can be overcome or ‘sublated’ with reference to an idea of criticism that, like the one found in Romanticism, considers an idea of ‘life’ to be capable of suspending the static opposition between a work and its criticism:

What emerges at this highest stage is that strategic, polemical, scholastic criticism and an exegetical, commenting form of criticism are antitheses that sublimate each other [*leben...sich auf*] and merge in a criticism whose sole medium is the life, the ongoing life, of the works themselves [*Fortleben der Werke*]. (SW2:372; GS6: 170; translation modified)

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<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 246; *Kant’s gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Königl. Preussische [later, Deutsche] Akademie der Wissenschaften, 29 vols. (Berlin; Leipzig: George Reimer [later, Walter de Gruyter], 1900-), V, p. 375. Subsequent references to the English translation of the third *Critique* will be made within the text (and abbreviated to CJ). References to Kant’s work will also continue to cite the Akademie-Ausgabe (abbreviated as AA, followed by relevant volume and page numbers).

The short paragraph accompanying the ‘Antitheses’ table likewise argues for the existence of a ‘stage’ at which ‘criticism is the pure function of life [*reine Funktion vom Leben*], or, of the ongoing life of the work [*Fortleben des Werkes*]. ‘Only at this stage’, Benjamin writes, ‘is the work fully criticizable—and uncriticizable at the same time’ (SW2:410; GS6:170). By arguing that artworks have a ‘life’, and that this life is not only the ‘medium’ of their autonomous existence as works but also, and more importantly, of their criticism, Benjamin attests to the ongoing significance of the early Romantic theory of ‘criticizability’ for his later work, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, on the historical crisis of criticism. The idea that criticism partakes in the *historical* life of art is made clear in Benjamin’s careful terminology. In both fragments cited here, Benjamin uses the term ‘life’ (*Leben*) only to specify immediately that what he means is the ‘ongoing life’ (*Fortleben*) of works.

As Samuel Weber argues, *Fortleben*—which is notoriously difficult to translate and might be alternatively rendered as ‘survival’, ‘living on’, or ‘living away’—succinctly registers an exposure of life to history.<sup>10</sup> From the perspective of *Fortleben*, in other words, life is not a theological or transcendent concept, standing over and above its actualizations, but instead finds itself open to movement from the beginning, displacing and ‘losing’ itself in its articulations and indeed only ever existing in such dispersals; Weber notes that Benjamin’s essay on ‘The Task of the Translator’ introduces the term ‘living’ in lieu of ‘life’ to attest to this constitutive openness to alteration.<sup>11</sup> Criticism, ‘whose sole medium is life’, does not inherit a merely static and all-encompassing idea of organic totality, therefore (an idea that has been both affirmed and denigrated in the history of modern literary criticism). Rather, the life of art and of criticism is always already historical. This means that it is, like any life, open to the contingencies and uncertainties of history, including, as Weber notes, to its own erasure, and to ‘mortality’.<sup>12</sup> If Benjamin suggests that a work can be ‘fully criticizable—and uncriticizable at the same time’, then these passages insinuate, in short, that this unification arises on account of *one* of the terms at stake, namely the term ‘criticizable’. The overcoming of the tension between ‘criticizability’ and ‘uncriticizability’ is achieved through the idea of ‘criticizability’, which sees the life of art to encompass its historical unfolding in acts of criticism.

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<sup>10</sup> *Benjamin’s -abilities*, p. 66-67.

<sup>11</sup> *Benjamin’s -abilities*, pp. 65-66. This thesis will not deal at length with Benjamin’s essay on translation, primarily because the relevance it has for my project has been dealt with at length in Weber’s book and in another significant essay, which closely examines the idea of ‘untranslatability’: Werner Hamacher’s ‘Intensive Languages’, trans. Ira Allen and Steven Tester, *MLN*, 127.3 (2012), 485-541.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin would go on to develop this, in his work on Baroque *Tranverspiel*, through the idea of ‘natural history’.

#### 4. 'Only at this Stage': Uncriticizability and the Matter of Literature

This unification through 'criticizability' creates an intractable difficulty, however: it suggests that Benjamin does not really see a significant opposition between criticizability and uncriticizability at all, since criticizability turns out to be the condition that governs their unification. A closer investigation of the concluding paragraph of Benjamin's 'Antitheses' fragment puts the dominance of 'criticizability' into question, however:

The negation of criticism [*Die Negation der Kritik*] that the antithesis expresses is in a sense the position of the work. Commentary represents the dialectical overcoming of the antinomies of criticism. Only at this stage is the work fully criticizable—and uncriticizable at the same time [*Erst in diesem Stadium ist das Werk vollkommen kritisierbar und unkritisierbar zugleich*]. Only at this stage, therefore, is criticism the pure function of life, or, of the ongoing life of the work [*Erst in diesem Stadium ist die Kritik daßer reine Funktion vom Leben, bezw. Fortleben des Werkes*]. Only at this stage do quotation and gloss become part of the formal characteristics of criticism. Whereas Goethe's theory coincides in all essentials with that of a mediating criticism [*mediaten Kritik*], the relation of the Platonic to the Romantic remains to be illuminated. (SW2:409-10; GS6:169-70; translation modified)

Benjamin here employs the language of dialectics to argue that the antithesis between 'criticizable' and 'uncriticizable' expresses 'the negation of criticism'. I have just suggested that this passage problematizes the dominance of 'criticizability', but I do not mean to imply that readers ought to succumb to the obvious temptation posed by the opening sentence of this passage; we should not simply identify this 'negation' with one side of the table, namely the term 'uncriticizable' (which encompasses an obvious privation). This is because the 'negation of criticism' is not a negation of the idea that works are 'criticizable'; instead—in line with the repudiation of conceptual generalizations outlined in the opening pages of this thesis—it is the negation of a particular *conception* of criticism, namely, one reliant on the assumption that criticism is a determinate idea or method, capable of existing and operating independently of works of art, of imposing its concept on them no matter what conditions might befall it. This is why the negation expresses nothing other than the 'position of the work' (*Position des Werks*), the *work's* survival.

The 'antinomies of criticism', therefore, are not overcome by 'criticism' itself, or by the Romantic idea of 'criticizability', whose structural openness to the future threatens to impose a particular image on the field of time, but only by another term that comes to stand in for a

relation to the work that suspends this presumption of criticism's sovereignty and makes no claims on time: 'commentary'. That is to say, the antinomies are overcome by a sustained engagement with works at their material level. In the 'Antitheses' fragment, this is registered, under the heading 'uncriticizable', in the term 'material content as primal image' (*Sachgehalt als Urbild*), whose corresponding term in the 'criticizable' column is 'truth content as model' (*Wahrheitsgehalt als Vorbild*). Truth content and material content together form the 'position of the work', as Benjamin's essay 'Goethe's Elective Affinities' proposes at greater length, but their meeting cannot be determined by the assumption that the former merely subordinates the latter, since this would follow a 'model' that would already have determined the conditions of their encounter. It is only from the perspective opened by commentary then—the only one capable of suspending a totalizing viewpoint, Benjamin implies—that a work is both criticizable and uncriticizable at the same time. This perspective is by no means a secure one, however, or one that we can picture in advance according to a philosophical method such as dialectics, whose terminology Benjamin here, as elsewhere, riskily adopts. After all, as the relevant sub-column indicates, 'material content as primal image' threatens to send us down the more mundane path of 'literary history', a discipline with its own tendencies to stratify the field of time and history.<sup>13</sup> Rather, as the fragment's recursive rhythm intimates, we only ever reach the 'stage' of the works, never beyond them, and we do so time and again. The 'negation of critique' and the 'position of the work', then, do not lead to another methodology, but, once again, either to a materialist criticism or to a 'pathos' that is achieved and performed in Benjamin's accumulative scattering of philosophical terminology across the surface of the 'Antitheses' fragment.

The motivation for this thesis is that a genuine consideration of the 'position' of the works demands a serious engagement with the idea of 'uncriticizability', one that has been for the most part neglected by Benjamin's readers and critics. As the fragments addressed already suggest, Benjamin understands Goethe to have developed a tentative theory of uncriticizability,

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<sup>13</sup> In 'Literary History and the Study of Literature', published in *Die literarische Welt* in April 1931, Benjamin criticizes the prevalent assumption that literary history is an 'autonomous discipline'. Whereas this would imply that the history of literature, as a mode of human activity, is unconstrained by 'political and intellectual developments', Benjamin contends not only that this is demonstratively untrue, but that the conceptual imposition of 'autonomy' as a marker of the supposed independence of literature unduly influences what is understood by 'history': 'the idea of autonomy easily spills over into the historical domain'. Through a brief account of the trajectory of 'literary history', Benjamin's essay proceeds to show how a crisis has arisen on the basis of the forceful imposition of such 'values' on the field of the historical. What has become 'literary history' is cast as a 'science that throws its weight around' (SW1:459-465; GS3:283-290). For a reading of this text in the context of Benjamin's literary-critical project, see Kevin McLaughlin, 'Biophilology: Walter Benjamin's Literary Critical Legacy', *MLN*, 133.3 (April 2018), 562-584.

which stands in a complex relation to the more assertive theory of Romantic criticizability.<sup>14</sup> As expressed in the afterword to his dissertation, the Romantic relation between artworks and the idea of art is that ‘the infinity of art is fulfilled in the totality of works [*in der Allheit der Werke erfüllt sich die Unendlichkeit der Kunst*]’; the Goethean relation is one whereby ‘the unity of art is found ever again in the plurality of works [*in der Vielheit der Werke findet sich die Einheit der Kunst immer wieder*]’ (SW1:183; GS1:117; translation modified). Whereas Romanticism’s capacity for living reflection proceeds on to infinity, the Goethean theory runs up repeatedly against individual works, which assume the character of a ‘torso’, and beyond which one cannot proceed (SW1:181; GS1:114). On the one hand, as a number of explicit statements about Goethe attest, Benjamin sees in the idea of uncriticizability a renunciation of critical, scientific and philosophical rigour typified by Goethe’s indifference or hostility to criticism and by the imbrication of his literary and scientific concerns. Goethe’s scientific works, as Benjamin attests in an article written for the Great Soviet Encyclopedia in 1928, were certainly inspired by a close reading of Kant’s third *Critique* (particularly its second part), but also maintained a strong affinity for pre-Kantian philosophies of nature, especially that of Spinoza, whose famously quarrelsome late eighteenth-century reception renewed questions about the very possibility of value-judgements about the world and its products, both natural and artistic (SW2:174; GS2:719).<sup>15</sup> Goethe’s theory of art, determined by his scientific endeavours to recognize the ‘ur-phenomenon’—as an ideal that could manifest in both natural and aesthetic production—is derided above all for its blurring of the empirical and the pure realms of nature, which Benjamin’s training in Kant and the Marburg neo-Kantianism of Hermann Cohen made him particularly alive to.<sup>16</sup> On such a reading, ‘uncriticizability’ simply registers and generalizes the implications for the philosophy of art of Goethe’s indifference toward criticism, which is predicated on his assumption that critics, or the general ‘public’, were unaware of art’s fundamental grounding in nature’s productivity.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> In Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe’s work, notably, Goethe’s relation to the literary absolute is a somewhat liminal and (significantly, it seems to me) economically understood one: ‘Goethe was not far from incarnating the great ideal [...] but his lack of philosophy was a little too much. He was not yet, not altogether, equal to the period.’ *The Literary Absolute*, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> On Goethe’s relation to the third *Critique*, see the work of Géza von Molnár, especially ‘Goethe’s Reading of Kant’s “Critique of Esthetic Judgment”: A Referential Guide for Wilhelm Meister’s Esthetic Education’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 15.4 (Summer 1982), 402-420.

<sup>16</sup> The work of Astrid-Deuber Mankowsky is particularly lucid on this point. See ‘Explizite und implizite Bezugnahmen auf Hermann Cohens System der Philosophie in Benjamins *Wahlverwandtschaften*-Essay’, in *Benjamins Wahlverwandtschaften. Zur Kritik einer programmatischen Interpretation*, ed. by Helmut Hühn, Jan Urbich, and Uwe Steiner (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015), pp. 238-258 (p. 244).

<sup>17</sup> For an account of how Goethe’s indifference to criticism manifested itself in relation to the often hostile reception of *Elective Affinities*, see Astrida Orle Tantilto, *Goethe’s Elective Affinities and the Critics* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2001).

Yet Benjamin does not present this problem as a mere historical or philosophical curiosity pertaining to Goethe and his acolytes. The invention of the term ‘uncriticizability’ indicates, instead, an attempt to consider a more fundamental problem concerning the relation between nature and art, one that—as I have started to suggest—troubles the pervasiveness of Romantic ‘criticizability. On the one hand, the relation between the two terms might be considered in terms of the question of ‘-ability’ or potentiality itself. From the perspective of maintaining ‘criticizability’ as a potentiality and not merely as the conceptual forerunner (or, what is the same, retroactive recognition) of its various actualizations, the privative term ‘uncriticizability’ might serve as a reminder that potentiality ought to encompass impotentiality, the irreducible actuality of the potential *not* to be.<sup>18</sup>

As I have suggested, however, Benjamin’s opposition of the terms ‘criticizable’ and ‘uncriticizable’ is not offered in the name of a redemption of the potentiality of the former; rather, it is precisely the premises grounding the assumption of such a potentiality that Benjamin’s literary-critical project challenges at the most fundamental level. As Samuel Weber has argued, ‘Benjamin’s abilities, more generally, go hand in hand with the negotiation of inability’, but this interplay is not in the service of philosophy’s wilful attempts to maintain its own openness.<sup>19</sup> Instead, as Weber notes, inability registers what Benjamin’s early essay on Friedrich Hölderlin terms a ‘greater determinability [größere Bestimmbarkeit]’ (SW1:19; GS2:106), which he associates not with the faculties, capabilities or potentialities of the human being, but with language’s own ability to determine us, captured in Benjamin’s employment of the term ‘the poetized’ (*das Gedichtete*).<sup>20</sup> This non-subjective linguistic capacity, which precipitates not an opening onto language ‘as such’ or the ‘fact of language’, but rather a field in which languages are always in movement—disallowing us, more often than not, from even identifying this movement as distinct from the discursive happenings of reading and of life—is what Benjamin encounters, again and again, as the ‘stage’ that comes into view when criticism disposes, as best as it can, of its concepts and will to autonomy, and accepts that literature might never appear to us as we want it to.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This problem can be traced back to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, but has played a significant role in contemporary philosophy and theory—especially the work of Giorgio Agamben—eager to overturn Aristotle’s prioritization of the actual over the potential. See Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> *Benjamin’s -abilities*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>20</sup> A similar claim motivates Kevin McLaughlin’s *Poetic Force: Poetry After Kant* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), whose insights will be brought to a reading of the third *Critique* in Chapter 1.

<sup>21</sup> The idea that language, or potentiality, can never be grasped or experienced as such, but instead gives rise to unforeseeable movements that might always escape even the most attentive forms of reading, is one I take from Werner Hamacher’s diverse (but often, equally, recursive) body of work, which will be of importance throughout his thesis.

## 5. Taking the Side of Life?

I have suggested in the above that the ‘solution’ of the antithesis between criticizability and uncriticizability would be illegitimate if it merely reinforced the capacity of one of the two ideas to structure the conditions under which the antithesis could be solved. The tendency of the idea of ‘criticizability’ to dominate the opposition in this manner was shown to stem from its pedigree in Kantian and post-Kantian theories of organic life: a work’s ‘criticizability’ stems from its ‘life’ or ‘ongoing life’ (*Fortleben*). Conceived in this manner, life asserts itself as an ability to unify and incorporate not only its own parts, but everything else too: the logic of life, it seems, is always an encyclopedic one. Even though, as was suggested, *Fortleben* denotes a ‘life’ that is always-already historical, displaced, and constitutively open to the historical field of possibility—including the possibility of its own demise—its opposition with the unprogressive, unproductive inertia of ‘material content’ brings out the possibility that even the notion of *Fortleben* asserts a totalization upon literary time, reductive of the kinds of experience that other understandings of nature—indeed other understandings of life—might offer.<sup>22</sup> ‘Uncriticizable’, then, is certainly on the other side of the table from ‘criticizable’ but their opposition is not a symmetrical one. Uncriticizability does not solve the table in advance, as ‘criticizability’ does.

It is hardly surprising that the term ‘life’ should play such a prominent role in a table structured according to an antithesis that always threatens to be solved by one side or the other. The question of ‘life’ itself (as Chapter 1 will explore at length) was the subject of a remarkable renewal in the late eighteenth century, but this revival took the form (or is generally considered to have done so, at least) of an oppositional framework that pitted preformationism (the idea that a being’s future developments were contained in its seed-like form, already complete in itself) against epigenesis (the theory that living matter was not merely formed by external influences, but had a self-propagating, self-forming force). This opposition has long structured

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<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida’s engagements with ‘life’ in Husserlian phenomenology and beyond will not be explored at any length in this thesis, though, as will be noted on occasion, Derrida’s writing in this field seems to take up, with or without explicit influence, some of Benjamin’s most pressing concerns. Nonetheless, this work is relatively unique, to my mind, in its rigorous unpacking of the assumptions, premises and impositions that accompany any assertion about ‘life’, including the ‘transcendental life’ (or ‘transcendentality of a living present’) that, Husserl claims, remains when empirical or psychic life is bracketed. This rigour extends to the ‘ultra-transcendental’ life that Derrida considers to survive in the wake of the deconstruction of the opposition of empirical and transcendental life. See Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. by David B. Allison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973). See also, for an excellent account of ‘life’ in Derrida, Geoffrey Bennington, *Not Half No End: Militantly Melancholic Essays in Memory of Jacques Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), especially the chapter ‘That’s Life, Death’ (pp. 47-64).

reconstructions and interpretations of the key scientific debates of the period. Insofar as it inevitably inflected the fields of philosophy and literature in the period around 1800 too (to the extent that these fields could be differentiated), this opposition has also conditioned considerations of the relations between science, literature and philosophy since then. The notion that a specific idea of ‘life’ first arose in the period around 1800, as a result of this opposition, has also been fundamental to biopolitics, the realm of political theory which sees this emergence of life as providing a new, dispersed site through which sovereign power could operate more effectively via ‘societies of control’, and in which, according to Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* project, Western society’s foundational logic of the inclusive exclusion of ‘bare life’ could entrench itself and proliferate in new ways.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, much in the same way that the idea of life allows ‘criticizability’ to determine in advance its relation to ‘uncriticizability’, this opposition is more often than not represented as a mere prelude for the idea that proved to be victorious in the scientific unfolding of the debate, epigenesis. A recognition of this tendency has been an achievement of recent work traversing literary theory, political theory and the philosophy of science, which has sought to challenge the dominant, oppositional picture of the period ‘around 1800’ (and the tendency to resolve such oppositions through the very terms of the victor).<sup>24</sup> Such work has posed new, much-needed questions about the nature and authority of the norms, methods of thinking, and institutions—political and cultural, literary and scientific—that have been bequeathed to us from these years (not least the assumption of its unprecedentedly formative epochal character). Particularly insofar as it has been attentive to the intersections of literature, science and philosophy, recent theory in this emergent and diverse field could justifiably be thought to have jettisoned previously-entrenched oppositions that defined, and hindered, the humanities in the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> To a large degree, this thesis is influenced by the ethos of such work, and seeks to make a contribution to it. Nevertheless, I am also eager, throughout the chapters that follow, not to dissolve the difficulties that uncriticizability raises by attributing them to

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<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault, “*Society Must be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. by David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003); Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> This is a key insight of Jocelyn Holland, *German Romanticism and Science: The Procreative Poetics of Goethe, Novalis, and Ritter* (New York; London: Routledge, 2009). See especially pp. 8-10.

<sup>25</sup> For an overview of recent work in this vein, see the contributions to Nina Amstutz et al, ‘Forum: Romanticism’, *The German Quarterly*, 89.3 (Summer 2016), 344-60. Recent interventions that have explicitly challenged the way such debates have structured the field of literary theory and criticism include Holland’s *Procreative Poetics*, Amanda Jo Goldstein’s, *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), Leif Weatherby’s *Transplanting the Metaphysical Organ: German Romanticism Between Leibniz and Marx* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), and Audrey Wasser’s *The Work of Difference: Modernism, Romanticism, and the Production of Literary Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).



overdeveloped caricatures of thinkers who *are* often associated with ‘life’ around 1800 and who are often charged with having inaugurated—and in so doing limited—our senses of what literature, science and philosophy can and cannot do.

In some recent and otherwise compelling studies, Kant’s writing, particularly in the third *Critique*, has played this role, to the extent that he occasionally appears as a foil for reproaches of much that came after him, from New Criticism to deconstruction.<sup>26</sup> Yet, so partial are the pictures of Kant that tend to arise in such projections, that Kant appears, so to speak, as a foil for himself. Before offering a Chapter Outline, then, it remains to point out that this thesis will be concerned throughout with the project and the possibility of Kantian critique, something that is always in question in Kant’s writing. Rather than assuming the critical enterprise’s self-coherence and systematic dominion, ‘uncriticizability’ helps us to continue to register critique’s own contingencies (epistemological, structural, textual), which the ‘problem’ of life—though it is never really one problem—brings to the surface. Benjamin’s inkling that Kant’s philosophy could open onto a genuinely historical and genuinely linguistic experience is therefore a thought that bristles throughout this thesis.

## 6. Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 addresses this problem of ‘life’—or the problem of its ‘problem’-character—in Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. After outlining how questions of organic life were framed in the late eighteenth century, the chapter shows that Kant was dissatisfied with the dominant opposition of mechanical science and vitalist force that structured the thought of his contemporaries. Attending to the significant and often contradictory role played by biological imagery throughout Kant’s accounts of the ‘peculiar fate’ of human reason, and to his attempts to control the proliferation of concepts that sought to explain ‘life’, the chapter reimagines the dominant picture of the motivations and impact of the third *Critique*. Rather than becoming an object of critique, as some readings of Kant’s teleology suggest, ‘life’ accompanies critique as a process, to the extent that it is never possible to determine which one precedes the other. Through readings that span the entirety of the third *Critique* and which address many of its most important interpretations, the chapter explores the notion of ‘purposiveness without purpose’ to

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<sup>26</sup> I occasionally point to instances of what I perceive to be such reductions in the course of the thesis. It should also be noted that Romanticism’s notion of poetic life is sometimes caricatured in a similar manner; see for example, Katie Terezakis, *The Immanent Word: The Turn to Language in German Philosophy, 1759-1801* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007). In reproaching ‘criticizability’ in relation to the idea of life, I do not mean to contribute to such reductions; rather, I am primarily interested in this term as Benjamin’s (self-consciously constructed) *concept*, that is, as itself a reduction (though perhaps an unavoidable one) of what criticism does.

solicit a crucial tension between imaginative freedom—most clearly at work in the poet’s prolific creation of aesthetic ideas—and the primary manifestation of this freedom, which lies not in poetic products, but in the representation of ‘spirit’ as a mere suspension of conceptual determination. Reflecting on what this aporetic tension means for ‘critique’, in light of Kant’s famous claim that the text brings the critical project to an end, Kant is shown to make a subtle nod toward literary criticism as a mode of embodied thinking that is itself without ‘end’. This is the context in which Friedrich Schlegel and other thinkers of early Romanticism inherit Kant, the chapter proposes. If language has an infinite spiritual ‘life’ that is generated by poetic production then Schlegel’s celebration of the ‘poetry of poetry’, the chapter argues, is not simply a marker of this infinitude, but registers its suspension in the letter of criticism. Schlegel’s ‘poetry of poetry’, in other words, marks the first poetic articulation of a difference between the ‘life’ of criticism and its conceptualization.

Chapter 2 turns to Benjamin’s doctoral dissertation, ‘The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism’, his most extensive account of Romantic criticizability. This chapter begins, however, not by elucidating the major claims of Benjamin’s dissertation, but by addressing an earlier, less celebrated account of ‘true criticism’, which emerges in a letter of 1916. By evoking the etymological link between criticism and crisis, Benjamin here proposes that a ‘positive’ notion of criticism, rather than upholding the ‘semblance [...] of discriminating between good and bad’, emerges when language is considered to have a crisis at its heart. Instead of being a means to criticism’s end, language and criticism are said to reach a living unity insofar as the very constitution of language is deemed to be critical.<sup>27</sup> In this letter, however, Benjamin casts doubt on the possibility that this notion of criticism could ever appear as such, noting that its unidentified object is both ‘all too great to criticize’ and ‘all too small to criticize’, thus escaping the ‘gaze of anyone who attempts to contemplate it’. As these enigmatic remarks indicate, the possibility of a non-judgemental criticism pertains to questions of intention, direction and precedence, all of which arise in the letter. In arguing that crisis ought to be ‘transposed into the heart of language’, Benjamin appears to invoke an intentionality at odds with the objective account of language that can be found throughout his writings. Such a problem is also integral to the essay ‘On Language as Such and on Human Language’, written in the same

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<sup>27</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*, ed. by Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem, trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 84; *Briefe*, ed. by Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem, 2 vols. (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1978), I, p. 131. Subsequent references to Benjamin’s correspondence will be made parenthetically within the text to the English translation (abbreviated as C) followed by the German original (abbreviated as B followed by an indication of the relevant volume and page number).

year, in which Benjamin—seeking to escape the strictures of existing theories of language—argues that ‘paradox’ is not something to be solved by linguistic theory, but instead serves as its only possible solution. Chapter 2 links the theory of human naming subsequently developed in this essay to Benjamin’s comportment with regard to Romantic theories of finitude and infinity. The human name, rather than merely approximating language’s totality, instead registers its uncreative reception of the heterogeneity of language. This insight, the chapter contends, influences the account of Romantic form in Benjamin’s dissertation, and brings to light the centrality of a paradox that Benjamin understands to be fundamental for the Romantic ‘concept’ of criticism: namely, that in order for its concept—‘criticizability’—to achieve stability, it must be generated by self-effacing, poetic acts of criticism.

Whereas Chapter 2 raises a tentative relation to ‘uncriticizability’ by revealing criticism’s relation to the act of naming, Chapter 3 enquires more directly into uncriticizability’s currency in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century by exploring its curious representation in Goethe’s 1809 novel *Elective Affinities*. Through a close reading of a scene in which one character’s claims to the legislative authority of criticism encounter another’s feeling of a work’s recalcitrance to such claims, the novel is shown to offer a privileged insight into Goethe’s theory of art. The chapter plots the idea of uncriticizability in three ways. Firstly, the idea is traced to a significant, if not exclusive, source in the writings of Karl Philipp Moritz. Moritz’s essays are generally remembered as strained efforts to consider the work of art as a microcosm of a rationally organized nature. On closer inspection, however, these texts will be shown to suspend the principle of mimesis that they otherwise affirm. By revealing how Moritz’s imagistic language folds the creation and reception of art into one another, the chapter argues that his writings allow for the coexistence of a plurality of artworks and for criticism’s continued relevance, in spite of the fact that it merely reflects individual works back into the world. To this extent, Moritz is shown to offer a unique contribution to the late eighteenth-century revival of a problem posed by Leibniz in response to Spinoza’s philosophy: namely, whether Spinoza’s pantheism prohibited the possibility of human creativity, even in the form of value judgements. As the next part of the chapter argues, Moritz’s essay on ‘formative imitation’—to which Goethe, to a contested extent, contributed—informs Goethe’s own theory and practice of criticism. Rather than considering criticism to be capable of making a fundamental difference to the work of art, Goethe’s writings position it as a potentially imperceptible inhabitation of a work’s own language. Nonetheless, the chapter contends, Goethe’s literary works query the plausibility of an entirely unproductive language that his critical and theoretical writings sometimes espouse. The final part of the chapter, therefore, turns back to *Elective Affinities* to

show how the elucidation of the novel's eponymous scientific theme—and with it the conceptual priority of relationality—relies on an account of language's unproductivity that is both reinforced and destabilized throughout, especially in its intersections with problems of social and sexual difference. By linking the novel's ambiguous deployment of the language of 'sacrifice' and 'rights' to its zealous reception in Friedrich Gundolf's *Goethe* (1916), the chapter proposes that the novel opens, but leaves unexplored, alternative relations between social life and literary time.

The conclusion of Chapter 3 thus paves the way for the fourth chapter's sustained engagement with Benjamin's essay 'Goethe's Elective Affinities'. Composed at the same time as his fragmentary text 'Toward the Critique of Violence', Benjamin's essay draws links between the mythic ambiguity of the idea of 'rights'—explored in the previous chapter—and the totalizing image of nature that Benjamin sees as reigning over Goethe's novel. The essay has often been understood to espouse the view that *Elective Affinities* itself generates a totalizing matrix of nature, myth and fate that is punctured only at specific moments of interruption or 'caesura'. By showing that Benjamin's own attempts to articulate departures from myth are conditioned by a less prominent and largely unexamined awareness of his own critical language, however, the chapter argues that the essay yields a more complex account of myth than is usually acknowledged. Drawing on the essay's relation to the problem of the 'demonic', on a linguistically capacious account of 'relationship' (*Verwandtschaft*) offered in a contemporaneous fragment, and on Benjamin's criticisms of Gundolf's idea of 'living form', the chapter offers a renewed account of uncriticizability. Although Benjamin explicitly associates the idea of an uncriticizable work with Goethe's ambiguous imbrication of art and science, uncriticizability is shown to register the extent to which artworks remain mythic, if only as indexes of language's irreducibility to the purposeful practice of critique. Showing that even the minimal notion of Romantic criticism offered in Chapter 2 is liable to become 'representative', to the extent that it reduces the content of human life to a 'symbolic form', Chapter 3 considers how Benjamin's reading of Goethe's novel articulates a unique reconsideration of the relation between human life and literary language. By exploring, in particular, Benjamin's depiction of sexuality in 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', and in related fragments, the chapter links Benjamin's writings about human life to an idea of *linguistic* life. This connection is drawn upon in the conclusion, which focuses more closely on the relation between uncriticizability and literary time.

## Chapter 1

### Purposiveness without Purpose, Critique without End: Life and Imaginative Freedom from Kant to Romanticism

#### 1. ‘We locate life...’

Immanuel Kant begins a late text, his ‘Proclamation of the Imminent Conclusion of a Treaty of Perpetual Peace in Philosophy’ (1796), by citing a joke attributed to the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus: ‘Nature has given the pig a soul, instead of salt, so that he should not become rotten’.<sup>1</sup> Repurposing the joke, which is said to be told with a ‘Stoic language of force’ (*stoischen Kraftsprache*), Kant extends it to ‘our own day; save only that now, instead of the world “soul”, we have taken to use that of *living force*’. Just as the idea of a ‘soul’ was indispensable for ancient philosophy, Kant’s appropriation of the joke foregrounds the ubiquity of ‘living force’ (*Lebenskraft*) in its contemporary manifestations.

Kant, whose first published work was *Thoughts on the True Estimation of Living Forces* (1749), continues, however, by suggesting that this ubiquity—if only on his own categorical terms—is justified, ‘since from an effect we can certainly infer to the force that produces it, but not forthwith to a substance specially adapted to this type of effect’. It remains for Kant, then, to define ‘life’, rather than force:

we locate life [*das Leben...setzt*], however, in the action of animating forces (life-impulse [*Lebensreiz*]) and the ability to react to them (living-capacity [*Lebensvermögen*]), and call that man healthy in whom a proportionate stimulus produces neither an excessive nor an altogether too small effect.<sup>2</sup>

Life lives, Kant seems to say, in a finely-tuned balance between action and reaction, between impulse and ability. In this text alone, Kant employs the terms *Leben*, *Lebenskraft*, *Belebung*, *Lebensprinzip*, *Lebensreiz*, and *Lebensvermögen*, drawing attention not only to the preponderance of ‘life’ but also to its almost endless capacity for variation, its tendency to infiltrate philosophy’s

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<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, ‘Proclamation of the Imminent Conclusion of a Treaty of Perpetual Peace in Philosophy’, trans. Peter Heath, in *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*, ed. by Henry Allison and Peter Heath (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 451-460 (p. 453); AA8:413.

<sup>2</sup> AA8:414; ‘Proclamation’, p. 453; translation modified.

language and to be infiltrated by it in turn.<sup>3</sup> As much as Kant is self-consciously parroting the saturation of his contemporaries' philosophical discourse with the language of vitality, however, the joke is also on himself, as he is keenly aware. As anyone who has attempted to forge a consistent definition of 'life' across the corpus of Kant's writings would attest, and as Kant's own copious terminology in this late text implies, the term's meaning is hard to pin down.<sup>4</sup> This self-conscious variety in Kant's employments of the term 'life' indeed suggests that a stable concept of 'life' is lacking from his work: more often than not, life is taking leave of itself to appear in a plethora of variegated forms. And insofar as there is often little shared ground in the multiple uses of 'life' that can be found scattered across Kant's writings, it would appear that a Kantian concept of life, if possible to establish at all, requires to be forged rather than derived. Life, in short, is not a stable concept decorated by other terms that might be scraped away; there is, rather, little to suggest that 'life' exists independently of such conceptual decoration.

## 2. 'Life' in the Age of its Mechanical Inexplicability: Purposiveness without Purpose

Though the above account of 'life' was not simply a way for a philosopher with much at stake to hedge his bets, the flexibility of Kant's definition was undoubtedly warranted. The emergence of a proto-biological understanding of life as an autonomous principle over the course of the long

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<sup>3</sup> This insight casts doubt on one of the claims of Amanda Jo Goldstein's otherwise compelling *Sweet Science*. Goldstein argues that 'the burden of the brilliant, long-eighteenth-century experimental and theoretical work on animation and sensation captured in expressions like *irritability*, *sensibility*, *excitability*, and *associability* was to articulate a nuanced spectrum *between* autonomous action and passive determination as the zone proper to biological life' (p. 12). In the overall structure of her book, however, this relies on a misguided assumption that Kant's engagements with life—reduced to a 'Kantian organicism' (p. 79), which Goldstein routinely conflates with 'vitalism'—is entirely indifferent to this liminal zone, to the extent that Goldstein claims that 'the simultaneous codification of aesthetics and the organism in Kant's critical philosophy relied upon discounting the activity of "natural" non-selves, within and without' (p. 128), a claim that any reading of Kant's third *Critique* would have to question. As these remarks from his 'Proclamation' suggest, Kant never seeks to reduce 'life' to an overarching principle; what they also suggest, however, is that he maintains a percipient awareness of how life's 'proportionate' condition can also create a space for the proliferation of concepts that seek to fill it. Kant, therefore, has a much closer relation to Goldstein's account of the simultaneously poetic and scientific nature of eighteenth-century experimentation than is suggested in her work.

<sup>4</sup> This chapter does not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of 'life' in Kant. For an account toward this end, see Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant: The Hermeneutical Import of the Critique of Judgment* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), especially the fifth chapter, 'The Life of the Imagination', pp. 88-110. For other texts that assess the problem of life in Kant, see Peter Fenves, *Late Kant: Towards Another Law of the Earth* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Susan Meld Shell, *The Embodiment of Reason: Kant on Spirit, Generation, and Community* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996); Mary-Barbara Zeldin, *Freedom and the Critical Undertaking: Essays on Kant's Later Critiques* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International [for the American Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies], 1980), especially 'Pleasure, Life and Mother-Wit', pp. 116-39. A colossal enumeration of references to life and related terms can be found in Courtney D. Fugate, *The Teleology of Reason: A Study of the Structure of Kant's Critical Philosophy* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), especially the 'Excursus on Life' (pp. 337-57).

eighteenth century threatened to overturn the premises on which mechanical science, which had to this point delimited Kant's notion of experience, was based.<sup>5</sup> Commentators have long sought to clarify Kant's position with regard to the conflict between mechanism and emergent theories of life that came to a head in the second half of the eighteenth century. This conflict most regularly took the form of an opposition between preformationism and epigenesis. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, whose notion of a 'formative drive' (*Bildungstrieb*) is given a prominent place in the second part of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (the 'Critique of Teleological Judgment'), outlines the opposition (preformation here takes the name 'evolution'):

Namely, one either assumes that the mature, but otherwise rough and unformed procreative matter of the parents, when it arrives at its time and under the right circumstances at the place of its determination, is then gradually formed [*ausgebildet*] into a new creature. The theory of epigenesis teaches this. [...] Or one dispenses with all procreation in the world and believes on the contrary that for all humans and animals and plants which have ever lived and will yet live, *the seeds* have been made already at the first creation, so that now one generation after the other merely needs to *develop* itself [*sich . . . entwickeln*]. Thus it is called the theory of evolution.<sup>6</sup>

How, if at all, did Kant, navigate this terrain? How, to borrow Timothy Lenoir's phrasing, did he 'chart a course between the Scylla of reductionist mechanics and the Charybdis of vitalism'?<sup>7</sup> Responses to this and similar questions have proliferated in recent decades, as Kant's 'Critique of Teleological Judgment' has become the object of sustained attention not only from Kantian philosophers but from scientists, historians of science and a number of other disciplines. Whether the aim is to situate Kant in the history of science, or to consider the impact of the

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<sup>5</sup> As Robert Mitchell has argued, the idea that living beings were in some way autonomous in relation to other material entities was not new and can be traced back at least as far as Aristotle. The idea that living beings were infused with a power of reason or self-motion was elaborated further in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was on the basis of the idea of a principle of life, which could not be understood along the lines of 'modern' science, that eighteenth-century theories of life distinguished themselves. See Mitchell, *Experimental Life: Vitalism in Romantic Science and Literature* (Baltimore, MA: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), pp. 8-9. Two well-known overviews of the period to have emerged in recent decades are Timothy Lenoir, *The Strategy of Life: Teleology and Mechanics in Nineteenth-Century German Biology* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989 [1982]) and Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Cited and translated in Holland, *Procreative Poetics*, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Michel Chaouli, *The Laboratory of Poetry: Chemistry and Poetics in the Work of Friedrich Schlegel* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p 197.

budding life sciences on Kant's philosophy, the third *Critique*, with its unprecedented attention to 'organized beings', has been considered a main source of enlightenment on such questions.<sup>8</sup>

In the 'Critique of Teleological Judgment', Kant tackles the problem of organic life by attending to what is variously termed the organism, organized being or natural end, employing the example of a tree to explain how living beings differ from mechanically-determined matter. Kant's account of the 'tree' has three dimensions which vouch for the peculiarity of organic beings (CJ: 243-44; AA5:371-72).<sup>9</sup> Firstly, the tree is both a particular organism and a member of a species: in that it 'unceasingly produces itself', the tree *causes* the propagation of the species, and is at the same time the *effect* of such procreation. Secondly, the tree is in a dynamic relation to its environment: any individual tree imbibes organic and inorganic matter, and grows or decays in a manner inexplicable by mechanistic accounts. Thirdly, the tree, like all organisms, evinces a part-whole causality irreducible to mechanistic norms: any one of the tree's parts both contributes to and depends upon the 'whole', and the tree can subsequently adapt to so many 'miscarriages and malformations in growth' in order to preserve its life. Such accidents indeed contribute to the overall whole, rather than damaging it irreparably.<sup>10</sup> The tree's parts are 'combined into a whole by being reciprocally the cause and effect of their form'. The reciprocal causality of the tree, and of organized beings in general, remains alien to human cognition, whose category of causality relates effects only to 'physical-mechanical causes', meaning that humans may comprehend wholes only as effects from the actions of parts, which operate as efficient causes. Whilst, for example, we can understand—along purely mechanist lines—that if an extra part is added to a tree it will have the effect of altering the whole tree, we cannot think that the whole can be the cause of the parts in question. With organisms, we see that parts affect the whole but also that the whole seems to affect the parts; there appears, in other words, to be some undetermined whole working behind what we perceive, allowing the parts and the whole to mutually generate and renew one another. Kant's example proposes that organisms appear to operate in such a way that contravenes the mechanistic unidirectionality of causality; when we encounter them in acts of judging, they draw attention to our own cognitive limitations.

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<sup>8</sup> For an argument about how organicism structures Kant's philosophy of mind, see Jennifer Mensch, *Kant's Organicism: Epigenesis and the Development of the Critical Philosophy* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), especially pp. 8-9. For an overview of Mensch and other recent approaches to the specific problem of epigenesis, see John H. Zammito, 'Epigenesis in Kant: Recent Reconsiderations', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 58 (2016), 85-97.

<sup>9</sup> Citations in the present paragraph are all drawn from these pages.

<sup>10</sup> For a summation of Hegel's appropriation of these characteristics, see Thomas Khurana, 'Life and Autonomy: Forms of Self-Determination in Kant and Hegel', in *Freedom of Life: Hegelian Perspectives*, ed. by Thomas Khurana (Berlin: August Verlag, 2013), pp. 155-94.



Whatever the novelty of Kant's account of organized beings, his argument's relation to the ongoing debate about mechanism and 'life' requires unfolding. Recent critical interventions illuminate not only Kant's awareness of variations on this debate, but also his dissatisfaction with the terms that structure it: the 'Antinomy of Teleological Judgment', as almost all commentators note, sheds light on Kant's recognition of the assumptions behind the seeming irreconcilability of two opposing claims. In the seventieth section of the third *Critique*, having already offered the account of the organism abridged above, Kant opposes the thesis that all things are explicable by mechanical laws to the antithesis that some things—namely organisms—are apparently inexplicable according to such laws. Kant's solution proposes that the antinomy exists only on the basis that each principle is taken as constitutive for determining judgement: that is, the antinomy exists if the potential judgements we might make on *all* natural phenomena are understood to act on the principle that a universal is given, when we judge, under which particulars are subsumed (CJ:259; AA5:387-88).<sup>11</sup> This is so for mechanistic explanations; as a kind of reflective judgement, however, our teleological judgement of organisms does not seek to make a determinate claim, since a concept for the object at hand is not given in advance.<sup>12</sup> The reflective judgement, instead, points only to the limits in our own ability to know things mechanically (an ability which should nonetheless, Kant maintains, be pushed as far as possible).

Much rests, then, on the status of reflective judgement and the objects that occasion it. As Rachel Zuckert has proposed, reflective judgement involves the representation of an object as a 'unity of diversity', a characterization with implications for the notion of 'purposiveness'. To the extent that reflective judgement actually grounds determining judgement, all judging can be said to be purposive to some extent; even empirical cognitive judgement is purposive insofar as

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<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey Bennington has problematized Kant's resolution of the antinomy 'on paper', suggesting that the 'extremely delicate' argument is missed when Kant (and his interpreters) refer to the reflective nature of judgements. This is unsatisfactory, Bennington argues, because of a mischaracterization of the antinomy itself: the principles that give rise to the antinomy (thus making it an antinomy) are 'maxims for reflective judgement' and not determinate judgements: determinate judgements, Bennington reminds us, are not autonomous and give rise to no law, and so to no antinomy. Hence Kant's appeal to the reflective nature of our judgement upon organisms, Bennington claims, is tautological. Bennington, 'The End is Here', in *Kant After Derrida*, ed. by Philip Rothfield (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2003), pp. 50-65 (p. 51). I seek to respond to this argument later in this chapter, when I consider a disparaging claim that Kant makes about the tautological nature of poetry's relation to purposiveness.

<sup>12</sup> Rachel Zuckert has drawn attention to the fact that Kant's definition of reflective judgement in the fourth section of the published Introduction (whereby 'only the particular is given, for which the universal is to be found') does not play much of a role in the main body of the third *Critique*, since neither aesthetic judgement nor teleological judgement really seek to find or apply universal concepts to particulars. Rather, Zuckert argues, there is a 'weak' commonality between reflective judgement, aesthetic judgement and teleological judgement: all are cases of non-determining judgement. The 'strong' link that Zuckert identifies between the three is the notion of purposiveness, which will play an important role throughout this chapter. See Rachel Zuckert, *Kant on Beauty and Biology: An Interpretation of the Critique of Judgment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 66-67.

we (purposively) refer the representation of a phenomenon to a concept or end. Yet because certain representations of the imagination are only referred to the lawfulness of the understanding without the mediation of a concept (namely, reflectively), ‘purposiveness without a purpose’ can be considered the subjective principle of such judgements.<sup>13</sup> Considered like this, purposiveness without purpose refers to a relational form for how things are subjectively held together. Since no particular purpose or concept is given, our judgement concerns merely the form of purposiveness: purposiveness without purpose names just *what we do* when we apply concepts or seek to form or find them.<sup>14</sup> On such a definition, it is precisely the subjective, unified nature of our imaginative representation that matters, and not, as Zuckert takes pains to emphasize in regard to dominant interpretations, that the object in question fulfills a cognitive requirement ‘as if’ it was made with a purposive aim by an intelligent creator.<sup>15</sup>

Encountering organisms, our subjective judgements are (as in all reflective judgements) guided by purposiveness insofar as we attempt to establish a unity of diversity, as we do when we judge works of art or ‘natural beauties’. The purposiveness is without purpose because, even if we know the purpose of a specific part of the organic being (for example, if we know each organ’s function) or if we understand the organism as part of a wider whole (if we consider a plant’s role within an ecosystem, for instance), we still do not know the purpose of its existence: namely, we have no access to the ‘whole’ or purpose that is at work behind its parts, which remains (though the being is objective and material) a subjectively constituted unity.<sup>16</sup> What makes teleological judgement unique among other forms of reflective judgement, however, is that we do not merely reflect on our own receptivity toward the world, as in aesthetic judgement; rather we attribute the structure of purposiveness to an object that comes to be understood as objective and material. For Zuckert then, ‘organic unity is not only a unity that is contingent [...] but also holds among parts qua contingent and diverse’.<sup>17</sup> This ‘special unity’ is, Zuckert claims, the one and only aspect of organisms or organic behavior that cannot be explained mechanically.<sup>18</sup> Zuckert maintains that the third *Critique* does not license the claim that objects in nature are to be judged and unified according to teleological laws, as the more ambitious of Kant’s introductory statements might suggest. However, it does provide an account of how purposiveness without purpose constitutes what Kant, in the first *Critique*, termed the ‘highest

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<sup>13</sup> Zuckert, p. 64.

<sup>14</sup> Zuckert, pp. 76-77.

<sup>15</sup> Zuckert associates this heuristic claim with an ‘initial proposal’ made in the Introduction, which effectively serves as a foil for her readings of both the ‘Critique of Aesthetic Judgement’ and the ‘Critique of Teleological Judgement’. See pp. 31-42.

<sup>16</sup> Zuckert, p. 81.

<sup>17</sup> Zuckert, p. 109.

<sup>18</sup> Zuckert, p. 126.

formal unity<sup>19</sup>: it constitutes this unity ‘as the form of reciprocal means-ends relations grounded in a temporal anticipatory structure, a form of relations that holds of and unifies parts precisely as diverse and contingent’.<sup>20</sup>

Considered in light of the solution to the problem of organic life’s relation to mechanical determination in Kant and his interlocutors, Zuckert’s analysis is telling. For if Kant’s rejection of the terms on which an opposition between life and mechanical science was posed relies on an acknowledgement that our response to organic life is merely regulative for reflective judgement, then a notion of reflective judgement which seeks to highlight the irreducibly occasional nature of our recognition of ‘life’, such as that offered by Zuckert, suggests that there may ultimately be no one opposition between ‘life’ and mechanical science.<sup>21</sup> As that which is judged as a unity of diversity, ‘life’ is equally irreducible to a cognitive determinate claim *and* to its putative status as the mere index of the totality of nature, whose very unrepresentability would serve to justify empirical scientific enquiry. ‘Purposiveness without purpose’ describes the unique way that humans encounter and imaginatively construct organic life (including our own biological being), but this does not mean that all such constructions of life are fundamentally identical. It is only in the third *Critique* that Kant, in turning his attention to organisms themselves, emphasizes the freedom of our subjective response to beings that appear themselves—objectively and materially—to be free.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This, according to Zuckert, is precisely why the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* is so novel. In the Appendix to the Dialectic of the first *Critique* Kant had already pursued the argument that we may use teleological laws regulatively to discover causal laws, a theme that was well established by Leibniz and other seventeenth-century deistic models which encourage an understanding of nature as if designed by God. See Zuckert, *Beauty*, pp. 26-31.

<sup>20</sup> Zuckert, p. 126

<sup>21</sup> As Jocelyn Holland has argued in a similar vein, the stories most often told about the emergence and consolidation of the life sciences tend to be from the perspective of the victor: as she notes of Helmut Müller-Sievers’ influential account, epigenesis writes the story of its own success, turning a less determined field of problems into a ‘strongly dichotomized’ opposition. See Holland, *Procreative Poetics*, pp. 8-10; Helmut Müller-Sievers, *Self-Generation: Biology, Philosophy, and Literature Around 1800* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> The objective status of organisms is emphasized in Bennington’s argument that Kant’s discussion of Epicurus troubles the notion that purposiveness is *only* a subjective principle: ‘the position of Epicurus will provide a negative (“materialist”) truth of Kant’s thought’, though this is never articulated as such in the third *Critique*. This is what Bennington terms ‘chance’, which I have here considered as the ‘occasional’ nature of our encounters with organisms. See Bennington, ‘The End is Here’, p. 56. A different argument about the role of Epicurean and Lucretian atomism in the period around 1800 can be found throughout Goldstein’s *Sweet Science*.

### 3. Critique without Beginning, Critique without End

The limitation of the third *Critique*'s novelty to the claim that a notion of organic life is regulative for reflective judgement, in short, merely redoubles the assumptions that there was ever *an* encounter between 'life' and mechanical science, that the complexity and singularity of our responses to organic beings can be generalized, and that such generalizations aid the fulfilment of Kant's alleged aim with the 'Critique of Teleological Judgement': to definitively solve the problem of organic life. Such preconceptions about the purpose of the third *Critique*, and thus about its historical and philosophical significance, place limits upon our ability to recognize the nature of the enterprise of critique itself.

The third *Critique* grapples with a problem that had left the boundaries of the critical enterprise porous: the status of the living, yet rational, human agent at its heart. As the question of how to understand life comes to the forefront of scientific and philosophical enquiry in the late eighteenth century, Kant's confrontation with it illuminates a problem that had always haunted critique. The crisis inaugurated by the proliferation of scientific thinking on 'life'—and the nature of Kant's response to it—recalls the very beginning of the critical project. 'Life' acts as a charged index of the problem named at the outset of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, on which the project of critique itself balances: why do some questions arise which are ultimately unanswerable, but which cannot be dismissed?<sup>23</sup> Why are we interested in problems that lead us careeringly beyond our cognitive capacities, and why, moreover, do we concern ourselves with our own ineluctable and headlong tendency to get lost in such questions?<sup>24</sup> The groundlessness of such questions, Kant suggested, which can meet with neither true nor false answers, is the condition on which other, answerable questions can be grounded. They form the very bedrock of reason and science, but since it is not possible to establish why these questions, rather than others, violently pose themselves, their unreasonable imposition is a matter of the most vexing, even lamentable contingency, suggesting that 'fate' rather than rational necessity is at work in the grounding of reason.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* famously begins: 'Human reason has the peculiar fate in one species of its cognitions that it is burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason'. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 99. My discussion of the relation of fate and unanswerable but inescapable questions is indebted to Peter D. Fennes, *A Peculiar Fate: Metaphysics and World-History in Kant* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>24</sup> For another clear exegesis of this problem in relation to the concept of 'interest' in the late eighteenth century, see Jan Mieszkowski, *Labors of Imagination: Aesthetics and Political Economy from Kant to Althusser* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 13-14.

<sup>25</sup> For a rebuttal of Fennes' reading, see Rei Terada, *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). Terada argues that the first *Critique* sees an

In responding to the problem of ‘life’ through a consideration of the kinds of judging appropriate to our singular encounters with organisms, the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* continues to attest to this uncertain origin of critique. From its beginnings, indeed, Kant’s critical philosophy registers how the incipient life sciences might, in their very determinability, attest to critique’s own peculiar birth. In this regard, the first critique’s notorious metaphor of an ‘epigenesis of pure reason’ does not posit a determined origin of reason;<sup>26</sup> rather, a claim to ‘epigenesis’ denotes that the origin of reason remains *obscure*.<sup>27</sup> The obscurity is only redoubled by Kant’s employment of the language of epigenesis’ epistemological nemesis, preformationism, to describe the ‘elaboration’ of pure reason’s architectonic schema: the science of pure reason ‘lies in reason like a seed, all of whose parts still lie very involuted and are hardly recognizable even under microscopic observation’.<sup>28</sup> Kant’s appeal to two opposed eighteenth-century models of life indicates less a carelessness with language than an embryonic entanglement between critique and the scientific uncertainty about ‘life’: this uncertainty was, from the beginning, highly relevant for considering the peculiarity of reason, just as reason would demand an undogmatic approach to this open scientific field.

Kant, as is well known, never set out to write more than one *Critique*, and one can plot the stages at which he realized that a *Critique of Pure Reason* would not suffice. The decision to write a separate *Critique of Practical Reason* was made after numerous considerations, in the midst of revisions for the second edition of the first *Critique*, regarding how to address the problem of practical reason in light of the perceived shortcomings of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.<sup>29</sup> The *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, likewise, is the result of numerous shifts in Kant’s thinking, which would have seemed impossible at earlier dates, such as the ‘cognitive turn’ that led Kant from a ‘critique of taste’ to a critique of judgement.<sup>30</sup> Another change concerns the problem of ‘life’, which, however, entails a multi-layered and far less conspicuous transformation. On one level, the change can be viewed from the perspective of critique’s own

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‘analgesic Kant’ (p. 81) pardon us from the need to engage with fated questions: ‘The First Critique is a largely successful secular comedy that modifies and domesticates fate, and the text is remarkable for its absence of lamentation’ (pp. 81-82, n.9).

<sup>26</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 265. Zammito notes that epigenesis is conceptually distinguishable from ‘organicism’ per se, but that both terms were important for Kant’s considerations of pure reason. See ‘Epigenesis in Kant’, p. 86.

<sup>27</sup> Weatherby, *Transplanting*, p. 75. With reference to the obscurity implied by the metaphor, Weatherby restates the question of fate as follows: ‘How is it that we are rational in a world whose proper rationality we must remain agnostic about?’ (p. 74).

<sup>28</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 692.

<sup>29</sup> Lewis White Beck, *A Commentary on Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1960)

<sup>30</sup> John H. Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant’s Critique of Judgment* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

need for closure, which demands (if that closure remains outstanding) critique's openness to domains—such as contemporaneous theories of organic life—that were previously beyond its remit. Yet, at another level, it is not merely a question of openness and closure, and 'life' is not merely an example of a field that critique could incorporate, since—as we have just seen—the problem of 'life' is present throughout Kant's critical project. Even before the third *Critique*, then, life undergoes multiple, often, furtive transformations. Kant reminds us at the end of the first *Critique* of the necessity of faith, yet this reminder is necessitated by what appears to Kant as an irreducibly practical dimension of reason: we are agents in the world, and 'life' is the fact of this existence.

If life, as such a view implies, can only be understood retroactively, an argument could be made for life's similarity with practical reason: from this perspective, 'life' would be the mere index of our practical existence. This practical dimension of reason has solicited from Kant's interpreters a 'constructivist' argument, according to which reason has to be constructed rather than imposed, and which therefore diagnoses critique's openness as the result of its merely *recursive* character (this is the constructivist primacy of the practical over the theoretical).<sup>31</sup> Yet a recognition of the originary entanglement between critique and 'life'—crystallized in Kant's metaphorical appeals to epigenesis and preformationism—suggests that the reduction of critique to a merely recursive function of practical reason is misguided, insofar as it also necessarily reduces life to a simple, representational index of reason's construction. Against this view, the 'fated' character of life ought to be upheld: 'life' is never depicted as an unconditioned idea like the immortality of the soul, freedom, or God, but it nevertheless shares their obscure and 'peculiar' origin. This means that life should be considered as both inescapable and—as Kant's mixed metaphors show—inescapably heterogenous: in the fact that we are alive, we are bound to be rational beings, bound for our practical actions to presume our status as living agents in the world, yet finally—perhaps most troublingly for Kant—bound to be organisms, capable of free

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<sup>31</sup> The constructivist position is usually associated above all with Onora O'Neill; see her *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). In an influential argument similar to the constructivist one, Hannah Ginsborg argues that purposiveness is a 'normative lawfulness', distinct from and 'thinner' than rational normativity deriving from pure practical reason. See Ginsborg, *The Normativity of Nature: Essays on Kant's Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 251. Jane Kneller has proposed a viable counterpoint to this constructivist argument (although her attention is not to the question of life, and she takes a more unitary approach to the role of the third *Critique* than I take here). As Kneller points out in relation to constructivism, the third *Critique* implies 'a less interventionist, less defensive mode of rational engagement with the world of nature and with others'. In short, the third *Critique* emphasizes play rather than will and proceeds from the singularity of our encounters with works of art or natural beings rather than from the 'fact' of reason. See Jane Kneller, *Kant and the Power of Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 77.

activity of a kind whose ‘purpose’, considered at the level of any life itself rather than the ‘final end’ of human morality, remains inscrutable.<sup>32</sup>

There is a constructivist response to the third *Critique* too, of course. For Paul Guyer, reason’s practical dimension essentially determines in advance the meaning of ‘purposiveness without purpose’. Guyer asserts that Kant’s reference to the ‘postulate of practical reason’ means that ‘purposiveness without purpose’ must always be subject to a moral supplement: ‘purposiveness without purpose *with a purpose*’.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, the immanent causality of the individual organism, for Guyer, is ineluctably referred to the relative causality that is (as Kant repeatedly states) interminable considered from the perspective of nature, but which finds its unconditioned end in the idea of the highest good, the greatest possible happiness as the result of human virtue. Yet as the *Critique of Pure Reason* shows, our practical fatedness has an uncanny resemblance to freedom, insofar as it is the sign of the incompatibility of our rational nature with the causality that otherwise structures the world and our judgements thereof. And, as the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* shows, in a similar vein, we are likewise fated to be free *as organisms*. Whereas the indeducibility of life *can* be captured by the primacy of practical reason—whereby it is reduced to a mere index—the third *Critique* theorizes the imaginative freedom that animates our singular encounters with organic life itself, including our own. The potential encounter between the imagination in its freedom and the freedom of organic beings is of such a singular nature that we cannot presuppose the seamless transition from scientific experience to recognition of a moral demand.

The novelty of the third *Critique* can be considered, then, in terms of the specific role that organisms, in their multiplicity, play in ‘constituting critique’.<sup>34</sup> Against all attempts to capture a general concept of life from Kant’s account, the singularity of reflective judgements—at their

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<sup>32</sup> For Kant’s classification of all transcendental ideas into three classes, see the *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp. 405-06. The pertinence of the problem of ‘life’ for these debates is illuminated by another analogy Kant seems to make between the emergence of reason and that of life. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant affirms, contra Hume, the ‘self-delivery [*Selbstgebärung*] of our understanding (including reason), without impregnation by experience’ (*Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 656; translation modified). As Müller-Sievers has pointed out, this seems to compound Kant’s conception of the ‘epigenesis of pure reason’ (*Self-Generation*, p. 49), yet, like Holland and Weatherby, I think it is necessary to uphold Kant’s openness to the heterogeneity of the problem of life, rather than seeing him as coming down on one side of a dichotomous opposition.

<sup>33</sup> This argument is made in a review essay which tackles Zuckert’s book: Paul Guyer, ‘The Harmony of the Faculties in Recent Books on the “Critique of the Power of Judgment”’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 67.2 (2009), 201-21 (p. 202). ‘See also the chapter ‘Feeling and Freedom: Kant on Aesthetics and Morality’ in Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 1-47. As Kneller notes with reference to this chapter, the independence of feelings of pleasure or displeasure from *practical* reason may actually *serve* pure practical reason but they are not independent for the sake of morality (as Guyer claims). See Kneller, p. 89 n. 36.

<sup>34</sup> I refer here to Willi Goetschel, *Constituting Critique: Kant’s Writing as Critical Praxis*, trans. Eric Schwab (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

individual level—remains irreducible. The porosity of critique, implied in the early recognition of reason's affinity with both epigenesis and preformation, is thus intensified in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, which proposes our encounters with life to be singular and ungeneralizable, multiple yet incommensurable. The historicizing, representational impulse that reduces life to one problem and one solution that could bring critique to an end is undermined, therefore, by an account of the imaginative singularity of every solution, which implies that critique is without end, and remains in process; or alternatively, that the end of critique is not on the horizon but right before us as nothing other than the promise of an end, rather than a telos.<sup>35</sup> The fact that we encounter life in singular phenomena that come to seem 'objective and material' indeed presages the way that Romanticism will commend the irreducibly material nature of poetic language, in which writing is not just a container for spoken words, but a material instantiation of the excessive and literary nature of language—the life of language—itself.<sup>36</sup>

#### 4. The Force of Imagination: 'On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy'

Before turning to Kant's inheritors, however, we have to recognize the extent to which the entanglement of life and imaginative freedom posed a problem in the late eighteenth century. The semi-satirical sting of Kant's quip about the ubiquity of the concept of 'living force' in his 1796 'Proclamation' renews his critical engagement with theories of 'life' and 'force' that had come to prominence in Germany, somewhat belatedly, in the 1780s and 1790s.<sup>37</sup> (Kant is

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<sup>35</sup> Bennington, 'The End is Here', p. 63.

<sup>36</sup> Holland argues that literary texts are 'uniquely situated to assess the interdisciplinarity of the phenomenon' of life or procreation. Again, the value of this account lies in its rebuttal to Müller-Sievers, who states that: 'Epigenesis is thus the condition of the possibility of any claim to absoluteness, be this a philosophical or literary absolute. The only form under which the absolute can be said to exist is the organism, since only organically can the interminable chain of causes and effects be bent back onto its own origin, and only as organic can a discourse claim to contain all the reasons for its own form and existence'. Müller-Sievers, *Self-Generation*, p. 4; cited in Holland, *Procreative Poetics*, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> As Justin E.H. Smith has argued, whilst something like biology had come to occupy a preeminent position in the thought of Leibniz by the end of his life, it failed to make philosophical headway in Germany, partly on account of perceived failures, in the scholarship of Leibniz's early reception, to recognize the analogical nature of some of his more striking statements about life; the effect was that the concept itself widely regarded as an unserious one. Kant himself epitomized the degree to which Leibniz's biological thinking was put aside, reading him mainly in light of the debate about the nature of space that took place in Leibniz's correspondence with Samuel Clarke. See Justin E.H. Smith, *Divine Machines: Leibniz and the Sciences of Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 4. In Britain, arguments about life had come to prominence in the 1740s, and had spread to France by the following decade, to be taken up by the French *Encyclopédistes*. An exhaustive enquiry into the historiographical reconstruction of the development of the life sciences over the course of the eighteenth century is of course beyond the scope of this thesis. Such an enquiry is attempted in many texts on the period, however. James L. Larson, for instance, suggests that Anglo-American historical accounts are skewed by measuring primary texts as forerunners (or otherwise) of Darwinism. See James L. Larson, *Interpreting Nature: The Science of the Living Form from Linnaeus to Kant* (Baltimore, MA: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).



responding, more specifically, to their reappearance in Schlosser's popular philosophy).<sup>38</sup> Kant had closely followed developments in the life sciences throughout Europe since the 1750s. He had sharpened his teeth, however, on taking apart theories that promised to account for the emergence of life, and which assumed that concepts of 'life' or 'force' could account for reason as well as biological existence. His grievances stemmed, by and large, from two closely related problems, each of which concerned the imagination. Firstly, as the bathos of Kant's put-down makes clear, he believed the terminological contrivances of the life sciences to be arbitrary and lacking in categorical foundation: in failing to ground new theories in pure concepts of the understanding, the imagination ran wild in its conceptual inventions.

At the same time, Kant was privy to the fact that, in the thought of his contemporaries, the faculty of the imagination was itself undergoing far-reaching transformations which could, if not curtailed, render it compatible with, and indeed central to, the development of an all-encompassing and uncritical 'vitalist' theory of life. The problem of the imagination in the late eighteenth century concerns a particular dimension of the dualism of mind and matter, one that had been in want of a solution since Descartes: if the imagination is an active rather than merely passive faculty, the 'power of imagining itself', then, when the theological grounding of the 'I' is challenged, it remains unclear whether this power acts blindly and freely, or if it is animated by an anterior disposition traceable to a sovereign subject.<sup>39</sup> Herder's reduction of rational faculties to the power of the imagination—and his appeal to a vital 'force' that permeated reason and matter—renewed an answer to this question, which had already come to prominence in Leibniz. The imagination, according to this radical answer, is not guided by causation or habitual proximity, nor by the intellect, but by its own internal impetus.<sup>40</sup> If a person was not simply affected by the matter of the external world, but somehow worked actively to reconstitute it—in however minimal a way—then imagination had to be afforded an active, intellectual role. The problem arises, however, of what drives the imagination: is it guided by an internal force or conatus, does it work anarchically upon material, or can it operate in accordance with other faculties, whether under their constraint or in its freedom?

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<sup>38</sup> See Peter Fennes, 'The Topicality of Tone', in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant, Transformative Critique by Jacques Derrida*, ed. by Peter Fennes (Baltimore, MA: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 1-48.

<sup>39</sup> My reference is to a claim that follows soon after the second meditation's identification of the 'I' as a 'thinking thing': 'In fact, I am also identical with the "I" who imagines because even if it happened, as I supposed, that none of the things I imagined were any longer true, the power of imagining itself truly exists and is part of my thought.' René Descartes, *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, trans. Desmond M. Clarke (London: Penguin 1998), pp. 25-26.

<sup>40</sup> These remarks condense some of the key insights of Christoph Menke's *Force: A Fundamental Concept of Aesthetic Anthropology*, trans. Gerrit Jackson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), pp. 1-12.

In the absence of any guidance by morality or even legislation by the understanding, Kant feared the destiny of such a force being nothing other than the imagination's descent into a fruitless 'wasteland'.<sup>41</sup> Whereas Kant had previously held theories that ran counter to mechanism to be merely epiphenomenal, he came to recognize the severity of the threat they posed to the project of critique, insofar as the theory of vital organic force could, if left unchecked, come to account for the genesis of reason itself.<sup>42</sup> This tension came to define the debate that took place under the auspices of the principle of 'teleology': more fundamentally, the very status and possibility of a *principle* of teleology becomes a site of conflict.<sup>43</sup> In recognizing a connection between an imagination that gives rise to illegitimate conceptual inventions and an imagination that was rumoured to be undergoing real change, Kant's early responses to the proliferation of vitalist discourse allow for a better understanding of how we might consider the limitations on imaginative freedom that ultimately come to inhibit the third *Critique*.

As Kant increasingly turns his attention to organisms, this problem comes to the fore: how is Kant to defend a 'principle' of teleology, whilst seeking to limit the power of the imagination that had been associated with self-generating beings? A digressive remark from the third *Critique* on the imagination's limits consolidates the author's own (negative) analyses of illegitimate concepts, alongside his justification for allowing experience to be guided by rational ideas rather than by imaginative productions. In the 'General Remark on the Exposition of Aesthetic Reflective Judgments' that follows the 'Analytic of the Sublime', Kant defends the validity of the 'pure, elevating, merely negative presentation of morality' that arises when the imagination fails (referring, famously, to the foremost manifestation of this failure to be found in culture: the ban on images). Kant's defence, however, works by way of a reproach. It is a 'wholly

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<sup>41</sup> See Shell, *The Embodiment of Reason*, p. 202. Kant's references to this 'wasteland' (*Wüste*) are scattered throughout a number of texts, including his review of Herder's *Ideas* (AA8:64), his essay 'On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy' (AA8:180-1) and the third *Critique* (AA5:442), where an addition to the second edition claims that, without human beings, nature would be a 'mere wasteland [*Wüste*] [...] in vain and without final end'.

<sup>42</sup> Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 156. For Herder, the term 'genesis' was preferable to 'epigenesis': 'it appears to me that one talks inappropriately [*uneigentlich*] if one talks of seeds that are merely developed or of an *epigenesis* according to which parts grow onto the individual from the outside. Rather, it is formation (*genesis*), an effect of internal forces, for which nature had prepared material to form into itself [*sich zubilden*], in which to make itself visible' (cited in Weatherby, *Transplanting*, p. 99; translation modified). Herder is proposing that the term *epigenesis*—a *genesis* on some pre-existing material—still bears too much in common with preformationism, yet the point may be furthered to suggest that natural genesis is inseparable from that of reason: reason has no precedence over genesis itself on Herder's account. For Kant, as noted earlier, the language of epigenesis could be used to point to the obscure origin of reason, but this image relied on the obscurity of epigenesis itself, which is to say, on the problem of life insofar as it remained a problem: in no way could reason itself be epigenetically conceived. See also Weatherby, *Transplanting*, p. 73.

<sup>43</sup> Shell, *The Embodiment of Reason*, p. 202.

erroneous worry' (*eine ganz irrige Besorgnis*), Kant writes, to fear that the imagination, deprived of the senses, would be subject to an imposition of morality that would 'bring with it nothing but cold, lifeless approval [*kalte, leblose Billigung*] and no moving force or emotion' (CJ:156; AA5:274; translation modified). Kant's worry about this 'worry' does not, as might be expected, produce a positive account of the life, force or emotive character of morality's exaltation (save, that is, the claim that 'the unmistakable and inextinguishable idea of morality remains', in spite of the imagination's failure). Instead, he opts only to reinforce his claim that such a 'worry' is, indeed, mistaken. Rather than attempting to find 'images and childish devices' that could represent rational ideas, 'it would be more necessary to moderate the momentum of an unbounded enthusiasm' that feels the need for such accoutrements in the first place. The somewhat marginal status of this digression means that Kant does not fully flesh out his argument. Kant appears to attribute this supposed need for imaginative representation to a 'fear of the powerlessness of these ideas' (*Furcht vor Kraftlosigkeit dieser Ideen*). The implication is perhaps slightly unusual: fear and worry—affects over which most of us would admit, or perhaps hope, to have no control—can be illegitimate. It is not, however, a fear of phenomena of incalculable magnitude or terrifying power that Kant here chides, but a fear about the *lack* of power or force in ideas themselves.<sup>44</sup> It is not clear whether Kant really thinks that ideas *do* lack power (*Kraft*), but the eventual implication is that it does not really matter. Just as Kant writes that a 'worry' about the 'lifeless' imposition of ideas is misguided, without actually affirming that ideas do indeed have life, he seems to suggest that 'fear' in the face of this powerlessness is misguided: whether ideas have life or not is neither here nor there. The sublime, after all, is the occasion on which the imagination, in its freedom, does violence to itself.<sup>45</sup>

All of this has important repercussions. For it was under the sign of a similar 'worry' or 'fear' that Kant felt the need to defend himself against the claims of his contemporaries, in his 'On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy' (1788), an important precursor to the 'Critique of Teleological Judgment': here, a version of Kant's later feigned 'worry' about lack of imaginative life is cast as a fear about life itself. The occasion for Kant's essay was the

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<sup>44</sup> Kant here uses *Kraftlosigkeit* to refer to the (either real or perceived) powerlessness of the ideas themselves, his only use of this term in the third *Critique*. Elsewhere in the text, Kant uses *Ohnmacht* to refer to 'physical powerlessness', a person's 'present actual powerlessness' and a 'feeling of complete powerlessness that is the appropriate disposition of the mind', all of which accompany the feeling of the sublime. The translators and editors of the Cambridge translation do not make this distinction (and indeed offer 'powerlessness' only as *Ohnmacht* in the book's glossary); the distinction seems to be an important technical one, however, since *Kraftlosigkeit* refers to the (again, either real or perceived) lack of vitality in ideas themselves, whereas *Ohnmacht* describes the famous subjective effect on the spectator.

<sup>45</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago, 2001), pp. 130-31.

publication of Georg Forster's 'Something Further on the Human Races', which was in turn a response to Kant's earlier essays on race, 'Of the Different Races of Human Beings' (1775) and 'Determination of the Concept of a Human Race' (1785), as well as a riposte to Kant's highly critical reviews of Herder.<sup>46</sup> In Forster's essay, Kant had been accused of giving undue precedence to theoretical principles over empirical enquiry, a prejudice that greatly compromised his ability to recognize and legitimate the scientific novelty of theories about human generation or life itself. Kant was the intended target of Forster's accusation of an active disinterest in the radical insights afforded by trips such as that taken by Forster himself to the Pacific:

one of the safest means to rest comfortably in a happy everydayness of thinking—to bow in submissive, intellectual poverty under the yoke of the most foolish prejudice and never to avenge a nearby truth beckoning the thinker—is to recoil, as before a monster, from a bold consequence that flows quite directly from clear premises. Away with this unmanly fear!<sup>47</sup>

Kant's retort explicitly acknowledged the slight: 'I know of yet another fear which is not exactly [...] *unmanly*, namely to recoil from everything which unhitches reason from its first principles and permits it to wander about in unbounded imaginings'.<sup>48</sup>

Forster accuses Kant of fearing the scientific novelty of 'life'; Kant responds coyly that he has a legitimate 'fear' of illegitimate uses of reason such as Forster's; and finally, in the third *Critique*, Kant suggests that any 'fear' or 'worry' about the sublime's shattering of the imagination's capacity for representation is misguided. In all three instances, a fear is expressed about the denial of imaginative activity or life and the dominance of a rational idea. What ties these moments together, however, is yet another instance, in which fear is explicitly denied. Whilst Kant here foreshadows the method pursued in the third *Critique*, it is striking that a central metaphor of the *Critique of Pure Reason* returns. Kant accepts that the use of teleological principles requires its own trial of sorts, and—taking to the stand—any residue of fear in the author fades:

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<sup>46</sup> English translations of Kant's essays on race, alongside relevant texts by Georg Forster, E.A.W. Zimmermann, Christoph Meiners and Christoph Girtanner, can be found in *Kant and the Concept of Race: Late Eighteenth-Century Writings*, ed. by Jon M. Mikkelsen (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013).

<sup>47</sup> Georg Forster, 'Something More About the Human Races', in Mikkelsen (ed.), *Kant and the Concept of Race*, pp. 145-167 (p. 154).

<sup>48</sup> Immanuel Kant, 'On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy', trans. Günter Zöller, in *Anthropology, History and Education*, ed. by Günter Zöller and Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 192-218 (p. 215); AA8:180.

I fear nothing from a court of inquisition for Hr. F.'s system (for it, too, would presume a jurisdiction outside of its domain). Moreover, if necessary, I vote for a philosophical *jury* [...], composed of mere investigators of nature, and yet do not believe that their ruling would be in his favour.<sup>49</sup>

Kant admits no fear of being tried by a jury of 'mere investigators of nature'. Indeed, in the legal idiom that permeates the text, Kant claims that the 'suspicion' he has come under owes to a lack of understanding that 'is grounded in the warrant, which has not yet been sufficiently elucidated, of being allowed to use the teleological principle where sources of theoretical cognition are not sufficient'.<sup>50</sup> In the service of scientific enquiry, Kant maintains, understanding has 'the right of *precedence*', which Kant is thus eager to protect even as he introduces a teleological principle.<sup>51</sup> In defending 'a need to start from a teleological principle where theory abandons us'—particularly when it comes to 'the concept of an organized being' which manifests the means-end reciprocal causality elaborated upon in the third *Critique*—Kant seeks to make clear that this recourse is fully warranted by a desire to pursue legitimate scientific research whilst being aware of the boundaries of science.<sup>52</sup>

In the first *Critique*, the tribunal serves as a guiding metaphor for the interrogation of reason's claims to knowledge. For a *Critique of Pure Reason*, the sound judgements of science are called upon as witnesses in the courtroom of critique: Kant wants to interrogate such judgements in order to figure out what makes them, unlike others, stand up under scrutiny.<sup>53</sup> He finds, of course, that the unshakeability of cognitions in mathematics and physics owe neither to transcendent principles lying beyond experience, nor to the longevity-producing effects of habit and custom, but to pure concepts of the understanding. In 'Teleological Principles', however, Kant is not putting *nature* on trial, but rather the limitations on the possibility of scientific claims to knowledge that emerge from *critique* and are here embodied in the figure of Kant himself as he comes under personal attacks from Forster. In putting the author of the *Critique of Pure Reason* on trial, Kant appears to be inaugurating a line of thinking that would be extended in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. The work of critique is being put on trial, subject—that is—to the work of critique. The third *Critique* has indeed been considered as a reflection of critique upon critique itself. As Gary Banham succinctly characterizes this reflexivity with regard to its own methods,

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<sup>49</sup> Kant, 'Teleological Principles', p. 214; AA8:179.

<sup>50</sup> 'Teleological Principles', p. 196; AA8:160.

<sup>51</sup> 'Teleological Principles', p. 196; AA8:160.

<sup>52</sup> 'Teleological Principles', p. 195; AA8:157.

<sup>53</sup> Eve W. Stoddard, 'Reason on Trial: Legal Metaphors in the *Critique of Pure Reason*', *Philosophy and Literature*, 12.2 (October 1988), 245-60.

the main question of the third *Critique* can be understood as: ‘what are the limits to asking about limits, what is the purpose of asking about purposes?’<sup>54</sup> Despite casting light upon the flexibility of critical philosophy—to the extent that it can become an object of itself—such an understanding seems to uphold the courtroom as the sole domicile of critique. Critique does not leave the courtroom and does not give up on its methods; the court setting, rather, allows *the* teleological principle, in the singular, to emerge in the first instance and determines the strict limitations Kant here places on thinking about ‘life’ and critique.<sup>55</sup>

## 5. Trying to Name Life: Narrative and Natural History

With the essay on ‘Teleological Principles’, Kant had paid lip service to that which escapes ‘theory’ by staging a trial, putting critique itself on the stand, and requiring it to defend itself against the claims brought about by investigators of nature. By the time of writing the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, however, it is as if Kant has been forced to confront a real monster: the singular nature of each and every organism, and with it the imaginative freedom required to judge an object, guided by no principle but that of ‘purposiveness without purpose’.

Kant’s earlier essay, however, raises pertinent questions about the concepts that could express imaginative freedom. More generally, it raises a problem that will permeate the third *Critique*, that of thought and its presentation. In the essay, Kant gives serious consideration to the qualities of scientific *writing* about life. The various rubrics of scientific representation that appear in the essay allow him to probe how narrative (*Erzählung*) can be used either legitimately or illegitimately. Forster’s accounts of his journeys provide the foremost examples, for Kant, of the illegitimate employment of narrative, concealing bad faith under the guise of scientific receptivity:

I do not care for the mere empirical traveller and his narrative [*Ich danke für den blos empirischen Reisenden und seine Erzählung*], especially if what is at issue is a coherent cognition which is supposed to turn into something for the purpose of a theory. Such a traveller will usually answer when asked about something: I would have been able to notice that if I had known that I was going to be asked about it.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Gary Banham, *Kant and the Ends of Aesthetics* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2000), p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> As the editors of the Cambridge edition of Kant’s writings note, Kant uses ‘teleological principles’ in the plural in the title of his essay, referring not to the singular nature of every encounter with a being that exhibits organic freedom, but to different uses of the same principle of purposiveness. See the ‘Editor’s Introduction’ to ‘On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy’, pp. 192-94 (p. 193).

<sup>56</sup> ‘Teleological Principles’, p. 197; AA8:161.

In contrast, if a scientific method is to be honest, it has to accept its own limitations. Kant suggests that there is something particularly unfeasible about any narrative representation of the origin of life.<sup>57</sup> This implores him to enforce a distinction between the description of nature and ‘natural history’, that is, between science and the search for a principle of life’s origin.<sup>58</sup> Natural history, as ‘a *narrative* of events in nature’ (*eine Erzählung von Naturbegebenheiten*), could be verified only by some being who was present at every natural event the world has seen. As such, natural history would be ‘a science for gods, who were present then or were even the authors, and not one for human beings’.<sup>59</sup> This impossible narrative is, appositely, contrasted with another natural history that is ‘not only possible but that has also been attempted often enough’. This alternative version ‘would only consist in tracing back, as far as the analogy permits, the connection between certain present day connections of the things in nature and their causes in earlier times according to laws of efficient causality, which we do not make up [*die wir nicht erdichten*] but derive from the power of nature as it presents itself to us now’.<sup>60</sup>

Whereas Kant’s description of this latter genre appears at first glance to be sympathetic, it is soon clear that this is not the case: this all too possible ‘natural history’ compares unfavourably both with the impossible narrative of the gods and with the sober, empirical description of nature that befits the scientist. Whereas the empirical description of nature may appear ‘as a science with all the splendour of a great system [*der ganzen Pracht eines großen Systems*]’, natural history ‘can only point to fragments or shaky hypotheses [*Bruchstücke, oder wankende Hypothesen*]’.<sup>61</sup> Kant then stresses the need for ‘the careful separation of one business from the other, since they are entirely heterogeneous’, an imperative that marks an unsurpassable chasm with Forster, who writes that he can only accept Kant’s division of natural science into the

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<sup>57</sup> Weatherby notes that Herder’s *Ideas* constitutes a revision of ‘the Enlightenment genre of narrating nature’s whole course of development’, from which Herder is said to take the term ‘organ’, central to Weatherby’s reconstruction of late eighteenth-century transactions between philosophy and science. *Transplanting*, p. 98.

<sup>58</sup> The experimental nature of Kant’s text is further evidenced by a footnote, in which Kant offers his own terms: ‘I would propose the word *physiography* [*Physiographie*] for the description of nature and the word *physiogeny* [*Physiogenie*] for natural history’. ‘Teleological Principles’, p. 198; AA8:163. Kant’s terms do not seem to have survived the nineteenth century, though both Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his literary executor Joseph Henry Green made repeated use of ‘physiogeny’ to describe a practice of writing. See Tilottama Rajan, ‘Excitability: The (Dis)Organization of Knowledge from Schelling’s *First Outline* (1799) to *Ages of the World* (1815)’ in *Romanticism and Modernity*, ed. by Thomas Pfau and Robert Mitchell (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 47–64.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Teleological Principles’, p. 197; AA8:161. Kant is thus confirming a thesis put forward, with a different intention, by Forster, who writes that natural history, that is, the science of generation, ‘might, however, possible be only a science for gods and not for human beings’. Nonetheless, Forster wants to pursue the possibility of natural history by other means.

<sup>60</sup> ‘Teleological Principles’, p. 197; AA8:161–62.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Teleological Principles’, p. 198; AA8:162.

description of nature and natural history if ‘both are over and over again united and treated as parts of a whole’.<sup>62</sup>

For Kant, this strict separation is necessary for three main reasons: firstly, it allows for the insights of science to be given their due; secondly, it allows for the limits of such insights to be recognized; finally, it yields the bare possibility of ‘natural history’ being developed at all. The final point marks an aporia, however. Kant stipulates: ‘The word *history* [*Geschichte*], taken to mean the same as the Greek *historia* (narrative [*Erzählung*], description [*Beschreibung*]), has been in use too much and too long for us easily to tolerate that it be granted another meaning which can designate the investigation of origin in nature’.<sup>63</sup> He continues: ‘The biggest difficulty in this putative innovation lies merely in the name [that is, ‘history’] [...] But the linguistic difficulty in the distinction cannot suspend the difference in the things.’ On first reading, Kant’s claim is clear enough: although the term ‘history’ is too overdetermined with meaning to be applied to the ‘investigation of origin in nature’ (*Naturforschung des Ursprungs*), this pitfall fails to distract from the putative existence of different races. The caveat is important, but *not* because it allows Kant to get at the ‘things’ (*Sachen*) themselves—that is, the different races—and to thus suspend this question of nomenclature. After all, the question of ‘race’ (‘the difference in things’), *has* at this point in the essay been suspended, albeit momentarily, as it would be to a much greater degree in the third *Critique*.<sup>64</sup> Instead, it seems, Kant is proposing that the ‘word’ used to name the problem of life is of less importance than the ‘mere’ (*blos*) possibility, or impossibility as the case may be, of *naming* life. The difficulty lies merely in the name, which is to say, not in the relative merits of whichever particular names might be given to the study of life, but to the mere fact of its being-named.

Against Herder, who had recognized a special mark of the human to be its ability to name itself, Kant voices an intractable scepticism about the names associated with life.<sup>65</sup> Whilst the clear delineation of science, on the one hand, and the study of natural origin, on the other, is necessary for any knowledge of ‘the principles according to which natural history could be enlarged in the best possible manner’—that is, for any inkling of how this ‘science of gods’ could

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<sup>62</sup> Forster, ‘Something More’, p. 156.

<sup>63</sup> ‘Teleological Principles’, p. 198; AA8:162-63.

<sup>64</sup> Recent discussions, it must be noted, have questioned the supposed recession of ‘race’ in Kant’s writings of the 1790s onwards. See, for example, Pauline Kleingeld, ‘Kant’s Second Thoughts on Race’, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 57 (2007), 573-92, and Robert Bernasconi, ‘Kant’s Third Thoughts on Race’, in *Reading Kant’s Geography*, ed. by Stuart Elden and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: SUNY Press, 2011), pp. 291-318. However, the relative scarcity of references to race in the third *Critique*, particularly the ‘Critique of Teleological Judgement’, cannot be denied.

<sup>65</sup> See Weatherby, *Transplanting*, pp. 104-05. Weatherby also argues that Kant asks whether Blumenbach’s concept of the formative drive (*Bildungstrieb*) was not in fact just another name for the problem of life, replacing one unknowable by another (p. 196).



be humanized without being misused— Kant deploys an artistic image to stress how this remains a mere possibility. Natural history, he asserts, ‘for now (and maybe forever) is realizable more in silhouette than in deed [*mehr im Schattenrisse als im Werke*].’<sup>66</sup> Narrative, however, is not simply a characteristic of the kind of hypotheses about ‘life’ that Kant is at pains to dismiss. Rather, Kant desires to use narrative—and the multiplicity of forms thereof—to stress the *difference* or irreducible heterogeneity, integral to his argument, between a teleological principle and the description of nature. In his very scepticism about the possibility of naming ‘life’, Kant therefore attests to a certain force in language: of course, Kant does not subscribe to this force himself, but nor does he argue that ‘life’ can be understood independently of it. Even if it is illegitimate, then, conceptual naming—the abundance of terms under which ‘life’ appears—bears a necessary function: it registers, in a ‘mere’ way, the fact that life resists a conceptual name. Even if philosophically sound concepts for ‘life’ were to exist, Kant subtly suggests, the language of natural history would not simply dissolve into them. Rather, certain words, even if they are rejected, function as an index of life’s irreducibility and insusceptibility to full conceptual comprehension.

## 6. ‘Deceived with words’: Poetic Enthusiasm in the third *Critique*

In the third *Critique*, Kant appears to say as much. Here, he briefly directs attention to a use of language with a different relation to truth: poetry. Whereas we might consider poetic language favourable for thinking through the problem of ‘life’, insofar as the poetic word could express problems otherwise inaccessible to discursive language, Kant suggests otherwise. The curt remark in question occurs in the seventy-eighth section of the book. In this, the final section of the ‘Dialectic of the Teleological Power of Judgment’, Kant returns to the antinomy between mechanism and organicism posed earlier: nature cannot be explained comprehensively either by mechanical means or by recourse to natural ends. Kant remains eager, all the same, to follow the philosophical maxim that nature abhors a vacuum. Echoing and intensifying his arguments from the essay on ‘Teleological Principles’, Kant maintains that it is of ‘infinite importance to reason’ (*Es liegt der Vernunft unendlich viel daran*) that mechanism should not be ‘bypassed’ and that it should not ‘drop out of sight’ (CJ:279; AA5:410). And yet, famously, he invokes the possibility that even if science is able to ‘make good progress’ in ‘discovering laws of mechanical generation’

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<sup>66</sup> ‘Teleological Principles’, p. 198; AA8:162. It is perhaps unsurprising then that one of the ways Kant suspends the question of ‘race’ is by turning, in the middle of this essay, to an artistic genre closely related to the silhouette, namely portraiture (‘Teleological Principles’, pp. 201-02; AA8:168).

for organisms, ‘no human reason [...] can ever hope to understand the generation of even a little blade of grass from merely mechanical causes’ (CJ:278-79; AA5:409-19).

It is in response to this problem that Kant draws attention once again to the linguistic force that drives the imaginative fictions of life. Allying the Aristotelian injunction for continuity to a directive against too casual a use of the concept of natural purposiveness, Kant argues that we cannot employ ‘tautological’ explanations of purposiveness, which is to say that we may not use teleological principles *a posteriori* in order to account for experiences.<sup>67</sup> Were we to do so, Kant claims, ‘reason would be deceived with words’ (*so würden wir ganz tautologisch erklären und die Vernunft mit Worten täuschen*). Thinking we see purposiveness in forms, we appeal to a concept of purposiveness in order to explain such appearances: this is an illegitimate move, so Kant reminds us, because the attempt to explain phenomena *a posteriori* according to the concept of natural ends would be to use such a concept in a determinate way. It is tautological because a principle of purposiveness, as the essay on ‘Teleological Principles’ first established, conditions our experience itself.

Strikingly, Kant attributes this ‘straying into excess, where knowledge of nature cannot follow us’ to a tendency ‘to enthuse poetically’ (*dichterisch zu schwärmen*) (CJ:280; AA5:410; translation modified). Reminiscent of Forster’s undirected travels and their equally aimless narratives, the enthusiastic wandering that cannot be followed by determinate cognition ‘seduces’ (*verleitet*) reason in a poetic manner. As is often the case with enthusiasm, however, it is equally tempting to argue that it seduces reason into an unheard-of state of being, insofar as it is said to be reason’s ‘highest calling’, its foremost appointment (*vorzüglichste Bestimmung*), to resist such a snare. If enthusiasm is a necessary factor in the historical manifestation of our rational natures, the seductive call of purposiveness plays an important role, demanding that we resist it by coming to realise our own rational vocation. If we fail to do so, Kant writes, reason is ‘deceived with words’ (*mit Worten täuschen*). The power of language is here posed as a threat, capable of *deceiving* reason to the extent that words carry a potentially tautological force that could ultimately *displace* reason. Kant’s concern with the tautological danger of words such as ‘purposiveness’ voices a well-rehearsed refrain about the self-justifying, positing power of ‘force’ that may be found in his reviews of the first volume of Herder’s *Ideas*: with reference to the apparently ‘self-sufficient’ notion of force, Kant questions ‘the endeavor to want to explain what one does not

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<sup>67</sup> Kant defines tautological judgements as analytical propositions in which, of the ‘marks’ or predicates that should make a concept distinct, ‘one is contained in another’. See Kant, *Lectures on Logic*, trans. and ed. by J. Michael Young (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 363. Tautological propositions are ‘not empty of sense, but fruitless’ (p. 376), Kant specifies, thus they have an important place in any consideration of the relation between reason and poetry.

comprehend from what one comprehends even less'.<sup>68</sup> Here, the linguistic dimension of this hastiness is brought to the surface. Kant's claim that reason is misled by words, suggests that language is both the condition and potential agent of reason's deception.

However, the career of 'purposiveness' is, of course, not identical to the aimless wandering of imaginative concepts with which Kant more or less equates it here. Although Kant does not employ the term at this point, the idea of purposiveness without purpose lurks behind his frustrations with language and its capacity to deceive. Kant laments the impossibility of a fully-regulated language that would not hypothesize, posit or imaginatively create beyond that which exists, but would instead line up entirely with reason. This lament is bound, however, to the intractable fact discussed above that, even if we know the purpose of an organism—if we can establish a means-end relation between different organs, or even if we can consider the organism itself as part of a wider means-end relation in nature—we do not know the purpose of its existence. It is this lack of purpose that is papered over when we appeal tautologically, Kant seems to imply, to purposiveness. By chastising the 'poetic' use of 'purposiveness', Kant implies that the furtive notion of life he is attempting to think through cannot be appealed to directly, but is only thinkable through the mediation of a lack: 'without purpose'. To appeal to 'purposiveness' is to enthuse poetically, it seems, because poetry signals the snare of believing that any particular 'purpose' could be attributed to the form of purposiveness that we reflectively construct when we perceive living beings. The ultimate implication of Kant's scepticism, then, might only be recognizable when his argument is turned on its head and made to revolve around language's *own* relation to purpose: to speak of purposiveness *tout court* is all too easy, but to speak 'about' purposiveness without purpose—that is to speak *with purpose* about 'purposiveness without purpose'—is impossible. In the absence of the possibility of a truly imaginative language that would be adequate to express 'purposiveness without purpose' without falling into the trap that ensnared Herder, poetry therefore denotes, negatively, the words that proliferate when purposiveness cannot be held apart from any determinate 'purpose'. Purposiveness without 'without purpose': this is the field of illegitimate thinking with which Kant associates poetry. Yet poetry, or the tendency 'to enthuse poetically', successfully represents, therefore, a certain failure of purposiveness without purpose to attain to *its own* immediate presentation, a failure, that is, for the imagination's own freedom in relation to the freedom of the organism to ever come to presentation.<sup>69</sup> Kant's subtle reflections tentatively clear the way for another possibility to be

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<sup>68</sup> Kant, 'Review of J.G. Herder's *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity. Parts 1 and 2*', trans. by Allen W. Wood, in *Anthropology, History and Education*, pp. 121-42 (p.131-32); AA8:53-54.

<sup>69</sup> The charge of 'poetic enthusiasm' also condenses the disrepute in which Kant held fiction in the first two *Critiques*. In the first, Kant highlights the dangers of 'examples' by comparing them to the 'sage in a novel'

explored at the end of this chapter: that poetry's non-purposive language might be able to speak *positively* towards 'purposiveness without purpose'.

## 7. Genius and Imagination: The Spirit and Letter of Poetry

In employing the idea of poetic enthusiasm to denounce the tautological—unfruitful, but also theoretically perilous—application of the term 'purposiveness', the third *Critique* nonetheless leaves open the question of whether and how the freedom of the imagination, whether and how purposiveness without purpose, could *ever* be expressed or communicated. Such a question informs the problem of the overall structure of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Drawing on Ernst Cassirer's reading, Rudolf Makkreel has argued that 'creation' provides the fundamental point of connection in a book that seems to be highly concerned with, if not perturbed by, the question of its own unity.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Jean-François Lyotard has proposed that the 'abrupt recourse to vitalism' in Kant's appeal to a feeling of life (*Lebensgefühl*) attains its own conditions of possibility, belatedly, when Kant turns to genius as the possible guarantor of the communicability of a dynamic anthropology.<sup>71</sup> These influential readings suggest that genius confirms the link between three freedoms: the free play of the faculties in the reception of art, the free production of the artist who creates without merely following rules, and an idea of life, understood as the ability of the organism to freely employ its 'powers' independently of external influence.

Insofar as genius is said to be a 'natural gift' (CJ:186; AA5:307) and the 'gift of nature' (CJ:188; AA5:309)—and the genius the 'favourite of nature' (CJ196; AA5:318)—it undoubtedly forms a point of contact between the two parts of the third *Critique*, and provides a possible framework through which Kant aims not only to solve the problem of the production and communicability of the beautiful, but also to plot how the productivity of nature could find a

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(*Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 552). Examples—in their radical singularity—always have something suspect about them: whenever an example is introduced, one cannot be sure that 'mere fiction' has not taken over to the point of destabilizing rational discourse. See, on this point, Jonathan Luftig, 'Fiction, Criticism, and Transcendence: On Carazan's Dream in Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*', *MLN*, 126.3 (April 2011), 614-29 (especially pp. 621-23). Fiction thus shares something with the arcanity that threatens communicability in the public sphere, of the kind that Kant analyses in his essays on Schlosser (Fenves, 'The Topicality of Tone', pp. 2-3). In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, moreover, Kant argues that the novel ushers in 'moral enthusiasm' (AA5:86). In short, the transgressive exchangeability of reason and 'words' introduces the possibility of an uncontrollable (and hence, for Kant, undemocratic) tone to literary language, whilst poetic 'enthusiasm' shares with its moral equivalent an unjustifiable willingness to infringe boundaries. On enthusiasm and the novel, see Hiroki Yoshikuni, 'Kant with Melville: Freedom, Enthusiasm, and the Novel' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo, 2010).

<sup>70</sup> Makkreel, *Imagination*, p. 88.

<sup>71</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime: Kant's Critique of Judgement*, §§23-29, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 61.

vehicle in human culture. Kant's account of genius binds the productions of art to the productivity of nature: as the faculty for producing aesthetic ideas, genius is 'nature in the subject' which 'gives the rule to art (the production of the beautiful)', but gives it as nature. Only thus can beautiful art, which like all art requires a 'preceding rule', actually meet the almost impossible demand laid out in exacting prose by Kant in the forty-fifth section of the book: that 'beautiful art must be *regarded* as nature, although of course one is aware of it as art' (CJ:185-86; AA5:307). The genius is the rare instance of a person touched with the capacity for both unusual receptivity toward, and creative communicability of, the productivity of nature itself: the genius is the one who can fulfil the demand that art *be* art and yet look like nature.

In taking its rule from nature, 'genius is entirely opposed to the spirit of imitation [*Nachahmungsgeiste*]' (CJ:187; AA5:308). The genius, rather, has 'spirit' (*Geist*), uncompounded and alternatively embedded in quotation marks or written in italics by Kant. 'What is it then', Kant asks in a famous rhetorical question, 'that is meant here by "spirit"?':

*Spirit*, in an aesthetic significance, means the animating principle in the mind. That, however, by which this principle animates the soul, the material which it uses for this purpose, is that which purposively sets the mental powers into motion, i.e., into a play that is self-maintaining and even strengthens the powers to that end. (5:313; 192)

As an 'animating principle' (*belebende Prinzip*), spirit shares the capacity for 'self-maintaining' attributed to aesthetic judgement in the 'Analytic of the Beautiful': Kant writes in the twelfth section of the book that the pleasure in aesthetic judgement 'has a causality in itself, namely that of maintaining the state of the representation of the mind and the occupation of the cognitive powers without a further aim. We linger over the consideration of the beautiful because this consideration strengthens and reproduces itself' (CJ:107; AA5:222). Whereas some readers have claimed that Kant's account of the 'feeling of life' demands to be triangulated with reference to a dynamic concept of life that predates the third *Critique* (and of which genius acts as an index), the 'feeling of life' in the third *Critique* casts doubt on such notions, insofar as it refers to little beyond its own tendency to linger.<sup>72</sup> The 'causality' of aesthetic judgement, Kant writes is 'in

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<sup>72</sup> Howard Caygill links the 'feeling of pleasure' in the first section of the third *Critique* to Kant's *Lectures on Metaphysics* under the aegis of a dynamic principle of life, whose traces appear in the 'specter of hylozoism' that is a potential antidote to the supposed anthropocentrism of Kant's teleology. Arguing that the 'feeling of life' is present along representational, subject-oriented lines in §1, but is articulated according to 'dynamic', economical principles in §23, the first section devoted to the sublime, Caygill contends that a cardinal problem concerning representation becomes apparent if 'life' is limited to a given state concerning the relation of the faculties. Caygill goes on to say that this representation, which triangulates the play of the faculties, is no longer primary but rather 'supplements' an 'existing movement' captured by a dynamic metaphysics. The grounding

itself, hence the claim that we linger on the consideration only *because* it reproduces itself. Zuckert likewise argues that the pleasure in a judgement of the beautiful ‘is constituted a priori by purposiveness without purpose as a feeling of the subject’s purposive anticipation of the future (or the “feeling of life”).’<sup>73</sup> Whereas such a claim to the future-orientation of life could be considered to rely upon an anterior concept of ‘life’ as the capacity or demand for reproduction and survival, the claim chimes more with Kant’s argument that the state of the mind is maintained ‘without further aim’. The orientation of such a pleasure toward the future is perhaps best considered as a negative orientation, a caveat that has purchase on theoretical accounts of ‘life’ too: the pleasurable ability of the organism to employ its ‘powers’ (*Kräfte*) independently of external influences does not seek to recall an anterior concept of ‘life’, but nor is it mired in a frozen present: rather, it is future-oriented solely because life does not exist outside of time.

Whereas poetic enthusiasm diagnosed the condition by which words come, illegitimately, to stand in for the lack of purpose in organisms, thus effacing the singularity of any judgement of ‘purposiveness without purpose’, genius allows for the positive *expression* of the imaginative freedom associated with the feeling of life. Life’s freedom is undetermined by conceptual parameters, and—lingering on itself—concerns nothing other than what Friedrich Nietzsche would call life’s ‘viability’.<sup>74</sup> Kant writes that ‘it is really the art of poetry in which the faculty of aesthetic ideas can reveal itself in its full measure’ (CJ:193; AA5:314). To navigate Kant’s apparently contradictory approaches to the question of imaginative poetic creation, it is

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claim that ‘Kant’s views on the subject of life were already highly developed before the critical philosophy’ is no doubt true; however, the problem of representation attests not to the reduction of a pre-existing dynamic principle, but to the fact that neither life nor the idea of critique fully precede one another. See Howard Caygill, ‘Life and Aesthetic Pleasure’, in *The Matter of Critique: Readings in Kant’s Philosophy*, ed. by Andrea Rehberg and Rachel Jones (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), pp. 79-92.

<sup>73</sup> Zuckert, p. 179.

<sup>74</sup> The surviving notes that Nietzsche drafted for an abandoned dissertation on teleology have a strong focus on ‘viability’ (*Lebensfähigkeit*) or ‘the proof of the inexpedient’. ‘An outer purposiveness is an illusion’, Nietzsche writes, and it is precisely against this illusion that nature’s true ‘senseless method’, its ‘viability’—which, whatever it happens to chance upon, is always successful—proceeds, invariably hitting upon ‘the most beautiful melody’. See Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘On the Concept of the Organic Since Kant’, trans. Th. Nawrath, *The Agonist: A Nietzsche Circle Journal* 3.1 (2010). In a text first presented at the *Nietzsche aujord’hui?* conference at Cerisy in 1972, Jean-Luc Nancy argues that Nietzsche’s polemical criticisms of the third *Critique* are symptomatic of the positivist appropriations of Kant that had become current in the realms of biology and related disciplines by the mid-nineteenth century. Nancy goes so far as to suggest that Nietzsche’s notes and bibliography point toward the fact that he had not read the third *Critique* itself, but had only encountered it through such appropriations. Reading through the polemical surface of Nietzsche’s notes, however, Nancy detects a strong sympathy with Kant’s own arguments. He suggests, moreover, that it is precisely the sense that Nietzsche was—against all initial appearances—*repeating* Kant that lends Nietzsche’s work both its credence and its ultimate source of stultification. For, in repeating Kant, Nietzsche’s embryonic text can be understood in two ways. Either it is an attempt at philosophy that, in failing miserably at the test of originality, founders in its bid to philosophize; or, in repeating Kant’s argument, opens philosophy up to an other whose criteria is not that of originality: literature. See Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Nietzsche’s Thesis on Teleology’, in *Looking After Nietzsche*, ed. by Laurence A. Rickels (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 49-66. See also n. 74 below.

necessary to reconsider and contextualize the question he poses to himself: what is meant by ‘spirit’?

The definition cited above is intractably idiomatic, not least since Kant reserves his own definitions for terms such as ‘animating principle’, ‘mind’, ‘soul’, and ‘material’. Kant’s definition of spirit could not, however, fail to reference a theological context, marking it as one contribution to a debate that had bristled throughout the latter decades of the eighteenth century. This context provides the conditions for establishing a potential link between the thought of ‘life’ and its expression, but also suggests the aporetic nature of any such connection. Like *Dichtung*, which emerges only in the second half of the century, the character of ‘spirit’, as employed by Kant, is undeniably oriented by Christian theology. Both *Dichtung* and *Geist* register the survival and transformation of pre-modern and early modern theological problems in the inaugural epoch of modern, secular western literature. When this complex inheritance is granted—which is to say, when secularization is conceived along Hans Blumenberg’s understanding as both transitive (the secularization *of* an object previously determined by religion) and intransitive (secularization as productive of new realms of experience)—the modern capacity for generative poetic activity can be discerned all the more clearly.<sup>75</sup> Kant’s account of the combination of ‘spirit with the mere letter of language’, therefore, constitutes a contribution to a milieu in which the long-held, anti-Semitic assumption that Christianity gives life to the dead, silent and dumb utterances of Judaic law took hold in new manners.

Emergent biological ideas about ‘life’ had a significant role in new configurations of this old idea. As organicist theories of life emerged, in which life was understood to be animated by a spirit or principle, Judaism could be held as the law-bound ‘mechanical body of language (and so also the mechanical language of the body)’, in Jeffrey S. Librett’s chiasmic formula.<sup>76</sup> Whilst

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<sup>75</sup> Daniel Weidner, ‘Secularization, Scripture, and the Theory of Reading: J.G. Herder and the Old Testament’, *New German Critique*, 94 (2005), 169–93 (pp. 171–73). Weidner is addressing the ‘heated exchanges that took place between Karl Löwith, Carl Schmitt, Hans Blumenberg, and Jakob Taubes in the 1960s and 1970s [which] demonstrated that secularization is by no means a neutral or innocent term of analysis’ (p. 171).

<sup>76</sup> Jeffrey S. Librett, *The Rhetoric of Cultural Dialogue: Jews and Germans from Moses Mendelssohn to Richard Wagner and Beyond* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. xix. The incorporation of organic life into Christian rhetoric can be understood in terms of Librett’s wider ‘dialogic’ framework, by which the dependence of German-Christian ‘spirit’ on its Jewish precedent gave rise to new and continually transforming forms of discursive violence: Christianity’s position as the ‘literal truth’ of ‘figurative’ Judaism places it in a secondary position, giving rise to increasingly ‘paranoid’ forms of distancing and othering (p. 11). Librett’s broad approach is to stress the shifting nature of this opposition: following the logic of the supplement, Christian literality could always become itself ‘figural’. Librett argues that Herder’s analysis of the Old Testament as folk poetry, for example, casts it as the letter, whereas its spirit is only its Protestant fulfilment. Such movements also gave rise, Librett claims, to a split in the figure of the ‘Jew’ in the German imaginary: diasporic Jews, including those living in Germany, were thought to lack the spirit of ancient ‘Hebrews’, which lived on in the ‘sublime’ Germans. Daniel Weidner complicates this picture even more, suggesting that interpretations of the Old Testament as merely the pre-figure of the New in fact decline during the period following the

theories of organic life were opposed to previously dominant mechanistic explanations, however, they were also subject to internal differentiations, not least in the conflict between theories of preformation and epigenesis that occupy Kant for much of the 'Critique of Teleological Judgment'. In the claim that life's entire development is already contained within the germ or cell at its conception, preformationist theories of life map onto the prefiguration-fulfilment model of letter and spirit. Equally, however, the epigenetic account of life marks a renewed attempt to consider spirit—considered as the active relation between organic force and matter—from a perspective whereby the former is not simply the animation of tendencies in the latter (a theory that would still operate under the remit of preformationism), but is instead a force or drive irreducible to the material on which it acts.<sup>77</sup> The complexities of the eighteenth-century life sciences therefore mirror those internal conflicts within German Protestantism, which displayed an almost interminable logic. To simply combine spirit and letter, as did Johann Melchior Goeze, would be to Judaize Protestantism, since such a unity could always be recast as a 'figure' and interpreted as a mere letter in turn.<sup>78</sup> In holding spirit apart from a hypertrophic letter, on the other hand, Lessing's 'hyper-Protestant' rejoinder to Goeze resisted the snare of the letter, but only at the risk of hypostatizing the distinction and non-unifiability of the two. Like the epigenetic account of life, Lessing's holding apart of spirit and letter succeeds only on the basis of maintaining a certain distance from the problem at stake.

If a Christian perspective on Kant's concept of genius would either acclaim his spiritualization of the dead letter or berate the concomitant literalization of the spirit, a theological aporia haunts the question of spirit and animation. Yet the principle of spirit might, more prudently, be understood as a negative one: Kant does not make a positive claim on genius's ability to spiritually animate the dead letter, but considers 'spirit' as the sole way to consider imaginative activity's freedom from the constraint of conceptual determination on the one hand and the Humean law of association on the other. Spirit means only that the poetic word is determined by neither concepts nor contiguity. This raises further questions as to the nature of poetic 'animation', and brings Kant's thought closer to contemporary theories of the poetic act than has generally been considered.<sup>79</sup>

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Reformation; insofar as this shift gave the Old Testament even less significance, it degraded the position of German Jews even further.

<sup>77</sup> In seeking to lift epigenesis out of its abyssal relation to preformationism, Müller-Sievers argues that epigenesis is a uniquely elastic theory, neither dogmatic nor sceptical (see the second chapter of *Self-Generation*, 'Self-Generation in Philosophy: Kant').

<sup>78</sup> Librett, pp. 26-29.

<sup>79</sup> With reference to the poetry of John Clare, for instance, Sara Guyer has recently reignited the question of the relation between apostrophe and animation, asserting that their poetic binding means poetry is uniquely placed at the origin of biopolitics, insofar as it constantly encounters language's political power to decide on



At the same time, Kant's statements on genius can be read in a more thetic register. In producing aesthetic ideas, Kant writes, the 'imagination (as a productive cognitive faculty) is, namely, very powerful in creating, as it were, another nature, out of the material which the real one gives it [*Die Einbildungskraft (als produktives Erkenntnis-vermögen) ist nämlich sehr mächtig in Schaffung gleichsam einer andern Natur, aus dem Stoffe, den ihr die wirkliche gibt*] (CJ:192; AA5:314). Such canonical formulations suggest that Kant indeed allows for the mediation, expression and communication of a new model of nature proper to the emergent biological sciences, one which overcomes the aporetic relation between spirit and letter, albeit at the risk of theological heresy: the imagination has the capacity to create a new, singular order of truth after the example of the life sciences. Moreover, such a thesis would align Kant with a long-standing philosophical framework: the invention of a second nature has a philosophical pedigree in accounts of habit or *hexis* stretching back to Aristotle, and would also be central to Hegel's appropriation of the Kantian definition of organic life.<sup>80</sup>

Yet there is as little critical consensus as to the meaning of such productions of genius as there is over terms such as purposiveness without purpose or *sensus communis*. In fact, the very interpretive debates that structure the reception of *sensus communis*, and which bear on the relation between aesthetics and the possibility of a critical 'system', are also relevant for genius. The possibility of agreement on a particular, without the mediation of a concept, positions taste as a 'kind of *sensus communis*', on the basis that in judging reflectively one 'takes account (a priori) of everyone else's way of representing in thought, in order *as it were* to hold its judgement up to human reason as a whole' (CJ:173; AA5:293). From one perspective, the abstract possibility of such consensus can position the third *Critique* as the closure of the system and as the putative basis for the normative realm of the public sphere.<sup>81</sup> Alternatively, if the possibility of our sense for the common is contingent on occasional (though by no means guaranteed) encounters with singular phenomena, and if the promise of universal communicability is not generalizable, then the closure to which the third *Critique* gives rise is itself singular, occasional and conceptually ungraspable, and hence can give rise to no such political programme or cultural telos.<sup>82</sup>

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the 'viability' of any life. Sara Guyer, *Reading with John Clare: Biopoetics, Sovereignty, Romanticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), p. 17. Guyer identifies a paradigmatic formulation of this question in Barbara Johnson, 'Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion', *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), 28-47.

<sup>80</sup> Khurana, 'Life and Autonomy', pp. 183-193.

<sup>81</sup> This perspective is associated above all with Jürgen Habermas. See his 'Modernity: An Unfinished Project', in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, ed. by Maurizio Passerin d'Entreves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 38-55 (p. 47).

<sup>82</sup> The latter perspective on the text is offered by, among others, Lyotard, who writes that: 'Universality and necessity are promised but are promised singularly every time, and are only just promised' (*Lessons*, p. 19).

To the extent that ‘purposiveness without purpose’ can be considered independently of the unconditioned ‘purpose’ of the highest good, it is the latter, far more fragile conciliation that Kant’s account of genius seems to validate. If the imagination is to be truly free, it must have the freedom to fail: the creation of a second nature would have to be free of any determination of exactly what a second nature would be.<sup>83</sup> ‘Second nature’, rather than reinforcing the bond between aesthetic and teleological judgement, between nature and freedom, functions as what Willi Goetschel has termed a ‘second bottom’ of the third *Critique*.<sup>84</sup> Precisely at the point when a systematic connection seems to be most urgently required by Kant’s text, whose structuring impulse often seems to be in excess of its thematic claims, the singular and serial nature of imaginative production arises, acting as an example only to itself and failing to provide any normative grounding for the connection between nature and art.

As Werner Hamacher has argued in a compelling comparison of Kant and Hegel’s organicism, Kant’s ‘example’ of an organized being, the tree, shares the singular nature of the production of genius.<sup>85</sup> As a ‘whole’ incapable of full determination by parts or by concepts, Kant’s tree is always-already split from itself, for Kant writes that every ‘twig or leaf’ can be understood as a tree in its own right, ‘merely grafted or inoculated’ onto a tree which is no longer the original tree—a whole which is no longer *the* whole—and which thus attests to the split in the desired totality of nature itself (CJ:243-4; AA5:371-72). Since *an* organism can never be generalized as *the* organism, Kant’s ‘example’ is forever on the verge of escaping the exemplary function its author has accorded it. The tree which ‘nourishes itself parasitically’ thus acts as an example of the failure of example. In doing so, it reveals that there is no totality of which it can act *as* an example: nature is split in such a way that, on the one hand points to the unbridgeability of nature and freedom *as such*, and on the other marks the extreme, momentary singularity of any bridging.<sup>86</sup> Kant’s example attests to the failure of scientific enquiry to be anything other than a heterogeneous grafting onto the causality of freedom, a split that remained deeply unsatisfactory

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<sup>83</sup> The potential irony of Kant’s statement, highlighted by the deictic presentation of the gesture itself, suggests that Kant was less sure about the normative function of genius: the absolute creative power of the imagination is here somewhat diluted by the comparative adjective ‘very’; moreover, the clauses ‘namely’ (*nämlich*) and ‘as it were’ (*gleichsam*) function to diminish the assertive force of Kant’s statement, reminding readers of the textual possibility that ‘another nature’ is only ever linguistically promised. My reading, which prioritizes this threat, contrasts with that of Mary-Barbara Zeldin, who argues that ‘in genius life is at its highest peak, so that not only is natural life surpassed but a new life is given permanence’ (Zeldin, *Freedom*, p. 135). Zeldin herein contrasts genius with wit, wherein ‘life endures, but it remains natural, increasing in quantity rather than changing its quality’.

<sup>84</sup> Willi Goetschel, ‘Kant and the Christo Effect: Grounding Aesthetics’, *New German Critique*, 79 (2000), 137-56 (pp. 141-42).

<sup>85</sup> Werner Hamacher, *pleroma: —Reading in Hegel*, trans. Nicholas Walker and Simon Jarvis (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 128-30.

<sup>86</sup> Hamacher, *pleroma*, p. 130.

for his idealist heirs, but which renders the third *Critique* as something other than a mere folding of critique upon itself.

## 8. Poetic Force? Life, Thinking, Criticism

A tension appears to hold sway over Kant's account of genius, however, and it determines the potentials and limits of this thought, and therefore of the third *Critique* as a whole. These relate back to the problem of poetry and to a question that can be formulated as follows: to what extent, in addressing 'life', does Kant actually consider, and legitimate, an idea of poetic productivity? And what is the relation between this productivity and poetry itself? Kevin McLaughlin has recently adumbrated the Kantian pedigree of an idea of 'poetic force' which, in the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger above all, is also necessarily an 'unforce'. McLaughlin writes that:

this reflection on linguistic force and its connection to poetry can be traced ultimately to a thesis implicit in Kantian philosophy: that of an a priori capacity of language to free itself from having empirical content. This linguistic capacity, which is derived indirectly from a cognitive incapacity, emerges as a key motif or theme in Kant's thinking. But by virtue of its very capacity to communicate or produce the feeling of the faculty of reason, this force of language is also accompanied by an unforce that must be felt in Kant's writing even as it remains (perhaps aptly) unstressed. In this sense the productivity of the poetic force emerging in Kantian philosophy is haunted by the unproductivity of apoetic force.<sup>87</sup>

The tension borne in Kant's considerations on genius may be considered in terms of this relation between poetic and apoetic force. The problem raised by Kant's text is that the productivity of imaginative activity—associated with aesthetic ideas—seems excessive in regard to the negative account of 'animation' that Kant theorizes. Inasmuch as Kant's 'spirit' ultimately suspends conceptual determination and the chains of habitual proximity, the novel chain of freedom to which it gives rise stands only as a representative index of this suspension.<sup>88</sup> The poetic force of

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<sup>87</sup> Kevin McLaughlin, *Poetic Force* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), pp. xiv-xv.

<sup>88</sup> There is an apparent affinity between Kant's account of 'spirit' and the idea of 'suspended animation' that had taken hold in Britain in the later eighteenth century and would be, according to recent studies, folded into British romanticism, particularly in Keats' 'negative capability'. 'Suspended animation' is a term attributed to the Scottish surgeon John Hunter, and describes a state of the body similar to that of a coma. According to

the imagination is at once highly productive and free, yet the primary manifestation of this freedom is in its presentation of the suspension of conceptual determination as an apoetic, unproductive unforce.

This tension holds sway over the question of the whole book's unity. Kant stresses the architectonic framework of critique in such a way that it too is frozen in the very moment of its suspension. As Daniel Payot writes, the third *Critique* purports to stand as 'the very last architectural manifestation before the organicity of the system: the display, the critique of the general faculty of the liaison'.<sup>89</sup> Attention to the processual, even literary nature of the third *Critique* highlights this above all: the structure of the book itself 'exhibits' the role of the free imagination in both aesthetic and teleological judgement and, in placing genius at the book's centre, 'comments upon' or 'stages' the open-ended, rather than conclusive, nature of critique; it does not build a bridge, but places before us a knot.<sup>90</sup> If the third *Critique* proposes that neither life nor critique precedes the other but that both in fact remain processual, the book's refusal to reduce life to a fundamental concept comes at the price of sublimating the imagination such that *nothing* is produced, save the suspension of conceptual compulsion itself.<sup>91</sup>

What of the imagination, however? In Kant's account of genius, its productive capacity is elucidated through the discussion of aesthetic ideas. Whereas rational ideas are concepts to which no intuitions are adequate, an aesthetic idea is a representation of the imagination that contains such a proliferation of imaginative content that it 'occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., concept, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible' (CJ:192; AA5:314). Kant's

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Robert Mitchell, suspended animation, for Hunter, 'should be understood as a *self*-suspension of activity and thus as a sign of life'. See Mitchell, *Experimental Life*, p. 48.

<sup>89</sup> Cited and translated in Diane Morgan, *Kant Trouble: Obscurities of the Enlightened* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 106.

<sup>90</sup> Goetschel, 'Kant and the Christo Effect', pp. 149-50.

<sup>91</sup> There is good reason, then, for Audrey Wasser's recent and compelling claim that models of literary organicism fail to account for literary *production*. See Wasser's *The Work of Difference*. Wasser claims that 'a certain nineteenth-century way of thinking about the new' (p.1) continues to dominate literary studies, based on the Romantic reception of Kant: from German and English Romanticism to New Criticism to deconstruction, Wasser contends that a totalizing idea of organic life reduces creation and reception into one another. Yet Wasser's complaint that the 'metaphor' between the living body and the literary text in fact comprises a 'catachrestic operation' (p. 47) is, I think, correct in a way that her reading neglects to follow through on. For Kant, the relationship between critique and life—or critique and literature—is catachrestic, precisely *because* neither of the two terms exist prior to their entangled emergence. This is the irreducibly literary and poetic problem that this chapter and thesis linger over, and which Wasser's subsequent turn to literary modernism, via the explicitly conceptual productivity of Gilles Deleuze and Pierre Macherey, needs to ignore. Goldstein also makes the case for the disproportionate influence of the third *Critique* on literary studies: 'Kantian organicism—owing, no doubt, to its privileged position within the 1790 *Critique* that Romanticists have long taken as their canon's philosophical catalyst and key—continues to monopolize critical understanding of the sphere of interaction between literary and scientific cultures, and between poetry and philosophy in the decades "around 1800"'. *Sweet Science*, p. 79.

reference to language is not accidental, since he later repeats his assertion that language is incapable of expressing the abundance of thought: an aesthetic idea is a presentation which ‘connects [...] with a fullness of thought to which no linguistic expression is fully adequate, and thus elevates itself aesthetically to the level of ideas’ (CJ:203-04; AA5:326).<sup>92</sup> Just as reflective judgements exhibit the conditions of judging in general and the suitability of such judgements—which spur a free play of our faculties—for our moral freedom, aesthetic ideas, to the same end, reveal the bare, minimal conditions under which the mind can be receptive to (rational) ideas at all, as well as the conditions under which such ideas can become real or external.<sup>93</sup> In the absence of ‘childlike images’, which can elicit human ‘fear’ over the powerlessness of rational ideas, aesthetic ideas have a significant role to play in determining how we can be moral agents in this world. The minimal status of this role, however, further reveals the precariousness of aesthetic ideas: it is as if the sheer surfeit of imaginative content produced by a thinking under no conceptual restraints whatsoever and at its most alive, is at the same time the register of the bare minimum that a mind can do. What is the relation between the imaginative surfeit of thinking and the representation or ‘expression’ of that surfeit?

This question touches closely upon the problem of life. In the last section proper of the third *Critique*, ‘On the kind of affirmation produced by means of a practical faith’, Kant contemplates such a thinking (*das Denken*) by evoking a problem that had concerned him since a text that is considered—often at the same time—to be his most literary and to signal the beginning of the critical project, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics* (1766). If, in the ‘pre-critical’ text, Kant’s own, highly stylized attempts to conceive of spirit metaphysically encourage him to map the limits of reason, the final section of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* evokes spirits once again, to consider the possibility of a bodiless thinking.<sup>94</sup> The context is

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<sup>92</sup> In drawing attention to these passages on the relation between aesthetic ideas and language, Katie Terezakis has argued that poetry acts as a ‘supplement’ for Kant’s thought, which expresses ‘extra-linguistic intensity’. All the same, Terezakis maintains that language ‘gets no special credit’ in the third *Critique* or elsewhere in Kant. Katie Terezakis, *The Immanent Word*, p. 130. In refusing to consider (as a deconstructive reading would demand, rightly I think) that the ‘supplement’ of poetic language might perturb Kant’s otherwise ‘conceptual’ language, Terezakis’ arguments about Kant reflect her book’s wider polemic, concerning the role of language in the period in question, against Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (see, for example, the critique of *The Literary Absolute*, pp. 17-20) and, somewhat more improbably, against the Romanticism of Friedrich Schlegel. In his *Logodaedalus*, Nancy addresses this issue at the level of Kant’s architectonic. Arguing that the possibility of a system’s displacement precedes the system itself, Nancy draws on Kant’s term *intus-susception* to argue that literature could never simply be added to philosophy, but is rather assimilated by it, transforming it in the process. *Dichtung* hits a ‘nerve’ in philosophy, with the result that it is eventually ‘purloined’ to anthropology. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Discourse of the Syncope: Logodaedalus*, trans. Saul Anton (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 95.

<sup>93</sup> Rodolphe Gasché, ‘Foreword: Ideality in Fragmentation’, in Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. vii-xxxii (p. xxvi).

<sup>94</sup> Immanuel Kant, ‘Dreams of a Spirit-Seer Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics’, in *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770*, trans. by David Walford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 301-360.

Kant's elucidation of 'matters of opinion', which count amongst 'facts' and 'matters of faith' as three types of possible cognition. Matters of opinion concern possible experiences, that is, experiences that could potentially take place in space and time, yet remain impossible within the limits of our world: the assumption of 'rational inhabitants of other planets' is a good example, Kant argues, because, though 'intrinsically possible [...] we will never come close enough to other planets' to verify our thoughts.<sup>95</sup> Whilst matters of opinion retain legitimacy, however, Kant evokes a belief in spirits to show their illegitimate other. Assuming the existence of rational aliens is more or less fine, Kant suggests:

But to have the opinion that there are pure, bodiless, thinking spirits [*reine, ohne Körper denkende Geister*] in the material universe (if we ignore, as is appropriate, certain actual appearances that have been passed off as such): that we call fiction [*heißt dichten*], not a matter of opinion at all, but a mere idea left over if one takes everything material away from a thinking being but still leaves behind thinking [*das Denken*]. But whether in that case the latter remains (something we are acquainted with only in human beings, i.e., only in connection with a body) we cannot determine. Such a thing is a sophisticated entity (*ens rationis ratiocinantis*), not an entity of reason (*ens rationis ratiocinatae*)—for the latter of which it is still possible adequately to establish the objective reality of its concept, at least for the practical use of reason, because the latter, which has its own special and apodictically certain principles a priori, even demands (postulates) this. (CJ:332; AA5:467-68; translation modified)

Compared to the pre-critical text, ghosts—'pure, bodiless, thinking spirits in the material universe'—are draped in more scholarly terms: as sophisticated entities, we cannot make any claims on them, either positive or negative. As in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, spirits haunt the text and the definition of rationality itself, revealing themselves to be fictions on which reason can make no

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<sup>95</sup> Kant full definition is: 'matters of opinion are always objects of an at least intrinsically possible experiential cognition (objects of the sensible world) that, however, merely because of the degree of capacity that we possess, are impossible for us' (CJ:331; AA5:476). It should be noted, for clarity's sake, that Kant here fundamentally revises the terminology of his first Critique, where he argues that the assumption of rational aliens is 'not merely an opinion but a strong belief' (*Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 687). For a lucid investigation of these ideas, see Peter Szendy, *Kant in the Land of Extraterrestrials: Cosmopolitical Philosophical Fictions*, trans. by Will Bishop (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

determinative claims whatsoever, but thereby performing the necessary task of marking the limits of reason itself.<sup>96</sup>

More to the point, however, Kant's denunciation of belief in ghosts can be parsed as an uncanny rewrite of the formula of aesthetic ideas. If a belief in ghosts relies upon the notion that there may be 'but a mere idea left over if one takes everything material away from a thinking being but still leaves behind thinking', then Kant might be understood as saying something remarkable about human beings: namely that to have a living body and to be capable of producing aesthetic ideas are the two conditions under which human beings can approximate the mental being of a spirit. With these conditions, human beings can live with the bare power of thought. This insight has implications for the possibility of speaking about 'life', which has been at issue throughout this chapter: life here is not just organic productivity or nature's wholeness, but the mere state of being alive and thus of being able to embody thought.

Kant, we must concede, takes this radical insight in a conservative direction. The indeducible character of this life is familiar from the *Critique of Practical Reason* and Kant proceeds to elucidate the primacy of practical reason in the final idea of the 'highest good', which must remain an object of faith rather than opinion. The third *Critique* does not go without suggesting other directions, however. A brief reference to art criticism also implies the necessity of embodiment. According to Kant:

Criticism [*die Kritik*], as an art, merely seeks to apply the physiological (here psychological) and hence empirical rules, according to which taste actually proceeds [*nach denen der Geschmack wirklich verfährt*] to the judging of its objects (without reflecting [*nachzudenken*] on its possibility), and criticizes the products of fine art just as the former criticizes the faculty of judging them. (CJ:166-67; AA5:286)

Criticism is an art—rather than a science or 'transcendental critique'—because it actually proceeds in carrying out the process of judging. Kant's claim, however, is not that criticism fails to *reflect* on its own possibility, since reflectively catching oneself in the act of judging is a necessary dimension to any claim about beauty, but rather that criticism does not think twice

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<sup>96</sup> It is little surprise, especially given Kant's own statements, that the idea of spectrality has proven attractive for recent thinkers eager to avoid the pitfalls of an organicism associated with the nation-state, with the biological body as opposed to the one that is mutually co-constructed with culture, and more generally with philosophy considered as a totalizing enterprise. References to spectrality are, however (as I hope to have shown) already latent in Kant's third *Critique*. For discussions of spectrality as an alternative to the organic, see Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), and Pheng Cheah, *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

(*nachdenken*) about this reflection. Insofar as art critics or literary critics are not writing the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, criticism is an ‘art’ because, as Kant himself considers it, art simply *does* without knowledge of what it is doing (CJ:182-83; AA5:303-04).<sup>97</sup> The criticism of art is physiological and psychological, then, taking place within a body and a mind. On the one hand, this suggests that Kant believes the transcendental reflection on the possibility of judging to be more free than the judging itself, since it is disentangled from its unfolding in any given empirical being. However, Kant’s argument also illustrates that individual artworks and criticisms thereof can have a significance beyond their merely theoretical position in his system; the opposition of criticism and transcendental critique is also troubled. In any case, the necessarily embodied nature of criticism does not respond merely to an unsuccessful force, but to a free product that appears as material and objective as the living beings one might encounter in nature.

Kant’s staging of imaginative freedom might have led him to consider language as the basis of a connection between ‘life’ and the potential for ‘thinking’ without any determinate thought. Arising from language in its objective freedom, rather than on the basis of its hypothetical effects, such a connection would be genuinely poetic. Kant’s failure to make this step, however, prompts a reevaluation of the third *Critique* in early German Romanticism. What is at stake in such reevaluations is the possibility for considering a life of language beyond the legislative authority of the Kantian subject.

## 9. The Poetry of Poetry: Romantic Criticism

In Kant’s argument about our reflective encounters with organic beings, the whole can be thought to dominate the parts as little as the parts can be thought to merely constitute the whole. Kant’s various responses to the problem of the imagination’s freedom, and of poetry, are structured by the problem of articulating this whole, without conceptualizing it. To speak about

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<sup>97</sup> Márton Dornbach makes a similar point with regard to what he terms ‘practical criticism’, and refers, as an example, to the pedagogical situation in which a master offers ‘severe criticism’ (CJ:229; AA5:355) to discourage a student from taking an example as a rule. See his *Receptive Spirit: German Idealism and the Dynamic of Cultural Transmission* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), pp. 84-86. Dornbach argues that this situation is ‘exactly analogous’ to the sublime’s indirect presentation of the unrepresentable and he understands ‘this type of sublime criticism as increasingly vital to safeguarding the continued survival of art’ (p. 86). Dornbach envisages this survival by proposing that a ‘critic’s psychologically nuanced account of his own response to a work of artistic genius can itself attain the status of original art’ (p. 86). Like Dornbach, I see Kant as anticipating Friedrich Schlegel’s account of the minimal difference between the artwork and its criticism: ‘In particular, since Schlegel thinks that great works of art (at least those of the modern age) always enact a transcendental-philosophical reflection upon the very conditions of art, his relativization of the difference between art and art criticism also points toward a cancellation of the Kantian dichotomy between practical criticism and the transcendental critique of taste’ (p. 87). Nonetheless, as I hope to show here and throughout the thesis, Kant’s argument touches not only on psychological response but also the question of its necessary, and often erased, physical embodiment.



the freedom of nature or of poetry, to speak about purposiveness without purpose—the third *Critique* suggests that such a task is impossible, even for poetry. For Kant, this impossibility is only propitious for awakening reason, which steps in to direct the faculties toward more grounded activities. Even when poetry is granted its greatest autonomy in Kant’s writing, it nonetheless becomes an object of discourse.

Early German Romanticism, however, does not shy away from this impossible proposal; rather, the imperative to give voice to the ‘life’ of poetic language is at the forefront of Romanticism itself. This is not to say that Romanticism falls into the traps identified by Kant, or that it does away altogether with Kantian restrictions on the poetic word or ‘life’. In its determination to find a language through which to speak about poetry, Romanticism—particularly the writings of Friedrich Schlegel, who will be the focus of what follows—is at once aware of the impossibility and necessity of such a language. This imperative arises from the affinity of poetic language and ‘life’; insofar as Romanticism considers life to be processual (rather than the singularly-constituted object of a suspension of other forms of causality), to speak about it is to speak about something that is still underway. Yet this gives rise to an unforeseen potential for this ‘speaking about’ itself. The Romantic discourse about poetry—Romantic criticism—is in fact at one with poetry. Critique, as it is taken up by Romanticism, is no longer a project bound to dissolve upon completion, but nor is it simply the performative (re)presentation of its own incompletable character.

The 116<sup>th</sup> *Athenaeum* fragment of Schlegel begins with this a famous claim: ‘Romantic poetry is a progressive, universal poetry’.<sup>98</sup> The fragment goes on to argue that Romantic poetry ‘tries to and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature; and make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical’.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>99</sup> Schlegel’s famous fragment is a good occasion to highlight two recent and highly significant accounts of the relation between poetry and science, each of which attest to the major problems discussed in this chapter. The verbs ‘mix’ and ‘fuse’ inform Michel Chaouli’s argument in *The Laboratory of Poetry* that Romanticism bore a close relation to a field of scientific experimentation that had not yet congealed into a discipline: chemistry. Schlegel’s relation to late eighteenth-century chemistry, for Chaouli, does not simply attest to the deconstruction of the distinction between the organic vivification and the chemical or mechanical composition of life, which sees these two models as separate but nonetheless integrated in one another. Rather, chemistry works to consistently unsettle the very sanctity of ‘life’, and as such Schlegel’s chemically ‘combinatorial poetics’ means we are ‘not obliged to read the organic only as the telos, the future promise, of the chemical, with which Schlegel at times identifies it’. Before self-conscious irony is staged, Chaouli argues, life itself is ironic at its very chemical basis (p. 198). A similar consideration of the porous relation between philosophy, literature and science informs Weatherby’s *Transplanting the Metaphysical Organ*. Arguing, however, that the presentational paradigm arising from Kantian critique remains merely salutary, Weatherby contends that with Romanticism ‘a new notion of life emerged’ (p. 6), which proceeded *from* the presentational, metaphorological framework established by Kant: actively labouring with the multiple resources of modes of thinking and

This proposed mixture of poetry and prose, Schlegel contends in another *Athenaeum* fragment, ‘should be called transcendental poetry’: ‘In all its descriptions, this poetry should describe itself, and always be simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry’.<sup>100</sup> Romantic poetry is ‘simultaneously’ at one with its critique and yet entirely different, for the reason that it is not yet Romantic poetry. In the same way that ‘life’ may not be conceptualized without losing what is specific to any life, Romantic poetry is ‘still in the state of becoming’, and indeed ‘should forever be becoming and never be perfected’.<sup>101</sup> Poetry’s fulfillment or perfection—like the conceptual or literal fulfillment of life—would be death. In the *Dialogue on Poetry*, published in 1800 in the third and final volume of the *Athenaeum*, the threat of ‘deadening generalizations’ stands over anyone who assumes that poetry could be completed: full communicability with the created world, Schlegel suggests, could only be found in life’s exhaustion.<sup>102</sup>

The opening sentences of the *Dialogue* are beset with the ambiguities that trouble the relation between life, poetry and critique in the wake of Kant. Schlegel attests to poetry’s force by writing that ‘poetry befriends and binds with unseverable ties the hearts of all those who love it [*Alle Gemüter, die sie lieben, befreundet und bindet Poesie mit unauflöslichen Banden*]’.<sup>103</sup> As a ‘higher magic power’ that unites ‘separate lives’ which usually ‘seek utterly different things’, poetry seems to function as a guarantor of community or as a legislator of intersubjective communicability. It is just as quickly proposed, however, that poetry gives rise to ‘streams of poetry’ (*Ströme der Poesie*), a number of muses, flowing together in one ‘great, universal sea’.<sup>104</sup> Poetry, for Schlegel, is both that which forcefully binds people together, and the name for the imaginative freedom of every individual.<sup>105</sup> Said to be ‘as infinite and inexhaustible as the riches of animating nature with her plants, animals, and formations of every type, shape, and color’, poetry approximates nature’s

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experimenting that had, for but a ‘small window’ (p. 22) not yet coalesced into discrete disciplines or forms of knowledge, Romanticism, argues Weatherby, exemplifies an ‘organology’, whose motto, which instrumentalizes Kant’s idea of purposiveness without purpose, would appear to be ‘instrumentality without subordination to a totality’ (p. 6). In this way, Weatherby contends, Romanticism sought to instrumentalize representation itself. Irony, parabasis, the re-presentation of representation; all of the motifs associated with Romanticism in literary theory of the second half of the twentieth century are here recast as merely preliminary to Romanticism’s praxis and metaphysics of the ‘organ’.

<sup>100</sup> Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 50-51 (*Athenaeum* Fragment 238).

<sup>101</sup> *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 31-32 (*Athenaeum* Fragment 116).

<sup>102</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, trans. Ernst Behler and Roman Struc (University Park; London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968), p. 55.

<sup>103</sup> *Dialogue*, p. 53; KFS 2.284.

<sup>104</sup> *Dialogue*, p. 53; KFS 2.284

<sup>105</sup> Azade Seyhan illuminates this by noting that, whereas ‘Kant does not grant imagination either a cognitive or a legislative function, as he does with understanding and reason [...] Schlegel reverses Kant’s judgement by claiming that all human beings are endowed with the same faculty of reason, but imagination and inner poetry are unique to each individual.’ Azade Seyhan, ‘What is Romanticism and Where Did it Come From?’, in Nicholas Saul (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to German Romanticism* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 1-20 (p. 16).

totality but is also unique to each person.<sup>106</sup> Schlegel's simile denoting poetry's inexhaustibility is also therefore synecdochal: it is precisely because humans are a part of that unconscious and unformed original poetry (or *Urpoesie*) that they have their own poetries, including—but not limited to—the 'poetry of words' and the poetic ability to perceive and appreciate such forms. In a formula that recalls Kant's famous definition of enlightenment as 'the emergence of human beings from their self-incurred nonage [*Unmündigkeit*]',<sup>107</sup> poetry is said to constitute a 'secret spirit [*Geist*] deep under the ashes of our self-induced unreason [*selbst-gemachten Unvernunft*].'<sup>108</sup> This designation considers poetic force as an answer to the troubling question of 'emergence' (*Ausgang*) in Kant's definition. It is precisely this ability to reproduce the productivity of primeval creation that, in this case, cements the 'transcendental' nature of Schlegel's poetics: 'Only through form and color can man recreate his own creation and thus one cannot really speak of poetry except in the language of poetry.'<sup>109</sup> Poetry is transcendental because it is a part of a whole that nonetheless recreates the creative force of the whole. In turn this means that, since each individual's view on poetry is itself necessarily poetry, that is, a natural and spontaneous recreation rather than an externally-motivated interest, it is necessarily 'true and good'.<sup>110</sup> This contrasts markedly with what Schlegel here terms 'criticism': by classifying individuals under 'stereotypes,' criticism effaces the spirit and sense of each person's poetry. Thus the need for 'genuine criticism,' which according to Schlegel, 'should teach the lover of poetry how he ought to form his inner self.'<sup>111</sup>

For Schlegel, primeval poetry appears in human beings as the quotidian capacity to create and receive form and colour. Yet the limitation of each individual poetry owes not to the fact that it is a more or less significant participant in a flow of energy from a divine source, since poetic capacity—rather than being purely receptive of a force that diminishes as it emanates through different levels of being—is *recreative* of poetic force. Whilst this receptive recreation allows each user of language to obtain a true view on God's creation (or on 'natural poetry') and thus on the poetry of poets, each of these possible relations remains strictly partial. Forming one's inner self, therefore, is by no means an inward operation, hinged on the individual's approximation of God, but an ex-centric one, taking place only in the horizontal act of 'grasping' other poetries. Each individual poetry seeks complementarity in 'mankind' as a whole,

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<sup>106</sup> Schlegel, *Dialogue*, p. 53.

<sup>107</sup> Immanuel Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment', trans. by Mary J. Gregor, in *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 11-22; AA8:35 (translation modified).

<sup>108</sup> *Dialogue*, p. 54; KFS 2.285 (translation modified)

<sup>109</sup> *Dialogue*, p. 54; emphasis mine.

<sup>110</sup> *Dialogue*, p. 54.

<sup>111</sup> *Dialogue*, p. 53.

only by seeking a point of connection in the ‘depths of another’. Such connections must be made at the deepest level, but this is thinkable only when depth is approached through a ‘play of communicating and approaching’ that ‘is the business and the force of life [...] communication, even with those who only play on the colorful surface’.<sup>112</sup>

What Schlegel’s *Dialogue* intimates then, is less a Neoplatonic ontology, in which each part is determined by an emanating whole, than a transcendental poetics, where the conceptual ungraspability of the whole—language *tout court*—forms the condition of possibility of the poetic plays of surface and depth in and between languages. Moreover, as in Kant’s description of the organism, it is only such plays on the surface that render the whole legible. In *Lucinde*, Schlegel emphasizes the sense of compulsion or force that the *Dialogue* attributes to *Urpoesie*, but here, explicitly, it is the letter that binds or captures spirit: ‘Veil and bind the spirit in the letter. The real letter [*echte Buchstabe*] is all-powerful; it’s the true magic wand [*eigentliche Zauberstab*]’.<sup>113</sup> In the same text, Schlegel’s discussion of ‘feminine love’ picks up on the singularity of any judgement about life: here ‘there are no levels and stages of development; nothing general at all, but only so many individuals, so many particular types. No Linnaeus can classify and spoil for us all these beautiful growths and plants in the great garden of life’.<sup>114</sup> The binding magic of the letter and the unclassifiable individuality of judgements about life each allude to what Schlegel describes elsewhere under the term ‘incomprehensibility’:

All of the highest truths of every kind are altogether trivial; and for this very reason nothing is more necessary than to express them ever anew, and if possible ever more paradoxically, so that it will not be forgotten that they are still there and that they can never really be entirely expressed.<sup>115</sup>

The nature of a truth’s expression, Schlegel proposes, is of a different order than truth itself: poetry, if only on singular occasions and so in a manner that cannot be generalized, communicates the incommunicability of the highest truths.

The problem raised by the third *Critique* was that of expressing the imaginative freedom of our encounters with life, without either betraying the non-conceptuality of ‘purposiveness

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<sup>112</sup> *Dialogue*, p. 53.

<sup>113</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 58.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>115</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, ‘On Incomprehensibility’, in Jochen Schulte-Sasse et al (eds.), *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 118-27 (p. 122).

without purpose' (as Kant's critique of poetic enthusiasm alleges) or reducing imaginative expression to a suspended representation (as Kant's minimal affirmation of poetic form seems to actually do). Schlegel turns 'purposiveness without purpose' into a reminder that the life of language is always one and multiple, that poetry is at the same time spirit and letter, poetry and its critique. Hinged on 'a point, which must be left in the dark, but which nonetheless carries and holds the whole', the purposiveness of poetic language, its being for another's interpretation and its bearing toward the whole of language itself, is free only if it remains without purpose and open to the potential incomprehension that means its criticism is without end.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> 'On Incomprehensibility', p. 126. This quotation is also central to the crucial introductory chapter of Werner Hamacher, *Premises: Essays on Philosophy and Literature from Kant to Celan*, trans. by Peter Fenves (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

## Chapter 2

### ‘Not there at all’: Criticism, Concept, and Name in Walter Benjamin’s Doctoral Dissertation

#### 1. The Chaos of Incomprehensibility

In a diary entry written by Gershom Scholem on 24 June 1918—a year and three days before Walter Benjamin successfully defended his doctoral dissertation, ‘The Concept of Art-Criticism in German Romanticism’, at the University of Bern—one can read, alongside Scholem’s own thoughts on Romanticism, an insight of Benjamin’s.<sup>1</sup> Scholem recounts Benjamin’s belief that Romanticism’s achievement was to have escaped the dichotomy of permanence and transience that had, for the generation to which the two young thinkers belonged, become a stricture on thought as debilitating as the subject-object divide that Benjamin had already come to lament in his essay ‘On the Program of the Coming Philosophy’, composed around half a year earlier during late 1917 and early 1918. Writing of his friend, Scholem proceeds:

He said that the Romantics did not fall into what affects us so much: namely, the opposition between the chimerical and the ordered, but within it is still pure chaos. Romanticism is the chaos that we must first bring to creation. One should not be surprised that the Romantics didn’t understand one another.<sup>2</sup>

Benjamin’s remarks, as recounted by Scholem, do not culminate in a systematic reappraisal of the terms under discussion: the chimerical and the ordered, chaos and creation. Rather, like ‘On the Program of the Coming Philosophy’ and any number of other writings, they gravitate towards a reflection upon the nature of philosophical expression. ‘Chaos’, rather than naming a state of primordial disorder, is something that is brought about, as an experience of non-understanding, in every *sui generis* utterance of Romanticism. Incomprehensibility, Benjamin’s

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<sup>1</sup> A useful chronological account of the development of Benjamin’s dissertation can be found in the relevant entry in the *Benjamin-Handbuch*: Justus Fetscher, “‘Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik’”, in *Benjamin-Handbuch: Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, ed. by Burkhardt Lindner (Stuttgart; Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2006), pp. 150–66 (pp. 151–52).

<sup>2</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Lamentations of Youth: The Diaries of Gershom Scholem, 1913-1919*, trans. by Anthony David Skinner (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 254–55; *Tagebücher: nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, ed. by Karlfried Gründer and Friedrich Niewöhner, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1995-2000), II (2000), pp. 253-55.

remark suggests, does not stem from the unreachable character of that which pre-exists human experience, but is created each time anew in language.<sup>3</sup> For Benjamin's Romanticism, every utterance is idiosyncratic and for this reason incomprehensible, so much so that, according to Scholem's account, Benjamin could make the extraordinary statement, concerning two authors whose correspondence and mutual activities he knew to be extensive, that 'Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis had absolutely nothing to do with each other'.<sup>4</sup>

The dissertation that Benjamin eventually submitted in 1919 was to be, as is well-known, his final success in the university. As numerous commentators have gleaned from epistolary evidence, its author was well aware of the work's academic status and of the conventions and constraints it thereby faced.<sup>5</sup> It is understandable, therefore, that the text differs in spirit and tone from a set of brief, conversational remarks recorded in a friend's diary. The occasional tendency, however, to position Benjamin's dissertation as a final attempt at pursuing a systematic philosophy, has redoubled this distance between its heterogeneous origins, and its final academic form.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the method of Benjamin's dissertation has been noted, even reprimanded, for its perceived tendency to treat the works of Schlegel and Novalis as interchangeable in its desire to reconstruct a coherent Romantic philosophy of art.<sup>7</sup> Benjamin's claim that language—rather than a pre-existing 'opposition of the chimerical and the ordered'—might constitute an abyss separating the two thinkers, and his awareness of the depths of Romantic incomprehensibility, is routinely struck from the record.

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<sup>3</sup> In a question that seems at first glance to oppose Benjamin's reading, Schlegel asks: 'And has not this infinite world itself been constructed by the understanding out of incomprehensibility or chaos?' ('On Incomprehensibility', p. 126). Yet this remark must be read in light of the whole text's abyssal engagement with irony, and especially with the statement, following shortly afterwards, that the 'understanding itself will have to be understood' (p. 127). To this extent, Michael N. Forster's argument that Schlegel's irony is simply 'an expression of infinite chaos', which is 'motivated by his epistemology and metaphysics as well', seems to me misguided. Forster's overall contention that Romanticism (even in the period 1798 to 1800) is about a 'metaphysical [...] experience of longing and striving for the Infinite' is one that Benjamin's writing on Romanticism—rightly, in my view—seeks to resist. See Michael N. Forster, *German Philosophy of Language: From Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 32-33.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Scholem, *Lamentations*, p. 255.

<sup>5</sup> For an account of the tensions arising from the academic nature of the dissertation, see especially Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Introduction to Walter Benjamin's The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism', in *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin and Beatrice Hanssen (New York: Continuum, 2002), pp. 9-18.

<sup>6</sup> For critical responses that assess the role of systematization between Benjamin's dissertation and his later essay on 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', see Paul North, 'Apparent Critique: Inferences from a Benjaminian Sketch', *Diacritics* 40.1 (2012), 70-97; Rodolphe Gasché, 'The Sober Absolute: Benjamin and the Early Romantics', in David Ferris (ed.), *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 50-74; David S. Ferris, 'Benjamin's Affinity: Goethe, The Romantics and the Pure Problem of Criticism', in Hanssen and Benjamin (eds.), *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, pp. 180-96.

<sup>7</sup> See especially Marcus Bullock, 'The Coming of the Messiah or the Stoic Burning: Aspects of the Negated Text in Walter Benjamin and Friedrich Schlegel', in Peter Osborne (ed.), *Walter Benjamin: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, vol. 2 (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 29-55 (especially pp. 31-35).

As Chapter 1 of this thesis proposed, the notion of incomprehensibility allowed Friedrich Schlegel to see language's capacity to generate difference as integral to the major philosophical problems of the late eighteenth century. Schlegel's attention to the minimal difference between poetry and its criticism—between poetry and the 'poetry of poetry'—was understood as a fragile resolution to a problem which emerges discretely in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.<sup>8</sup> Whereas Kant fretted about poetic language's propensity to introduce generalizations into thought that would nullify the singularity of subjective encounters with beautiful objects or living things, Schlegel gives expression to the idea that criticism, as the poetry of poetry, is constitutively belated in relation to the life of poetry, which is said to be forever in a state of becoming. Rather than adding a final purpose (*Endzweck*), determined by practical reason, to the 'purposiveness without purpose' that characterizes human judgements on the unprecedented causality of living things, Schlegel's poetics demonstrate the possibility that, in coming face to face with the 'life' of artworks or of organisms, Kantian critique might not culminate in a systematic bridging between nature and freedom, but could instead give way to a prolongation of critique in Romantic art criticism, a possibility traceable in the literary-critical roots of critique itself, and hinted at in Kant's own brief references to the art of criticism.<sup>9</sup>

Benjamin's philosophical appointment with Romanticism can be understood as a sustained encounter with this Romantic response to the third *Critique*. As with the theme of 'chaos' that made its way into Scholem's diary, however, Benjamin's does not seek to appropriate or even identify a specifically Romantic conception of 'life'. Instead, his writing forms a response to the resources and idioms that Romanticism invented to isolate and develop an implicit claim in Kant's third *Critique*: that the problem of life was a problem of the conceptualization of 'life', or of the impossibility of conceptualizing that which exists only as an uncountable multiplicity of instances. More concretely, then, Benjamin's engagement with Romanticism is constituted by a series of encounters between singularity and conceptualization. Nowhere is this problem of conceptualization more in evidence than in Benjamin's shifting usages of the word *Kritik*. In this chapter, Benjamin's dissertation will be read as the apex of this encounter; as was the case with 'life' for Romanticism in the wake of Kant, the problem of 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism' will be probed as the manifestation of the very problem of criticism's possibility of conceptualization. In order to pursue this, and to better frame the concept of 'criticism' as it

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<sup>8</sup> Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 50-51 (*Athenaeum Fragment* 238).

<sup>9</sup> On the literary-critical roots of Kantian critique, see Howard Caygill, *Art of Judgement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) and Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, trans. by Sabu Kohso (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 35-39.



occupied Benjamin throughout the latter half of the 1910s, the 1916 essay ‘On Language as Such and on Human Language’ will be shown to inaugurate the theme of ‘naming’ that not only provides the under-examined lexicon of Benjamin’s Romanticism, but also constitutes the groundwork of his thinking about criticism as an idea which, like life and (as Benjamin will show) language, orients itself around its lack of ground.

## 2. ‘All too big’, ‘all too small’: Criticism in 1916

In a late 1916 letter to Herbert Belmore, Benjamin states his trenchant opposition to a presupposition that might normally appear necessary for criticism to function: that criticism has the right to cast judgements about things. The conception of criticism as an evaluative activity that makes judgements of good and bad, or of righteous and evil, had, Benjamin suggests, come to vitiate its true practice. In contrast to a prevailing conception that judges objects according to an exterior set of criteria, norms or rules, Benjamin’s letter expresses a wholly ‘positive’ idea of criticism, issuing from its linguistic character:

Language resides only in what is positive, and completely in whatever strives for the most fervent unity with life; which does not maintain the semblance [*Schein*] of criticism, of the κρινω [*krino*] of discriminating between good and bad [*schlecht*]; but transposes everything critical to the inside, transposes the crisis into the heart of language [*die Krisis in das Herz der Sprache verlegt*]. (C:84; B1:131; translation modified).

Benjamin here draws on the shared etymological root of crisis and criticism, but not so as to locate the critical point—at which one is compelled to divide, discern and judge—as a crisis faced by a subject in encountering an object. Rather, in line with the motivation that guides his consistent advocations for the neutrality or objectivity of language, the relevant crisis is said to be at the heart of language. If it is not an externally-motivated value judgement on objects, criticism must be considered as an originating crisis foundational for the linguistic constitution of things. It follows that language is not a means to criticism’s end: criticism would remain a mere ‘semblance’ if this were so. Rather, the character of criticism has to change and become ‘positive’, so that it may, with language, strive after a ‘fervent unity with life’. Benjamin suggests that this unity would be the mutual constitution and reciprocal inhabitation of criticism and language.

This results in an entirely different conception of the relation between criticism and its objects than that present in criticism's prevailing reduction to judgement:

True criticism does not go against its object: it is like a chemical substance that attacks another only in the sense that, decomposing it, it unveils its inner nature, but does not destroy it. The chemical substance that attacks *spiritual* things in this way (diathetically [*diathetisch*]) is the light. This does not appear in language. (C:84; B1:131-32; translation modified)

The criteria through which things are judged ought not to be external to those things themselves, Benjamin implies. Yet this call for a criticism that 'does not go against its object'—what the dissertation will come to term 'immanent criticism'—not only demands that one employ the presuppositions and language of the object under investigation in order to determine touchstones for its analysis and judgement, as practices of immanent critique had proposed since Hegel and Marx.<sup>10</sup> More importantly, the very language in which criticism occurs is constituted in criticism, rather than pre-existing it. The critical struggle with an object is—and is nothing other than, if criticism is not a mere 'semblance'—a struggle to expose the constitution *in* and *of* that object's linguistic being.<sup>11</sup>

As Benjamin's own language suggests, however, this positive idea of criticism raises problems of intention, precedence and direction, which inevitably inflect its ability to be theoretically presented. Firstly, criticism—crisis—is not already at the 'heart of language', the letter suggests, but has to be 'transposed' there. That this claim involves an apparently intentional act of relocation, akin to the subjective act of analogical substitution against which Benjamin elsewhere rallies (SW1:207-09; GS6:43-45), suggests that it is never possible to fully partition the linguistic objectivity of criticism from the arbitrariness of intentional linguistic acts, including—we would have to presume—judgements. Closely related to this problem are questions of precedence and direction. Even though he appears to argue that neither a subject nor language

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<sup>10</sup> For a lucid discussion of immanent critique which does not, however, attend to this linguistic dimension, see Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> Marcus Bullock has drawn attention to this letter, but mischaracterizes the relation between language and criticism therein. Bullock's argument can be considered as an instance of a critical tendency, in the wake of deconstructive readings of Benjamin, to reactively overexaggerate the stakes of the relation between 'image' and writing. In order to posit a degradation of 'textuality' to the profit of an image of Benjamin as a gambler who exercises 'blind judgement', Bullock writes that criticism 'involves the question of inner truth, a core of meaning which transcends its representation in language'; this core is 'to be laid bare as objectively real and present [...] The integrity of the text is therefore demoted. The intuition of light takes precedence in finding the freight of meaning over consideration of the hull of language'. Bullock, 'The Coming of the Messiah', pp. 51-3.

precede their ‘critical’ articulation, Benjamin uses an image of a ‘path’ on which language is encountered to emphasize the necessity of orienting oneself prior to and with respect to this encounter: ‘Inasmuch as the word appears to us on our path [*Wege*], we will prepare the purest and holiest place for it: however, it should dwell among us. We want to preserve it in the final, most precious form we are able to give it; art truth right [*Kunst Wahrheit Recht*]’ (C:83; B1:131; translation modified).<sup>12</sup> Art, truth and right, it seems, are the ‘forms’ that emerge from inescapably intentional acts of preparation and preservation, yet these acts and their resultant forms appears to be in tension with the apparent contingency of the critical encounter with language. This equivocal tension is found throughout the letter: ‘We are in the middle of the night’, Benjamin writes, indicating an irreducible historical situatedness: ‘I learned that whoever fights against the night must move into its deepest darkness to deliver up *its* light [*ihr Licht herzugeben*] and that words are only a station [*nur ein Station*] in this great struggle of life [*diesem großen Bemühen des Lebens*]: and they can be the final station only when they are never the first’ (C:83; B1:131; translation modified). Like the image of the ‘path’, the figure of the ‘station’ here indicates a temporal quandary. Language cannot be ‘first’, because it has to be encountered *as* a station when it enters into a unity with criticism; nonetheless, the ‘life struggle’ of criticism—like the act of ‘preparing’ and ‘preserving’—is always already linguistic, meaning that even the ‘final station’, conceived from the point of view of language’s irreducible existence, is ‘only a station’. Just as there can be no determinate departure point, there is no fixed terminus.

From this perspective, Benjamin’s terminology stands in for the absence of an existing philosophical vocabulary capable of attesting to the temporal entanglement that characterizes criticism’s relation to language.<sup>13</sup> Criticism’s ‘diathetical’ mode of attack, its pertinence for the

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<sup>12</sup> This formulation foreshadows a statement made in a letter of 28 December 1917 to Ernst Schoen. Here, Benjamin mentions his essay ‘On Language as Such and on Human Language’ as a starting point for his enquiries and writes the following: ‘Primarily, for me, questions about the essence of knowledge, right and art [*Erkenntnis, Recht, Kunst*] are related to the question about the origin of all human intellectual utterances in the essence of language’ (C:108; B1:164; translation modified).

<sup>13</sup> Giorgio Agamben’s work has oriented itself around an apparently similar temporal quandary: the fact that human language is no longer merely animal noise but not yet a fulfilled, pure language. Agamben, however, contends that Benjamin’s theory of ideas achieves this fulfilment at the point when language has ‘burst the chains of writing’ and is ‘celebrated’ rather than written. Agamben, ‘Linguistic and Historical Categories in Benjamin’s Thought’, in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 48-62 (pp. 57-58). As my readings here seek to show, Benjamin’s writing never reaches this point of self-identity. In an insightful essay on Agamben’s writing on language and its sources, Colby Dickinson argues that the relation between name and thing in Agamben is obscure because ‘it forms the problematic contours of transcendence itself, and that it is precisely by attending to such contours that Agamben emphasizes the possibility of experiencing the very existence of language itself. It is a general feature of Agamben’s project, manifested most clearly in his occasional polemics with Jacques Derrida, that, in attending so emphatically to the ‘fact’ of language, he neglects the irreducible heterogeneity of languages that Benjamin’s writing on language and criticism opens onto; when this heterogeneity is foregrounded, the moment at which the fact of language is experienced is liable to be recast as an image that obscures a less

constitutional make up or disposition (*hexis*) of ‘spiritual things’ (*geistigen Dinge*) is one instance of this terminology: his references to other chemical terms such as ‘preserving’ and ‘preparing’ are others, as is his reference to ‘life’ to refer to the unity of language and criticism. Rather than representing a defined picture of criticism, these terms are ciphers for a problem that is so minimal that it escapes sustained consideration or even contemplation.<sup>14</sup> Without identifying the object of the pronoun, Benjamin considers this problem through a unity of the smallest and the largest, of the most spiritual and the most corporeal: ‘It is all too great to criticize. It is all the night that bears the light, it is the bleeding body of the spirit. It is also all too small to criticize, not there at all: the dark, total darkness itself—even dignity alone—the gaze of anyone who attempts to contemplate it will grow dim.’ The critical thing at stake seems akin on the one hand to the formless, ‘all too great’ quantities that are impossible to imaginatively comprehend and so occasion judgements of the sublime, and on the other to beautiful forms, both in their pre-Kantian conception as delicate or fragile appearances and in their critical variation, according to which objects appear to leave behind nothing but the form of their appearance.<sup>15</sup> Yet the thing at stake in criticism is also of such a recessive nature that these categories no longer do it justice. It is no surprise therefore that, with some pathos (especially considering that he is writing in the middle of the war), Benjamin considers the possibility that ‘everything will be taken out of our hands, and it should then at least be form [*Gestalt*]: not criticism’ (C83; B1:131).

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stable movement. Colby Dickinson, ‘The Profanation of Revelation: On Language and Immanence in the Work of Giorgio Agamben’, *Angelaki*, 19.1 (2014), 63-81 (pp. 66-67).

<sup>14</sup> Another reading of the letter is found in Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectic: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press). Pensky argues that Benjamin constructs criticism in response to a demand posed in ‘On Language as Such and on Human Language’, wherein he writes: ‘Speechlessness: that is the great sorrow of nature (and for the sake of her redemption the life and language of man—not only, as is supposed, of the poet—are in nature)’ (SW1:72; GS2:155). Pensky considers criticism as the task of enacting the ‘redemption’ and purification (through the destruction of inessential elements) of the language of things, since this language is said to be condemned to a melancholy silence in the postlapsarian world. The human being’s linguistic task on earth, thus conceived, is that criticism should redeem the speechlessness of nature—its loss of language and concomitant condemnation to mere life (Pensky, p. 58). My reading of both texts is at odds with this determinate conception of criticism, and with the notion of a postlapsarian fallen language (and life, no less) on which it is premised. Notably, Pensky takes the ‘diathetically’ of Benjamin’s letter as ‘dialectically’ (p. 46).

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin, writing in 1916, thus appears to capture what has been theorized a century later as a ‘minimal Romanticism’ that explores the possibility of devoting attention to ‘the small, negligent, obscure, too little or too much, the ephemeral, the mere *there is*, the all but *not there*’. According to David L. Clark and Jacques Khalip, to consider Romanticism minimally is to ‘consider the fragmentary minimal as something otherwise than as a privation’, but this mode of consideration is as fragile as the thing it considers. See Clark and Khalip (eds.), ‘Introduction: Too Much, Too Little: Of Brevity’, *Minimal Romanticism*, special issue of *Romantic Circles* (2016), para. 3 of 8.

### 3. Paradox: ‘On Language as Such and on Human Language’

‘Do you want to read any of my works? I have written the following essays [...]’. As a post-script to his letter to Belmore, Benjamin makes his friend aware of the yield of his year’s toil. To be sure, there is no explicit mention of criticism in any of the essays listed. The last among them, however, the fragmentary and unfinished text ‘On Language as Such and on Human Language’, offers an account of language that is as wracked with difficulties as the one tentatively proposed in the letter.<sup>16</sup> The limitations of the essay do not only stem from its formal character as a text which originally took root in a letter and which Benjamin planned to develop further.<sup>17</sup> More significantly, the essay’s fragmentary status corresponds with the ungrounded nature of the theory of language presented therein. This lack of ground in Benjamin’s theory of language ought to make us wary of any assumptions that the essay could give rise to a determinate concept or task of criticism. Nevertheless, the possible relation between the theory of language articulated in the essay and Benjamin’s early thinking about criticism might be of a different order. Just as Schlegel’s transcendental poetics inaugurated a way to speak critically about poetry, overcoming Kant’s own interdiction on poetic attempts to render legible ‘purposiveness without purpose’, Benjamin’s writing about language demands attention to its own written character, insofar as its status of being ‘about’ (*über*) language is subject to a persistent self-questioning.<sup>18</sup> It is this self-conscious limitation of Benjamin’s essay that lends itself to his thinking about criticism, insofar as the latter is similarly wary of the dangers of its own conceptualization.

‘On Language as Such’ is, from the outset, suspicious of the idea that there can be a theory of language in general (*Sprache überhaupt*). The essay’s highly condensed opening statements propose that meaningful contents are not communicated in language, but rather that—in all things that have language, that is, anything we are capable of thinking of, since ‘we cannot imagine a total absence [*völlige Abwesenheit*] of language in anything’ (SW1:62; GS2: 141)—‘language communicates the mental being [*geistige Wesen*] corresponding to it’ (SW1:63; GS2:142). This means that every language communicates ‘that which in a mental entity is communicable’, namely, its language or communicability (*Mittelbarkeit*). Although it is tempting to draw a series of more general claims from these statements, Benjamin is careful not to abstract from the

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<sup>16</sup> Throughout, I refer to ‘Human Language’ rather than ‘the Language of Man’, when referencing Benjamin’s essay.

<sup>17</sup> For the ‘Notes for the Continuation of the Work on Language’, see GS7: 785-90.

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin’s essay has inspired Werner Hamacher’s highly relevant attempt to find a name for this kind of speaking-about in the word ‘philology’. For Hamacher: ‘Philology is the precarious movement of speaking about language, above and beyond every given language’. See Hamacher, ‘For—Philology’, trans. Jason Groves, in *Minima Philologica* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), pp. 107-156 (p. 110).

language that each thing communicates, to an idea of language itself. Such an abstraction would fall into the ‘abyss’ of a mystical theory or linguistic idealism that considers language, insofar as it contains the essence of things, to be an end in itself:

It is therefore obvious at once that the mental entity that communicates itself in language is not language itself but something to be distinguished from it [*etwas von ihr zu Unterscheidendes*]. The view that the mental essence of a thing consists precisely in its language—this view, taken as a hypothesis, is the great abyss [*große Abgrund*] into which all linguistic theory threatens to fall, and to hold itself suspended over, precisely over, this abyss is its task [*über, gerade über ihm sich schwebend zu erhalten ist ihre Aufgabe*]. (SW1:63; GS2:141)

If the most perceptive readers have noted Benjamin’s apparent flouting of his own injunction against the identification of mental essence with language, his letter to Belmore clarifies why such transgressions are possible and perhaps even necessary: the linguistic being of each thing is constituted on singular, critical occasions, rather than derived generally from a pre-existing ‘view’ (*Ansicht*) or ‘hypothesis’ about language, which would always constitute a ‘knowledge from outside’ (SW1:71; GS2:153).<sup>19</sup> ‘On Language as Such’ thus illustrates the singularity of each and every language—for example, ‘the language of this lamp [*die Sprache dieser Lampe*]’ (SW1: 63; GS2: 142)—to the extent that the text performs a ‘suspension’ of the attitude normally taken in linguistic theory: namely, that language itself can be the object of *logos apophantikos*, that there is such a thing called language that can be spoken about in logical statements capable of attaining to lasting truth or falsity.<sup>20</sup> The task (*Aufgabe*) of any linguistic theory, Benjamin proposes, is to hold itself suspended *over* the abyss registered by such a ‘hypothesis’, and not to erase that abyss itself. For this task, Benjamin implies, there is no determinate solution: the ‘paradox’ of the abyss of linguistic theory is ‘insoluble’ if it is ‘placed at the beginning’ (SW1:63; GS2:142), a claim that recalls the letter’s argument that words ‘can be the final station only when they are never the first’. It remains then, for Benjamin to propose that the place of the ‘paradox’ is at the centre of linguistic theory, as the ‘solution’ itself. Nonetheless, as the letter indicates, even this view is constitutively precarious, liable to ‘grow dim’ when subject to the ‘gaze’ of anyone who tries to hold it for more than a moment.

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Carl Jacobs, *In the Language of Walter Benjamin* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 105-06; Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>20</sup> Werner Hamacher, ‘95 Theses on Philology’, trans. by Catharine Diehl, in *Minima Philologica*, pp. 1-106 (pp. 10-11).

This precarity is evidenced in the course of the essay. The performance of language's hovering above its groundlessness soon gives way to a 'suspension of this suspension',<sup>21</sup> and to the elaboration of a narrative associated more readily with, for instance, philology's totalizing, reconstructive impulse, according to which language can bear within itself at all moments the narrative of its own becoming.<sup>22</sup> As Benjamin is aware, this totalizing impulse is extended in existing philosophies of language beyond the methodological limits of the philological practices with which it is most commonly associated. Beyond the attempt to secure the material bearers of meaning in any given text, and beyond the speculative attribution of intentional purposes (from imperfect textual sources) to an 'author', the reconstructive imperative extends to the history and philosophy of language as such. It is the presumed possibility of asserting the totality of 'language' underlying such an approach that Benjamin ascertains to have reappeared in the pre-eminent theories of language to which his essay responds: a mystical one, in which the word inheres as the essence of the thing (and which thus sees language as an end in itself), and a conventionalist, 'bourgeois' one, which recognizes only an arbitrary relation between word and thing (and so considers language a set of discrete means to an end, namely, the representation of exterior objects) (SW1:69; GS2:150).

If a totalizing history of language is a common dimension of the dominant theories whose presuppositions the essay seeks to circumvent, why then does Benjamin propose such a history via an account of language's origin, its paradisiacal state, and its subsequent decline? The retelling of Genesis that constitutes the latter part of Benjamin's text provides a textual foundation for the theory of language as a 'continuum'; crucially, however, the continuity of this narrative reconstruction also makes legible divergences from it, of which two are particularly prominent. Firstly, the difference between the creative word of God and the finite language of humans is immediately apparent: 'The infinity of all human language always remains limited and analytic in nature, in comparison to the absolutely unlimited and creative infinity of the divine word' (SW1:68; GS2:149). Secondly, humans and animals undergo fundamentally different modes of creation: the making (*Erschaffung*) of man from the earth is the only instance of creation

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<sup>21</sup> The idea that the essay performs a phenomenological suspension and then a 'suspension of this suspension' is proposed in Peter Fenves, 'The Genesis of Judgement: Spatiality, Analogy, and Metaphor in Benjamin's "On Language as Such and on Human Language"', in *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions*, ed. by David S. Ferris (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 75-93 (p. 77).

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Pfau, 'Thinking Before Totality: Kritik, Übersetzung, and the Language of Interpretation in the Early Walter Benjamin', *MLN*, 103 (1988), 1072-97 (pp. 1073-74). In this insightful essay, Pfau illuminates the indispensability of language for the Hegelian disclosure of the identity of the concrete and the rational, insofar as language, "teaches" to natural consciousness the lesson that only an intensive, meta-historical and non-referential mode of expression can be adequate to the universality and totality that characterizes the "Absolute Knowledge" at the end of Hegel's phenomenological movement.'

which ‘did not take place through the word’ (SW1:67; GS2:148). ‘The second version of the story of Genesis,’ writes Benjamin, ‘tells of the breathing of God’s breath into man’, by which man ‘is now invested with the gift of language and is elevated above nature’ (SW1:67-68; GS2:147-48). Although things of nature, by contrast, have not been gifted with language, they are said to contain a residue of God’s creative and simultaneously cognitive word, a residue that allows things to partake in a magical linguistic community, independently of humans.

As these difference imply, an account of the pre-linguistic origin of language, in Benjamin’s view, is necessary in order for language to be presented as something other than a mere unity of the existent, a ‘continuum [...] on which the given facts are gently borne along’ as he would have it in a review written as late as 1939 (SW4:140; GS3:566).<sup>23</sup> In turning to Genesis, then, Benjamin is less interested in proposing a unified history of language that would be readable in every linguistic utterance than in articulating a difference between human language and the world; or, to put it differently, since ‘we cannot imagine a total absence of language in anything’, the idea of the prelinguistic introduces a difference into the heart of language, to recall the image in Benjamin’s letter about criticism. In considering language as irreducibly heterogeneous, Benjamin demonstrates that language appears differently in every one of its manifestations.

#### 4. ‘More perfect’ without Perfection: Naming on the Frontier

The continuum of language, for Benjamin, is not a dogmatic presentation of human language’s relation to divine creation or to ‘language as such’ but instead a strategic image that allows for language’s heterogeneity to survive its theoretical presentation. The way that Benjamin considers human language to partake in this continuum—the act of naming—ought to be explored further, however:

The deepest images of this divine word and the point where human language attains its most intimate share [*innigsten Anteil*] in the divine infinity of the pure word [*bloßen Wortes*], the point at which it cannot become finite word and knowledge, are the human name.

The theory of proper names is the theory of the frontier [*Grenze*] between finite and infinite language. (SW1:69; GS2:149; translation modified)

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<sup>23</sup> The review is of Hönigswald’s *Philosophie und Sprache*. Samuel Weber considers this imperative in the following way: ‘in order to think of language as *Logos*, its other—*physis*—is required. In order to conceive language in its purity, it must at the same time be thought as being prelinguistic, as *actus purus*, as creating omnipotence, a transcendental subject that produces nature as its likeness and image.’ Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities*, p. 302.



The human name is the limit or ‘frontier’ that makes the continuum of language theoretically legible in the first instance. Yet, like all frontiers, it also fogs the opposition it contours, in this case that between ‘finite and infinite language’, so much so that the name is described as ‘the point at which it [the word] cannot become finite word and knowledge’. As in Schlegel’s *Dialogue on Poetry*, ‘On Language as Such’ thus sets out a possibility for human language to partake in language’s continuum without identifying itself as finite in relation to the infinite, divine word. And like the ‘point, which must be left in the dark, but which nonetheless carries and holds the whole’ sketched in Schlegel’s ‘On Incomprehensibility’, the name is both the condition of possibility for thinking of language as a continuous totality, *and* the simultaneous unsettling of this totality.<sup>24</sup> Not only is one of the continuum’s poles inconceivable in linguistic terms—the creative word of God is presentable only as a matrix of ‘deepest images’—but the name is considered to arrest any possible transition between finite ‘part’ and infinite ‘whole’, thus jeopardizing the continuum’s status as anything other than an image.

What are the qualities of the name that allow it to fulfil this in-determining, arresting, or suspending role in Benjamin’s thinking about language? ‘On Language as Such’ presents the idea that it is the lack of qualities that lends the name its power in this regard. The name, Benjamin suggests, derives its authority from its status as a pure material sound: names do not correspond to the qualities of things, but are sonic utterances that have no point of reference in the things they name. Just as the ‘Conjectural Beginning of Human History’, Kant’s own anthropological ‘pleasure trip’ along the textual ‘road map’ of Genesis, emphasized, through a derisive if pleasurable excess of its own, the nonsense of naming—its origin in ‘buzzing, screaming, whistling, singing and other noisy activities’—so Benjamin emphasizes the material excess of the name as a sound.<sup>25</sup> Stripped of any function, names should mean nothing other than the ‘event of their bestowal’, in Peter Fenves’s words.<sup>26</sup> An example of such an event, Benjamin suggests, is the naming of a newborn child, a being that has no meaningfully perceptible features about it: ‘With the giving of names, parents dedicate their children to God; the names they give do not correspond—in a metaphysical rather than etymological sense—to any knowledge, for they

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<sup>24</sup> Schlegel, ‘On Incomprehensibility’, p. 122.

<sup>25</sup> Immanuel Kant, ‘Conjectural Beginning of Human History’, trans. by David L. Colclasure, in *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 24-36 (pp. 24-25); AA8:111.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 146. As Fenves also notes, this follows a biblical prohibition, specifically concerning the naming of human beings.

name newborn children' (SW1:70; GS2:149-50).<sup>27</sup> Benjamin here understands the living being—the newborn—as a thing without qualities or values (a thing close to a 'mere life' in the idiom he would adopt from Heinrich Rickert, explored further in Chapter Four). Naming transposes the thing named into a 'more perfect' point in the circle of language, but it is anything but a squaring of that circle, or a reconstitution of God's creative intuition: it does not appeal to an identity between language, knowledge and referent (SW1:70; GS2:151).<sup>28</sup> The material singularity of the name, rather, announces itself in the fact that naming does not actually make things 'perfect'. Still less does 'more perfect' imply a telos: rather, 'more perfect' implies neither the possibility of perfection nor an infinite approximation, for every instance of naming eludes a scale of comparison and suspends the hierarchy of the continuum of language.<sup>29</sup> After the example of Kant's 'purposiveness without purpose', the name, on Benjamin's account, might be glossed as making things 'more perfect', without perfection or progression.

The implications of the name's nonsensical, sonic materiality are manifold. This is not because (as in Hegel, for instance) the name's negation of representation demands a transformation into something objective by representational understanding.<sup>30</sup> On the contrary, the name's nonsense remains unreadable, and refuses to lend itself to further philosophical use.<sup>31</sup> Since the name makes a continuum of language legible only at the same time as it prohibits the conceptualization of the human word as a finite part of infinite divine language, the nature of the continuum of language is itself thrown into question. Benjamin sheds light on this continuum when the name is considered in relation to other, non-human languages. Humans are said to perform the 'task' (*Aufgabe*) of 'naming things' by 'receiving [*empfängt*] the mute, nameless language of things [*die stumme namenlose Sprache der Dinge*] and converting [*überträgt*] it by name into sounds' (SW1:70; GS2:151; translation modified). Likewise, the name or 'human word' is nothing

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<sup>27</sup> Alongside Scholem, Benjamin also held an abiding interest in Paul Scheerbart, whose 'asteroid novel' *Lesabéndio* was to have been at the centre of the lost essay 'The True Politician', which itself was supposed to form part of Benjamin's 'Politics' project of the early 1920s. The genderless beings enclosed within the asteroid Pallas, on which the novel is set, can truly be said to have nothing about them: as such, on their 'birth' (an exposure to light), they are given names determined only by the sounds that they make, such as 'Lesabéndio', 'Biba', 'Bombimba', and 'Labu'. Scheerbart's work continued to be an important reference in the disagreements that arose between Benjamin and Scholem concerning the former's later work on language, particularly on the question of the significance of the 'infinite', which Scholem wanted to uphold against Benjamin and Brecht's 'revolutionary manipulation in the finite'. See Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), pp. 261-62.

<sup>28</sup> For the diagrammatic presentation of the circle of language, see GS7: 786.

<sup>29</sup> On the limitations of the motif of infinite approximation in Romanticism and beyond, see Jan Mieszkowski, 'Almost Nearly: The Languages of Approximation', *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies* 50.3 (2014), 258-75.

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin's names are similar to what Hegel denigrated as mere *sinnlose Äusserlichkeiten*, though, as Jeffrey Reid has demonstrated, Hegel claims that such a 'senseless externality' simply 'needs an other'. See Jeffrey Reid, *The Anti-Romantic: Hegel against Ironic Romanticism* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 54-57.

<sup>31</sup> Pfau, 'Thinking Before Totality', p. 1076.

but a 'receptive' (*empfangend*), rather than spontaneous or creative, material sounding, a material and irreducible response to the language of things:

the thing in itself has no word, being created from God's word and known in its name by a human word. This knowledge of the thing, however, is not spontaneous creation; it does not emerge from language in the absolutely unlimited and infinite manner of creation. Rather, the name that man gives to language depends on how language is communicated to him. In name, the word of God has not remained creative; it has become in one part receptive [*empfangend*], even if receptive to language [*sprachempfangend*]. Thus fertilized, it aims to give birth to the language of things themselves, from which in turn, in the mute magic of nature, the word of God shines forth [*Auf die Sprache der Dinge selbst, aus denen wiederum lautlos und in der stummen Magie der Natur das Wort Gottes hervorstrahlt, ist diese Empfängnis gerichtet*]. (SW1: 69; GS2: 150)

Insofar as it does not add anything to that which it receives, the act of naming remains uncreative, lingering at the level of a sonic, mimetic activity. Relinquishing the pretense of spontaneously allocating names for things, naming-language is receptive to the world insofar as it is receptive to the language of things.

In Benjamin's account, the naming word receives (*empfängt*) the communication that things are already communicative in their own way and it carries over (*überträgt*) this thing-language into the material medium of human sound. Exploiting the link between this carrying-over and the activity of translation, the receptive human word is considered as 'the translation [*Übersetzung*] of the language of things into that of man' or of the nameless into the name, a proposal that allows Benjamin to foreground the 'objectivity' of naming (SW1:70; GS2:150-51). Benjamin's terminology is significant, for at the same time as the essay discounts the presumption that humans can name things based on the properties of objects, it overturns a key Kantian term, according to which 'receptivity' (*Receptivität*) denotes a subject's capacity to be affected by the world outside by yielding representations that can be referred to the understanding's spontaneous ability to generate concepts. The verb *empfangen* usually holds the transitive meaning of 'to receive' and the intransitive meaning 'to conceive' (as in 'to conceive a child'), both of which are at work in this understanding of naming. In using the term *Empfängnis*, therefore, Benjamin's essay brackets the idea that a subject is affected in its receptivity to a world of phenomena in favour of an objectivity that arises not on account of the referral of subjective receptions to objective concepts (Kant) nor on the basis of the merely sensual word's need for

intellectual representation and subsequent transformation into an objective thing (Hegel) but only insofar as the name *uncreatively* receives other languages.

## 5. December 1917: Two Centaurs (Hölderlin, Guérin)

As has been suggested, the name allows for the consideration of human language's participation in the 'continuum' of language, without being identified—and measured—as a finite shard of the divine and infinite. If the name is said to be the point where human language achieves its 'innermost share' (*innigsten Anteil*) in the 'divine infinity' of language (SW1:69; GS2:149)—an idea that Benjamin may have derived from Friedrich Schlegel's lectures on the philosophy of history (delivered in Vienna in 1828)—the share is less a fragment of an emanating totality than a singular act of sharing.<sup>32</sup> For if the continuum of language is to be considered as language's heterogeneity, then naming-language—as a reception, which is also a sharing—opens the human word to the multiplicity of the world as a continuum of languages. The event of name-giving makes this opening, however, only on singular and ungeneralizable occasions. Benjamin argues at the outset of the essay that 'what is communicated [or imparted] *in* language cannot be externally limited or measured, and therefore all language contains its own incommensurable, singularly-constituted [*einziggeartet*] infinity' (SW1:64; GS2:143; translation modified).

When the singular, material nature of every event of naming means that no name can produce a universal measure, the relation between naming and linguistic theory, between human language and language as such, is thrown into question. Benjamin warns near the beginning of the 1916 essay of the requirement that the heterogeneity of language always be borne in mind: 'to identify naming language with language as such is to rob linguistic theory of its deepest insights' (SW1:64; GS1:143). On the one hand, this means that there are languages other than the human one which names things, and that 'naming' attains its potency precisely from this heterogeneity, insofar as naming figured as the reception of nameless language. It also means that there is no generalizable connection between the singularity of 'reception' in any act of naming and a theory of language as such. The 'claim' of Benjamin's fragmentary essay, so to

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<sup>32</sup> According to Scholem's diary, Benjamin found a precedent for the remarks on language that he makes to Buber in a late series of lectures by Schlegel: 'In passing, a few weeks after writing the letter, Benjamin found in Schlegel's *Philosophy of History* a section on language that uses different words to say the same thing' (Scholem, *Lamentations*, p. 136; *Tagebücher*, I, pp. 382-88). The editors of Scholem's diaries point to the relevant passage as occurring in the third of Schlegel's lectures, which is on China: 'It is here, therefore, the task attributable to each of these peoples, to determine and to develop the share of divine truth [*Anteil an der göttlichen Wahrheit*] or the measure and inheritance of the higher knowledge, alongside the accompanying human degeneration or aberration; because it is with this, at the same time, that the characteristic of the inner word, as the actual distinctive mark and spiritual essence of the human, and of humankind, is connected'. Schlegel, *Philosophie der Geschichte in achtzehn Vorlesungen*, 2 vols. (Vienna: Schaumburg, 1829), I, p. 82.

speak, depends entirely on the *lack* of any stable theoretical claim about such a link between naming and language in general. In the absence of such a theoretical claim, ‘On Language as Such’ leaves open a space in which language’s other possibilities can resonate: ‘the language of sculpture, of painting, of poetry’, but also ‘languages issuing from matter’, whose material communality points to ‘the world as such as an undivided whole’ (SW1:73; GS2:156). To understand ‘artistic forms’, the essay proposes, the ‘connection’ (*Zusammenhang*) or ‘affinity’ (*Verwandtschaft*) between natural and artistic languages has to be sought.

The impetus that leads Benjamin to situate the origin of language in a biblical narrative, and which ends with an affirmation of the heterogenous languages of art and nature, also finds expression in a fragment written around December 1917—precisely when Benjamin was in the throes of deciding upon a topic for his doctoral dissertation.<sup>33</sup> ‘The Centaur’ was written after Benjamin had read Maurice de Guérin’s prose poem, ‘Le Centaure’ (written in 1839 and first published posthumously in 1861). The quandaries of uncreative receptivity—particularly as they pertain to theories of life—come to the surface in Guérin’s text, which appears on Benjamin’s reading list (GS7:437) and whose German translation by Rilke he expressed a strong desire to read.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, Benjamin never addresses the text directly. In a way that reflects the problematic relation between criticism and its conceptualization, or language and its theorization, however, we might speculate that Benjamin recognized in Guérin’s centaur, the speaker of the poem, a mythological figure who preserves the heterogeneity of life only at the expense of entrenching a distance from it. On occasion giving itself up to ‘a life, blind and at large’ (*une vie aveugle et déchaînée*), de Guérin’s centaur oscillates between this openness to a ‘foreign life which interpenetrated me during the day’ (*la vie étrangère qui m’avait pénétré durant le jour*) and a ‘simple and solitary life’ (*la vie seule et simple*) of shell-like compactness and nocturnal repose, topographically associated with its cavernous dwelling-place.<sup>35</sup> Guérin’s prose poem emphasizes a peculiar receptivity from its opening sentence. Rather than simply stating the fact that he was born, the

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<sup>33</sup> As is well-known, Benjamin expressed a strong interest in writing on Kant’s philosophy of history, before hinting about another potential Kant-related topic: the idea of the eternal task. The relevant letters to Scholem in which Benjamin plots and jettisons these plans were written on 22 October 1917, 7 December 1917 and 23 December 1917.

<sup>34</sup> In a letter of 30 July 1917 to Ernst Schoen (C:91; B1:139), Benjamin writes that he wants to read this translation, originally published in 1911 in a run of only 300 copies (but reissued in 1919). Benjamin’s fragment is dated by the editors of the *Gesammelte Schriften* to December 1917, a month in which Hölderlin occupied him as much as his choice of dissertation topic: on 6 December 1917 Benjamin asked Scholem to procure for him a copy of the recent fourth volume of Norbert von Hellingrath’s edition of Hölderlin, and he thanks him for securing it on 23 December 1917. Benjamin’s fragment itself exists in a curious form: as a photocopy of a handwritten text composed on 15 July 1921 and attached to a copy of the 1919 edition of Rilke’s translation belonging to Julia Cohn. It was found amongst Scholem’s papers after his death.

<sup>35</sup> Maurice de Guérin, *Poèmes en Prose (Le Centaure—La Bacchante)* (Paris: Édouard Pelletan, 1901), p. 24. For an English translation of the poem (published in an ornate edition with a serif typeface that we now know as ‘Centaur’), see *The Centaur; The Bacchante*, trans. T.S. Moore (London: Hacon and Ricketts, 1899).

speaker acknowledges that he has been given his birth: ‘I received my birth in the caves of these mountains [*J’ai reçu la naissance dans les antres de ces montagnes*]’.<sup>36</sup> Rilke’s translation, which Benjamin may or may not have read at this point, maintains birth as a noun but loses the idea of birth being received: ‘Ich kam zur Geburt unten in den Höhlen dieser Gebirge’.<sup>37</sup> After his letter on criticism and essay on language, and before his dissertation on Romantic criticism, Benjamin finds in Guérin an almost incomparable instance of uncreative poetic receptivity, a mythical account of life so recessive and minimal that its survival and transmission seem radically improbable.

From Guérin’s prose poem, nonetheless, Benjamin drew connections to Friedrich Hölderlin’s Pindar translations and commentaries, particularly the last of these, ‘Das Belebende’ (‘The Life-Giver’).<sup>38</sup> Here, in highly compacted, alliterative and recursive prose—which often invokes the language, rhythms, and counter-rhythms of Hölderlin’s translation and commentary—Benjamin considers a mythical alternative to the pre-linguistic act of ‘language’ in the divine creation of life:

For where there is giving of life, there is force—where the spirit does not give life [*Denn wo belebt wird ist Gewalt, wo nicht der Geist belebt*].<sup>39</sup> That, however, is the word. Where the word does not give life, life takes its time coming awake, and where the creation takes its time and lingers, it is sorrowful [*Wo nicht das Wort belebt, wird Leben mit Weile wach und wo sich die Schöpfung verweilt ist sie traurig*]. This is the Jewish serenity [*Heiterkeit*] in the creation: that it is born from the word, full of deep seriousness but also full of heavenly joy. Greek nature

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<sup>36</sup> Guérin, *Poèmes*, p. 13. In an essay introducing a posthumous translation of Guérin’s diaries, Matthew Arnold seeks to capture the peculiar doubleness of Guérin’s idea of life, at once expansive and recessive: ‘He hovers over the tumult of life, but does not really put his hand to it’. Matthew Arnold, ‘Essay on the Life and Genius of Maurice de Guérin’, in *The Journal of Maurice de Guérin* (New York: Leypoldt & Holt, 1867), pp. 1-12 (p. 7). Guérin, according to Arnold, shares the ‘passive and ineffectual’ receptivity that characterizes what is perhaps the most famous expression of Romantic impotentiality: Keats’ ‘negative capability’. Of both writers, Arnold claims that ‘when they speak of the world they speak like Adam naming by divine inspiration the creatures’. Yet even in comparison to Keats, Guérin’s relation to nature lacks a ‘genial, outward, and sensuous’ orientation (p. 10). He has ‘a sense of what there is adorable and secret in the life of Nature’, an inwardness that Arnold describes as ‘devouring’ (p. 8), and which is said to have hindered Guérin’s own ability to publish work during his lifetime: ‘There is more power and beauty’, Guérin writes in a diary entry, ‘in the well-kept secret of one’s self and one’s thoughts than in the display of a whole heaven that one may have inside one’ (cited on p. 10).

<sup>37</sup> Maurice de Guérin, *Der Kentauer*, trans. Rainer Maria Rilke (Leipzig: Insel, 1919), p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> For a reading of Hölderlin’s fragment that is highly attentive to the literary articulation of ‘life’, see Kristina Mendicino, ‘Vivisections: Scripting Life in Hölderlin’s “Das Belebende”’, *The German Quarterly*, 91.3 (Summer 2018), 270-85.

<sup>39</sup> The metrically stable rhythm of this sentence almost matches that of the first lines of Hölderlin’s translation, before it begins to warp: ‘Die männerbezwingende, nachdem/Gelernet die Centauren’. *Sämtliche Werke: Frankfurter Ausgabe*, 20 vols, ed. by D.E. Sattler (Frankfurt am Main: Roter Stern, 1976-2008), XV (pp. 362-64).

comes to itself blindly, rouses sorrowfully, and finds no one to wake it. In the centaur it awakes.<sup>40</sup>

Benjamin's fragment cites Hölderlin directly by referring to 'the concept of centaurs' (*der Begriff des Centauren*). Following Hölderlin, this 'concept' is said to be 'life-giving water' (*belebenden Wasser*), which turns 'Greek nature' into 'life'. In Hölderlin, this corresponds to the creation—or rather a 'tearing' (*riß*)—of 'a channel and border [*Bahn und Gränze*], with force [*mit Kraft*], on the originally pathless [*ursprünglich pfadlosen*], burgeoning earth'.<sup>41</sup> Only with this force do 'life' and the 'cosmos' emerge from chaos, according to Benjamin's fragment. As Benjamin plays this idea off against the Jewish 'serenity in the creation', the word of God and the mythological centaur come to comprise two different ways that 'life' is said to be 'given' and thus differentiated from mere 'nature', figured as lifeless, still and slumbering.

Whereas Guérin's mythological prose poem results in a state of inertia and 'absolute repose' (*repos absolu*)—perhaps prohibiting Benjamin from writing about it at all—his reading of Hölderlin's text finds a way out, by way of myth, yet more precisely by way of a linguistically heterogeneous poetry's ability to cause a 'tear' in myth.<sup>42</sup> Just as 'On Language as Such' can be read to pose 'the implausibility of the fall as a definitive event in Benjamin's theory of language', whilst retaining the centrality of the practice of naming for the freedom of human language, the 'concept' of the centaur retains the idea of life-giving animation, whilst immanently casting doubt on the text's own (mythic) explicit claims about the difference between dead nature and active life.<sup>43</sup> Rather than proposing a determinate origin of life or establishing a criterion by which self-activating life could be distinguished from mechanical nature—as the concept promised to do increasingly since the eighteenth century—Benjamin employs Hölderlin's fictional concept of a 'life-giver' (*das Belebende*) to propose that, like language, life is not a mere unity that can be the object of instrumental discourse, but is instead displaced from itself from the very beginning. Life and language are only legible in the interstices where a 'tear' occurs, not at determinate points of origin that correspond to mythic acts of creation.

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<sup>40</sup> GS7:26; Walter Benjamin, 'The Centaur', in *Early Writings*, ed. and trans. by Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 293-86 (p. 283-84); translation modified.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in 'The Centaur', p. 285 n. 4; GS7: 567.

<sup>42</sup> Guérin, *Poèmes*, p. 17.

<sup>43</sup> Jacobs, *Language*, p. 106

## 6. 'The concept is being misused'

The poetic oscillation between sheer exposure and self-enclosure that Benjamin recognizes in Guérin, and which finds a delicate solution in Hölderlin, also informs Benjamin's thinking about criticism as he considers the problem of its conceptualization. 'The concept is being misused: Lessing was no critic', he states in the letter to Belmore (C:84; B1:132). With the exception of a postscript, Benjamin breaks off this address with this indication of his distance from a prevailing 'concept', which renders criticism as the judgement of works according to external criteria and so effaces the singular critical acts Benjamin's letter seeks to describe. Like Kant's analysis of aesthetic judgement, then, the letter might be more aptly characterized as a staging of the limits of evaluative discourse about art *in toto*, rather than an attempt to inaugurate a new 'aesthetics' based on the idea of criticism, since the very possibility of conceiving of the latter independently of its singular manifestations is thrown into question.<sup>44</sup> Then again, the accusation of misuse intimates that there could lie latent a *proper* use of the concept of criticism. Benjamin's dissertation, 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism', might be understood along each of these lines. It is an attempt to imagine a 'concept' of true criticism when the tradition of value judgements on works of art is decisively rejected. At the same time, however, and much less explicitly, it is a sustained consideration of the very possibility of such a concept, and thus a prolonged encounter with the idea that the problem of criticism is the very problem of its conceptualizability.

At the outset of the dissertation, the reader encounters a number of formulations intended as a 'delimitation of the question' Benjamin sets out to answer. The work is conceived as a contribution to a specific 'philosophico-problem-historical' [*philosophieproblemgeschichtlich*] task, namely, an 'investigation of the history of the concept of criticism' (SW1:116-17; GS1:11 n. 1). Such an appraisal promises to be 'different from a history of criticism itself' (SW1:116; GS1:11) and to distinguish itself from 'a purely systematic investigation into the concept of criticism' (SW1:117; GS1:12). It is later acknowledged that 'this study is not the reproduction [*Wiedergabe*] of a Romantic theory of criticism but the analysis of its concept' (SW1:141-42; GS1:50). These statements, it seems fair to say, indicate that Benjamin is not enacting an 'immanent critique' of Romanticism, as commentators have been eager to suggest, but is instead carrying out a more sober analysis of how criticism relates to its concept.<sup>45</sup> Alternatively, if these claims can be

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<sup>44</sup> For a development of this argument with reference to the third *Critique*, see Goetschel, 'The Christo Effect', p. 138.

<sup>45</sup> An argument that Benjamin is pursuing an immanent critique of Romanticism is found in Caygill, *The Colour of Experience*, p. 33; for the claim that this immanent critique seeks to activate and redeem the short moment of early German Romanticism in light of the movement's turn to social, political and religious conservatism, see



integrated, we can say that it is only by analyzing the concept rather than enacting an immanent ‘reproduction’ of Romantic criticism that a truly immanent critique can take place. In the same way, then, that Benjamin’s essay on language demands to be read as an entrenched critique of the assumptions governing prevailing theories of language, rather than another contribution to the roster of such theories, his explicit concern with the ‘concept’ of criticism can be considered a means of circumventing, and thus performatively commenting upon, the problems he associated with any attempt to theorize criticism. Benjamin’s attention to criticism’s ‘concept’ attests to a necessary interval between a conceptually-oriented language about criticism and criticism’s singular ‘critical’ character. The almost inconspicuous title of the dissertation contains something of this regularly overlooked ambiguity. For the phrase ‘concept of criticism’ can mean simply ‘the concept, criticism’ in which case the conceptuality of the term is taken for granted. It can also, however, be read less tautologically: the concept of criticism is something different from criticism itself. It is precisely what Benjamin is going in search of (or what he is seeking to distance himself from). From either of these perspectives, Benjamin’s text, from its title onward, reflects upon the potentially unbridgeable gap between the linguistic nature of criticism and the representational, reproductive nature of its conceptualization.<sup>46</sup>

## 7. The ‘peculiar paradox’ of Criticizability

In the afterword to the dissertation, the concept of Romantic art criticism is linked explicitly to the idea of art’s ‘criticizability’:

The concept of a criticism of art, however, itself bespeaks an unambiguous dependence on the center of the philosophy of art. This dependence is most acutely formulated in the problem of the criticizability [*Kritisierbarkeit*] of the artwork. Whether this is denied or affirmed is thoroughly dependent on the basic philosophical concepts that form the basis of the theory of art. The entire art-philosophical project of the early Romantics

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John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 27-28 and pp. 89-98. For the claim that Benjamin’s analysis of the concept of criticism mimics and thus ‘sublates’ Romanticism’s own critical procedure, see Pfau, ‘Thinking Before Totality’, pp. 1078-79.

<sup>46</sup> In this vein, Thomas Schestag argues that Benjamin’s academic dissertation, from its title onwards, suppresses its relation to philology, which, as Schestag points out, is *not* a concept for Benjamin, but rather a way of reading that eludes concepts. In light of the dissertation’s ‘critical’ relation to its own conceptual nature, then, Schestag playfully offers alternative titles that would capture dissertation’s relation to its concept: ‘The Concept of Critique *in* Critique’, ‘The Concept of Critique (as the Concept for the Critique of Concepts)’ (*Der Begriff der Kritik in der Kritik; Der Begriff der Kritik (als Begriff für Begriffskritik)*). See Thomas Schestag (ed.), ‘Interpolationen. Benjamins Philologie’, in *philo:xenia* (Basel: Urs Engeler, 2009), pp. 33-99 (pp. 45-47).

can therefore be summarized by saying that they sought to demonstrate in principle the criticizability of the work of art. (SW1:178-79; GS1:110)

This principle has been understandably pivotal for readers of Benjamin's dissertation, many of whom have recognized the uncanny relevance of the text's early twentieth-century revival of late eighteenth-century ideas for the models of art's reception that dominated postwar aesthetics, art practice and literary theory.<sup>47</sup> As Benjamin affirms throughout the text, the principle of criticizability displaces the connoisseurship and rule-governed aesthetics that had governed the reception of artworks in the eighteenth century. The Romantics, Benjamin recounts, 'avoided the idea of sitting in judgment over artworks, of rendering a verdict according to written or unwritten laws; one thought in this case of Gottsched, if not still of Lessing and Winckelmann' (SW1:143; GS1:52). Johann Christoph Gottsched's *Versuch einer kritischen Dichtkunst vor die Deutschen* (1740) seems to provide the particular foil against which Benjamin's linguistically-driven idea of criticism orients itself, not only because of its prolific instantiation of rigid laws supposed to prove normative for literary creation and judgement, but also because it conceives of criticism as philosophically—conceptually—determined. The 'true concept [*wahre Begriff*] of criticism has become more familiar' in the first decades of the eighteenth century, writes Gottsched, welcoming what he recognizes as an overlapping of philosophy and criticism in contrast to the models of textually-based learning that had been inherited from the seventeenth century: 'It has already become clear that such a critic must be a philosopher and must understand more than the mere philologists'.<sup>48</sup> More positively, however, the principle foregrounded by Benjamin's dissertation highlights the inexhaustible potential of artworks to be criticized, the virtual or structural possibility of their criticizability.<sup>49</sup> Whereas the 1916 letter to Belmore implied that, in the absence of a concept, criticism was liable to extinguish itself in its singular occurrences, a primary characteristic of the criticizable artwork is the insufficiency of any one act of criticism to fully unfold the work's potential. In fact, all critical acts add to the

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<sup>47</sup> As Weber notes, the idea of criticism as an integral element of the artistic process is repeated under the guise of reception theory (and the associated model of reader-response theory). See *Benjamin's -abilities*, p. 22. As Weber mentions, the origins of modern, secular literary criticism must also be traced to the paradigms of biblical criticism, particularly the idea of the Old Testament as a preparation for the New, discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

<sup>48</sup> Cited in Douglas Lane Patey, 'The Institution of Criticism in the Eighteenth Century', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, ed. by H. B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson, 9 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990-2013), IV, *The Eighteenth Century* (1997), pp. 3-31 (p. 4).

<sup>49</sup> I draw here upon terminology found throughout Samuel Weber's *Benjamin's -abilities*, though Weber is also a critic most attentive to the shortcomings of the term 'criticizability'. See the chapter 'Criticizability—Calculability' in *Benjamin's -abilities* (pp. 30-30), and the article from which it is developed: 'Criticism Underway', in *Romantic Revolutions: Criticism and Theory*, ed. by Kenneth R. Johnston (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 302-19.

potential of the work itself, meaning that the work is transformed in the very course of its historical reception.<sup>50</sup> Freeing works of art from their evaluative legislation by discriminating judgements, criticizability signals the infinite potential of artworks to be criticized, their constitutive, structural openness to future acts of criticism.

Benjamin proposes that the possibility of a concept of criticism depends upon the demonstrability of this principle. Precisely insofar as this principle is not taken for granted, however, the dissertation holds open a dimension of chance, contingency and even failure in regard to this possibility. When this schism between criticism and its concept is foregrounded, the principle of criticizability is no longer simply the marker of a discrete approach to the criticism of works of art associated with early German Romanticism, but becomes the point on which the very possibility of criticism's conceptualization pivots. Criticizability is thus imbued with its own sense of accident, with the possibility of its *not* coming to pass, even as a virtual possibility.

This must be held open if we consider where this principle of criticizability derives from, and how exactly it relates to the singular acts of criticism of which Benjamin had written to Belmore. In the second section ('The Work of Art') of the second part ('Criticism of Art') of his dissertation, Benjamin considers the Romantic demand for 'immanent criticism', and notices that this 'postulate conceals in itself a peculiar paradox [*Dieses Postulat birgt eine eigentümliche Paradoxie in sich*]' (SW1:159; GS1:77). This paradox is contained in Schlegel's consideration of the relation between an artwork's own unity and the 'whole' in which the artwork partakes; like the Kantian organism, the work is a whole unto itself (it is internally purposive), but it also demonstrates a relation to a wider whole, of which it is not merely a part. In Benjamin's reading, Schlegel contends that two defining characteristics of the Romantic artwork—the simultaneously rigorous (self-limited) and liberal (limitless, expansive) nature of its form—constitute a unity, which, according to the 253<sup>rd</sup> *Athenaeum* fragment, 'signifies the intentional development...of what is innermost...in the work according to the spirit of the whole' (cited in SW1:158; GS1:77).<sup>51</sup> What Schlegel designates as the 'innermost' faces a dual danger, however, concerning

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<sup>50</sup> Josh Cohen highlights the pertinence of a distinction between two types of 'unfolding' by turning to Benjamin's essay on Kafka: 'A bud unfolds into a blossom, but the boat which one teaches children to make by folding paper unfolds into a flat sheet of paper' (SW2:802; GS2:420). Whereas the flower, like the criticizable work, unfolds itself freely, the paper boat can only be unfolded once. See Josh Cohen, 'Unfolding: Reading After Romanticism', in Benjamin and Hanssen (eds.), *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, pp. 98-108 (pp. 98-99).

<sup>51</sup> Benjamin abbreviates Schlegel's fragment, which argues that the 'deliberate development' (*absichtliche Durchbildung*) is in unity with a 'subordinate development' (*Nebensausbildung*), and that these concern both the 'innermost and smallest in the work according to the spirit of the whole' (*Innersten und Kleinsten im Werke nach dem Geist des Ganzen*); Shakespeare is the most 'correct' example of this unity in modern poetry, according to Schlegel. See *KFSA*, II, p. 208.

its relation to the ‘whole’. On the one hand, if such tendencies toward the whole are ‘indisputably determinable’ (*einwandfrei feststellbar*), then they ought to be always-already ‘fulfilled’ by the material of this whole (SW1:159; GS1:77). However, this fulfillment would be contrary to the law of Romantic poetry: that it is forever becoming, and thus never quite on a par with its criticism. The actualization of criticism’s potential, which appears to be demanded, would also be its ruin. On the other hand—and more ominously, since this seems to be the situation of artworks—if the inner tendencies of works are ‘unfulfilled’ (*unerfüllt*) by the material of the whole (that is, if works are *not* at one with their criticism) then this disharmony must be put down to a lack of determinability in them in the first place. The very existence of artworks *as* artworks and not as immediate mediators of the absolute would attest to their alienated insignificance. Through Schlegel, Benjamin thus identifies the problem of potentiality *in nuce*: if something has potential, it should be actualized, so the fact of its non-actualization suggests that it does not have potential and, in the case of artworks, may not be critically developed.

As the nature of Romantic poetry’s relation to criticism (or the ‘poetry of poetry’) suggests, however, the difference between actuality and potentiality in Romanticism is less clearly definable. For Benjamin, the problems that arise concerning the over-fulfilled or unfulfilled tendencies of artworks are, in fact, resolved by Romantic criticism: ‘The immanent tendency of the work and, accordingly, the standard for its immanent criticism are the reflection that lies at its basis and is imprinted in its form’ (*Die immanente Tendenz des Werkes und demgemäß der Maßstab seiner immanenten Kritik ist die ihm zugrunde liegende und in seiner Form ausgeprägte Reflexion*) (SW1: 159; GS1:77). The immanent potential or ‘tendency’ of the work to be criticized is the reflection that is minimally ‘imprinted’ in its form.

As soon as this solution is proposed, however, it is transformed:

Yet this is, in truth, not so much a standard of judgment [*Maßstab der Beurteilung*] as, first and foremost [*in erster Linie*], the foundation of a completely different kind of criticism—one which is not concerned with judging, and whose weightiness [*Schweregewicht*] lies not in the evaluation of the single work but in the presentation [*Darstellung*] of its relations to all other works and, ultimately, to the idea of art. (SW1:159; GS1:77-78; translation modified)

In posing and immediately withdrawing the idea of a ‘standard’ for immanent criticism, Benjamin could be accused of attempting to solve the paradox of criticism’s possibility by a sleight of hand. This does not seem to be a plausible reading, however. Just as Benjamin opted

to place the ‘paradox’ of linguistic theory at the centre of his essay on language, his solution to a ‘peculiar paradox’ faced by criticism ought not to be dismissed as an unfaithful contrivance or as a mere oversight.<sup>52</sup> Rather, the nature of the solution that Benjamin proposes can be sought in its own paradoxical character: namely in the nature of the ‘standard’ he articulates and in the implications of its erasure for understanding the reflection said to be ‘imprinted’ in a work’s form. The ‘standard’ that is pronounced and then excised suggests that the foundation of the ‘possibility of [criticism’s] fruitful unfolding’—the foundation of criticizability—is not a pre-existent systematic totality, but a withdrawn, negative form (SW1:160; GS1:79). Benjamin’s presentation of the paradox thus pays fidelity to Schlegel not only by minimizing the communicative content of any particular work and thus proscribing its artistic evaluation, or by disproving criticism’s need for a ‘standard’, but by performing a suspension of the Schlegelian idea of the ‘whole’ in the name of a more original ‘form’.<sup>53</sup> The ‘reflection that lies at its basis and is imprinted in its form’ is, like the object of criticism in Benjamin’s 1916 letter, ‘all too great’ but equally ‘not there at all’. Whereas the earlier text considers, in the absence of a concept, that ‘perhaps everything should be taken out of our hands and it should then at least be form, not criticism’, ‘On the Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism’ suggests that reflection—criticizability—is inaugurated by this form itself.

## 8. Form, Romantic Nature, and the Measure of the Absolute

Insofar as a work’s criticizability denotes its autonomous capacity as a medium for further critical reflections, understood in opposition to a work’s heterogeneous determination by evaluative judgement, this negative, withdrawn form is a crucial element of Benjamin’s dissertation. It is important to consider, however, exactly how it differs from the initial understanding of form proposed in the dissertation. Benjamin’s early attention to Romantic form arises as he contrasts Romanticism’s theoretical rigour to the ‘deteriorated praxis’ of modern literary criticism (SW1:155; GS1:71). Voicing the idea that Romanticism transposes the reflection of the Kantian

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<sup>52</sup> In this respect, the ‘paradox’ that Benjamin identifies in the Romantic theory of criticizability might not be so ‘peculiar’. A similarly ‘peculiar paradox’ (*besondere Paradoxie*) is articulated and ‘dissolved’ with respect to ‘danger’ in ‘Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin’ (SW1:33; GS2:123). In Chapter Four, I will explore how Benjamin gives an important role to a ‘paradox’ concerning Goethe’s imbrication of art and nature.

<sup>53</sup> Rodolphe Gasché recognizes something very similar in Benjamin’s dissertation, but takes a far more circumspect view on its implications: ‘Criticizability—the very principle that the entire art-philosophical work of the Early Romantics sought to demonstrate—is thus tied up with what impedes criticism, and that against which criticism ought to prevail: transition, continuity, reconciliation between what can be brought together only at the price of paradox, false interpretation, or in other words, a complete surrender of the critical notion of the Absolute to the profane.’ Gasché, ‘The Sober Absolute’, p. 64.

subject to the domain of the artwork itself, Benjamin writes that Schlegel ‘secured from the side of the object or structure, that very autonomy in the domain of art that Kant, in the third *Critique*, had lent to the power of judgment’ (SW1:155; GS1:72). The artwork’s autonomy is developed in analogy with the attempted Fichtean overhaul of critical philosophy. Inspired by Reinhold, Fichte’s belief that Kant’s system could be completed only on achievement of a unifying starting point discovered such a principle in the formula ‘I=I’. Therein, self-consciousness is immediately present for Fichte as the original intellectual action of positing (*Setzung*), which pits the ‘I’ against everything outside its boundaries (the ‘not-I’ or nature), inaugurating a dialectical relationship. As an ‘*absolute* thesis’ (SW1:124; GS1:23), the I sets off a reflection that it also conditions, and which thus ceaselessly leads back to its origin in self-positing. The I is, from the outset then, a *fait accompli*, always already successful in its efforts to ‘arrest’ reflection or the possibility of infinite regress, and equally absolving of the need for Kantian dualism, since nature, determined only as the not-I, loses its noumenal character. Benjamin, for whom ‘it is a matter of observing precisely how far the early Romantics follow Fichte, in order to recognize clearly where they part company with him’ (SW1:121-22; GS1:19), submits that the Romantic theory of artistic form is constructed in analogy with the termination of reflection found in Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*. As Benjamin puts it:

The Romantic theory of the artwork is the theory of its form. The early Romantics identified the limiting nature of form with the limitedness of any finite reflection, and by this one consideration they determined the concept of the work of art within their world view. (SW1:155; GS1:72)

Under the aegis of self-limitation, Benjamin determines the work of consolidating artworks *as* works in parallel with Fichte’s resolution of the question of reflection in the act of dialectical self-positing. When the reduction of nature to the not-I is challenged, however, along the lines of the reproach to Fichte inaugurated by Hölderlin, works of art, like the Fichtean I, appear ‘burdened with a moment of contingency’, ‘isolated and fortuitous’, attaining to a ‘closure’ but only via a ‘relative unity’ (SW1:156; GS1: 73).

‘Where the thought of the “I” is not one with the concept of the world, we can say that this pure thinking of the thought of the “I” leads only to an eternal self-mirroring [*ewigen Sich-Selbst-Abspiegeln*], to an infinite series of mirror-images which always contain only one and the same thing and nothing new’ (cited in SW1:132-3; GS1:35). Benjamin here cites Schlegel’s critique of Fichte, which heralds the claim that “I”-less reflection is a reflection in the absolute

of art' (SW1:134; GS1:40; translation modified). The erasure of the negative form of the standard, later in Benjamin's text, is likewise performed in the name this absolute. In its criticism, the work enters into the absolute idea of art, wherein the correlation between a perceiving subject and perceived object, which Benjamin deemed a metaphysical hangover that weighed down Kant's philosophy, is deemed secondary to art as a privileged 'medium of reflection'. Benjamin defines this term, which is said to 'characterize the whole of Schlegel's theoretical philosophy' as 'the constantly uniform connection in the absolute or in the system, both of which we have to interpret as the connectedness of the real, not in its substance (which is everywhere the same) but in the degrees of its clear unfolding' (SW1:132-33; GS1:37).

The criticism of art, according to Benjamin, is the paradigmatic instance of this unfolding. Rather than being the 'means to the representation of a content' (SW1:158; GS1:76), form becomes liberal in criticism, which is a 'presentation of its relations to all other works' and hence grounds works as interconnecting instances within the medium of art: the limited reflection within each and every form is, in its relation to all others and to what Benjamin will come to call the 'idea' of art, set free and 'absolutized'. Criticism unfolds within the form of the artwork itself, and the manifestation of this process is the unity of all such unfoldings: 'Since the organ of artistic reflection is form, the idea of art is defined as the medium of reflection of forms. In this medium all the presentational forms hang constantly together [*hängen alle Darstellungsformen stetig zusammen*], interpenetrate one another, and merge into the unity of the absolute art form, which is identical with the idea of art. Thus, the Romantic idea of the unity of art lies in the idea of a continuum of forms' (SW1:165; GS1:87).<sup>54</sup> In its relation to the absolute, Benjamin's final analysis of Romantic criticism therefore stresses the link between art and the Romantic theory of nature that is discussed at length earlier in the dissertation. The idea of art, like the Romantic natural absolute, is not an 'aggregate of monads' (SW1:146; GS1:56), but rather a collection of infinitely transformable entities, centres of reflection with the intensive capacity to enter into, incorporate, dissolve and mutate one another—'like weather systems', as Michael Jennings and Howard Eiland put it.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Here, Benjamin points toward a conclusion of the dissertation, namely, his argument that 'holy-sober' prose, insofar as it constitutes the ground or idea of poetry, brings poetry's ecstatic movements to a standstill, as the novel comes to mark the sober *manifestation* of the continuum of forms, rather than yet another element in its expansion. Yet to extract this point from the paradoxical foundation of criticizability, as critics such as Tony Phelan have done, does not only emphasize the novel as an embodiment of the literary text's ultimate resistance to philosophical systematization, but also blots out the 'literary' nature of Benjamin's own *efforts* to systematize Romanticism. See Tony Phelan, 'Fortgang and Zusammenhang: Walter Benjamin and the Romantic Novel', in Benjamin and Hanssen (eds.), *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, pp. 69–82.

<sup>55</sup> Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 110.

The parallels between art and nature can be queried, nonetheless. If Benjamin only reaches the idea of art's 'criticizability', by reflecting upon a paradox, it is notable that, according to a footnote, this paradox exists 'not in the province of science but only in that of art' (SW1:194 n. 208; GS1:78 n. 201). Why is Benjamin so adamant about this fact, to the extent that it is 'self-evident' (*selbstverständlich*), and what does it mean for considering the specificity of Romantic criticism? One answer can be found in a somewhat enigmatic reference. Suggesting an awareness of the atomist pedigree of late eighteenth-century theories of nature, Benjamin refers to Democritus to describe 'perception' (*Wahrnehmung*) as the 'partly material interpenetration of subject and object' (*teilweisen stofflichen Durchdringung von Subjekt und Objekt*), a process that he recognizes in an image from Novalis, which reverses the expected roles of the instrument and object of scientific enquiry: 'the star appears in the telescope and penetrates it... The star is a spontaneous luminous being, the telescope or eye a receptive luminous being' (SW1:147; GS1:58). Rather than putting this process of reciprocal affect at the heart of his understanding of Romanticism, however (which would chime with the prominence of the Romantic trope of reciprocity identified by some of the dissertation's commentators),<sup>56</sup> Benjamin notes that the theory of perception 'has no influence on the theory of criticism and thus must be passed over here [*muss daher hier übergangen werden*]'.

Whereas his reasoning for dismissing the theory of perception is opaque (and the fact that perception is *not* simply 'passed over' suggests the necessity of referring to it), Benjamin's logic can be summarized as follows: unlike the Romantic theories of observation (*Beobachtung*) and experiment (*Experiment*), the theory of perception, as understood here with reference to Democritus, proposes so seamless a transmission of material between perceiver and perceived that it leaves no space for the minimal difference that Benjamin considers to take place in Romantic criticism. He writes of Democritean perception that 'this theory of knowledge cannot lead to any distinction between perception and knowledge [...] it attributes the distinctive features of perception to knowledge as well'. Whereas Romantic knowledge is ineluctably 'ironic', however—not knowing is a fundamental aspect of its form of knowing—atomist 'perception' is so similar to itself that it leaves no room for difference of any kind. Benjamin's neo-Kantian education appears influential here: Hermann Cohen considered a distinction between perception and experience—between receptivity, considered functionally, and the spontaneity integral to the 'encyclopedic' nature of Kantian experience—integral to Kant's

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<sup>56</sup> Winfried Menninghaus, 'Walter Benjamin's Exposition of the Romantic Theory of Reflection', in Benjamin and Hanssen (eds.), *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, pp. 19-50 (especially pp. 38-39).



philosophy, and lacking in empiricism.<sup>57</sup> Benjamin's argument might therefore even shed light on the third *Critique's* somewhat confusing historical-philosophical designation of the atomism of Epicurus and Democritus as 'idealism' (AA5:391-92; CJ:263): so immediately materialist is philosophical atomism, Kant might be arguing, that it is in fact 'idealist', unable to bear the 'materialism' of whatever resists incorporation into atomic interpenetration.

If there is a difference between atomist perception and Romantic knowledge, however, a further distinction remains to be elucidated: that between Romantic knowledge and Romantic criticism. Benjamin sees criticism as the highest intensification of the logic that places the romantic theory of nature above atomist perception. For even the romantic theory of nature (epitomized by observation and experiment), insofar as it emphasizes the absolute as a 'medium of reflection', turns not knowing into a form of knowledge and so flattens the possibility of difference that Benjamin associates with criticism. If observation proceeds on the basis of the ironic distance between the observer and the thing observed, 'criticism goes beyond observation', Benjamin contends (SW1:151; GS1:66) .

The reason for this seems to lie in the 'form' that Benjamin associates with the 'paradox' of criticism. In assessing the idea of a standard for immanent criticism, as we have seen, Benjamin places the stress on a work's weightiness (*Schweregewicht*) and on its presentation (*Darstellung*) of the idea of art (GS1:77-78). The existing English translation appears to iron out what is unique about Benjamin's understanding of art in relation to natural science. Insofar as an object's 'centre of gravity' is where its mass averages out, this rendering of *Schweregewicht* displays a very slight but telling prejudice toward a certain interpretation of the Romantic absolute, wherein each object enters into a purely neutral sphere of relations, tending toward equilibrium (*Gleichgewicht*) (SW1:159).<sup>58</sup> Benjamin's text on the other hand, stresses an irreducible *weightiness* of form: the mass (*Masse*) or measure (*Maß*) that is left of a standard (*Maßstab*) that is withdrawn, but which nonetheless acts as the foundation of the possibility of a work's unfolding—that is, its criticizability.<sup>59</sup> Although in most circumstances it might be possible to consider the difference

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<sup>57</sup> As Andrea Poma has argued, moreover, Cohen saw Plato's philosophy (in which 'ideas, precisely because they are thought, are the true being [...] since they are the truth of things') as 'going beyond the Eleatic tradition, which identified thought with being, and that initiated by Democritus, which recognized true being in nonbeing'. Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, trans. by John Denton (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 30-31.

<sup>58</sup> For a discussion of how equilibrium was understood in the literary, philosophical, and scientific atmosphere of around 1800, see Jocelyn Holland, 'Balancing Acts: Modes of Equilibrium in Romanticism and Nature Philosophy around 1800', *New Work on German Romanticism*, special issue of *Romantic Circles*, ed. by Zachary Sng (2016) <<https://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/german/praxis.2016.german.holland.html>> [accessed 1 June 2017].

<sup>59</sup> In their attempt to delineate 'Romantic minimalism', Clark and Khalip argue that the trope of 'weighting' (for example, the comparative weighting of formalist and historicist claims on texts) ought to be discarded in favour of 'tarrying with an indifference to weighing', a 'weightlessness' they find in the language 'divested of its

between a *-maß* (as in Kant's *Zweckmäßigkeit*) and an 'ability' (or *-barkeit*) on the definition offered by Samuel Weber—that the former 'is a measure, something that organizes and contains', whereas the latter is a virtual possibility— Benjamin implicitly suggests that the criticizability of a work of art is founded on a standard that gives a measure, but only on singular, hence unrepeatable, occasions.<sup>60</sup> An -ability is never simply an abstract possibility, but a measured economy of material and immaterial: as Kevin McLaughlin writes of Benjamin's media theory from his dissertation onwards, 'it is a matter of singular encounters with a certain materiality—a withdrawing materiality'.<sup>61</sup> In hinting toward his dissatisfaction with the post-Fichtean, Romantic theory of form—which remains too allied to the Romantic theory of knowledge—Benjamin also reflects upon the problem of singularity as it emerges in the wake of Kant's third *Critique*. Singularity is only such if it withdraws and threatens to be something other than singularity.

Elsewhere in the dissertation, in a passage cited in abbreviated form above Benjamin is more lucid about the differences between objects of art and objects of nature:

Insofar as criticism is knowledge of the work of art, it is its self-knowledge; insofar as it judges the artwork, this occurs in the latter's self-judgment. In this last office [*letzten Ausprägung*], criticism goes beyond observation; this shows the difference between the art object and the object of nature, which admits of no judgment. (SW1:151; GS1:66)

The role of 'self-judgment' (*Selbstbeurteilung*), which is unique to artworks, thus proves pivotal to the distinction the dissertation seeks to make between art and nature. Benjamin contends that self-judgement marks the supplementary difference between the 'self-knowledge' that inheres in any centre of reflection—be it a person, a plant, a poem or a painting—and the specificity of the artwork's form of self-relation. In short, it is the act of judgement that distinguishes the work of art from all other centres of reflection in the absolute.

The significance of judgement is acknowledged, however, not in any positive statement, but, as with the 'standard' that underlies criticizability, in a claim that is all but erased in Benjamin's presentation. In his analysis of immanent criticism, Benjamin states that it would be 'absurd to specify an immanent standard' for the judgement of artworks, since this would render

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semantic function' (and 'divested even of that divestiture') that, they note, permeates Benjamin's essay on Hölderlin. See Clark and Khalip, 'Too Much, Too Little', para. 5 of 8.

<sup>60</sup> Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>61</sup> Kevin McLaughlin, *Paperwork: Fiction and Mass Mediacy in the Paper Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), p. 18.

judgement itself negligible: judgement would simply confirm the immanent standard, which is to say, it would not judge. Benjamin considers Romantic criticism in its pure form, therefore, to have done with judgement: ‘in complete antithesis to the present-day conception of its nature, criticism in its central intention is not judgement but, on the one hand, the completion, consummation, and systematization [*Vollendung, Ergänzung, Systematisierung*] of the work and, on the other hand, its resolution [*Auflösung*] in the absolute’ (SW1:159; GS1:78). According to Schlegel’s *Dialogue on Poetry*, however, poetry’s completion (*Vollendung*) announces its death and with it the death of criticism. How, then, do the work of art and its criticism survive such a completion? It is only the fact that ‘the consequences [*Folgerungen*] of the theory of criticism extend to the theory of the judgment of works’ (SW1:159; GS1:78; translation modified) that means judgement survives the ‘consummation’ of criticism and that thereby allows Benjamin’s dissertation to proceed at all to the *concept* of criticizability, which is expressed for the first time here, not as the systematic guarantor of a work’s afterlife, but (in the principle of the ‘mediacy of judgement’) simply as one of these ‘consequences’. Despite the fact that ‘judgement’, in its evaluative form, is the ostensible target of Benjamin’s analysis, it also stands in as an index of the *act* of criticism itself, precisely insofar as it is erased and forgotten in criticism’s conceptualization.

## 9. Overleaping: Self-Judgement and Poetic Feeling

To stress the ‘act’ of criticism with reference to judgement might strike a reader of Benjamin’s dissertation as odd. It would seem to favour the existent totality of criticism’s actualizations over its virtual possibilities, justifying a ‘secret Fichteanism’ or ‘voluntarism’ that, Rebecca Comay suggests, is potentially at work in Romanticism itself.<sup>62</sup> As Kevin McLaughlin has shown, Fichte’s determination of the positing of the ‘I’ as an ‘actual deed’ (*Tathandlung*) has distinct legal connotations, relating the ‘absolute thesis’ of the ‘I’ to the specificity of a thing done as opposed to the possibility of doing it.<sup>63</sup> The act of criticism, on such a reading, would happen once and for all, exhausting its possibilities, and thus rendering a work, ‘uncriticizable’.<sup>64</sup> Benjamin, however, gives an indication as to the far more complex nature of this act in another conceptual erasure that occurs immediately after he has identified ‘self-judgement’ as the fissure separating art from nature. After citing instances where Schlegel and Novalis celebrate self-judging literary

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<sup>62</sup> Rebecca Comay, ‘Benjamin and the Ambiguities of Romanticism’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. by David S. Ferris (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 134–51 (p. 147).

<sup>63</sup> Kevin McLaughlin, ‘Benjamin Now: Afterthoughts on the Arcades Project’, *boundary 2*, 30.1 (2003), 191–197 (p. 193)

<sup>64</sup> Cohen, ‘Unfolding’, p. 99

works—or acts of criticism that practically contain the works themselves—Benjamin notes that ‘this self-judgment in reflection is only improperly called a judgment. For in it a necessary moment of all judgment, the negative, is completely curtailed.’ This leads to another consideration of the positivity of Romantic criticism and an attempt to distinguish it ‘from the modern concept, which sees criticism as a negative court of judgment’ (SW1:152; GS1:66). The root of Romantic criticism, Benjamin thus proposes without putting it in as many words, is self-judgement without the negativity that accompanies judgements made by subjects on objects, according to determinate criteria.

The nature of this self-judgement, however, still appears somewhat obscure: how exactly does it differ from mere acts of discriminating between good and bad based on pre-existing categories that hold sway over a work’s success or failure? The answer seems to lie in the peculiar and occasionally contradictory role played in ‘The Concept of Criticism’ by Kant’s third *Critique*. After vacillating over the previous winter about potential themes for his thesis, Benjamin writes to Scholem in a letter of 30 March 1918 that, having ‘come upon’ a dissertation topic himself, he will ‘undertake to prove that [...] Kant’s aesthetics constitute the underlying premise of Romantic art criticism’ (C:119; B1:180). In the dissertation, however, a seemingly antithetical position is put forward: Romantic criticism is said to offer no perspective that would allow for its relation to Kant’s third *Critique* to be ‘grasped [*erfaßt*]’ (SW1:150; GS1:64).

This latter claim, despite appearances, does not deny an affinity between Kant and Romanticism. On the contrary, it is the impossibility of fully capturing this relationship that best defines it, and which also portrays the fleeting nature of the self-judgement that distinguishes the work of art in Romanticism. In the dissertation, a brief allusion suggests that the original ‘reflection’ imprinted in the form of an artwork can be considered as a poetic affect, a non-subjective reception which gives rise to the possibility of further reflection: ‘the point of indifference for reflection, the point at which reflection arises from nothing, is poetic feeling [*poetische Gefühl*]’ (SW1:150; GS1:63). Benjamin, once again, appears equivocal about the dependency of such a claim on the third *Critique*: ‘It is difficult to decide whether this formulation contains a reference to Kant’s theory of the free play of the mental faculties, in which the object retreats as a nullity [*als ein Nichts zurücktritt*] in order to form merely the occasion [*Anlaß*] for a self-active, inner attunement of the spirit’ (SW1:150; GS1:63-64). The difficulty in such a decision would only appear to exist, however, when receptivity is considered as the way that a subject, whose experiences are supposed to be limited by the representative

capacities of the faculties, is affected by objects in the external world.<sup>65</sup> Seemingly distancing Romanticism from the strictures of the third *Critique*, Benjamin argues that the ‘distinctive element of the Romantic concept of criticism lies in its freedom from any special subjective estimation [*eine besondere subjektive Einschätzung*] of the work in a judgment of taste’ (SW1:161; GS1:80). However, in rejecting the psychological locus of judgements of taste and the accompanying doctrine of the faculties, even in their free play, Benjamin does not jettison the third *Critique* per se. In arguing ‘the point at which reflection arises from nothing’ to be poetic feeling, on the contrary, the dissertation locates the ‘form’ that resolves the paradox of criticism, by giving rise to a self-judgement without negativity, to arise in language.

The object which ‘retreats as a nullity’, leaving behind nothing but the feeling of its own taking-place—its own ‘occasion’—is, like the object of criticism in Benjamin’s early letter, simultaneously ‘all too great’ and ‘not there at all’.<sup>66</sup> Hence it can be said that reflection ‘arises from nothing’ (*aus dem Nichts entspringt*). By ‘nothing’, Benjamin appears to mean feeling considered simply as an occasion, not of the subject’s free imagination and lawful understanding entering into a harmonious play, but of the emergence of an ‘I-less’ reflection itself.<sup>67</sup> In similarly paradoxical terms, it is only through an ‘act’ of criticism that the possibility of criticism, a work’s ‘criticizability’, arises. Citing Schlegel’s remark that ‘every philosophical review should at the same time be a philosophy of reviews’, Benjamin proposes that this ‘critical bearing [*Verhalten*] can never come into conflict with the original reception of the artwork by pure feeling [*der ursprünglichen, rein, gefühlsmäßigen Aufnahme des Kunstwerkes*], for, in addition to the heightening [*Steigerung*] of the work itself, it is also the heightening of its comprehension and reception [*Erfassens und Empfangens*]’ (SW1:153; GS1:68, translation modified). Whereas the dissertation directs attention primarily to the medial nature of reflection in the absolute, the text also harbours a concept of poetic reflection that is, like the reception of language at the most minimal level, heterogeneous: auto-affection does not silently create the conditions for ideal reflection, but constitutes a site of potential difference (not least the possibility of its own failure) that accompanies all reflection and thus forms the conditions of possibility for critical unfolding. Whereas *Aufnahme* implies that the ‘original’ reception of the work in pure feeling is a kind of

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<sup>65</sup> For Benjamin’s claim that the ‘theory of the faculties’ in Kant is a ‘metaphysical rudiment’, see ‘On the Program of the Coming Philosophy’ (SW1:105; GS1:164).

<sup>66</sup> It is likely with reference to such negative forms that Benjamin’s claim of art as a ‘media of forms, resting in themselves’ draws on a literary corpus including Flaubert, ‘the Parnassians’ and ‘the George circle’ (SW1:177; GS1:107).

<sup>67</sup> As Werner Hamacher argues, tracing the Kantian pedigree of the passage under discussion, it is only through poetic self-affection that a self first emerges. Hamacher, “‘NOW’”: Walter Benjamin on Historical Time’, trans. by N. Rosenthal, in *The Moment Time and Rupture in Modern Thought*, ed. by Heidrun Friese (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), pp. 161–96 (p. 173–74).

incorporation or unmediated entry of the work into the observer, Benjamin insists that the heightening or intensification of such a pure receptivity is not in dispute with the heightening of the *Empfangens* of the work, its conceptive-reception. The two modes of reception can only be distinguished by the smallest margin, such as that which means transcendental poetry should ‘everywhere be at once poetry and poetry of poetry [*überall zugleich Poesie und Poesie der Poesie sein*]’ (cited in SW1:170-71; GS1: 96).

That poetry must be both poetry and criticism at the same time suggests that the criticizability of a work lies not merely in its potential for historical unfolding, in which acts of criticism successively develop the reflective nucleus of a work. This potential relies instead upon the critical moment of ‘form’ which first gives shape to time. In the dissertation, the image of a ‘transition that must always be a leap’ (*Übergang, der immer ein Sprung sein muß*) functions to illustrate the ‘mediated immediacy’ that connects a work’s immediate and original reception in feeling and its medial critical unfolding (SW1:126; GS1:27). The image references Schlegel’s review ‘Über Goethes Meister’, and the possibility articulated therein of bridging an ‘immeasurably wide distance’ (*ein unermesslich weiter Zwischenraum*) between ‘the first perceptions and elements of poetry’ and the point where the ‘highest and deepest’ can be grasped.<sup>68</sup>

The Romantic ‘leap’ therefore holds a systematic function, but it also retains an irreducible individuality, evident in the image’s own terminological transformability. In a subsection of the dissertation entitled ‘The Early Romantic Theory of the Knowledge of Art’, a citation allows Benjamin to almost silently say the ‘leap’ otherwise. The quotation comes from the first series of Novalis’s *Logological Fragments*, probably written around the time of the first *Athenaeum* issues. In Benjamin’s text, it runs as follows:

The act of overleaping oneself [*Der Akt des sich selbst Überspringens*] is everywhere the highest, the primal point [*Urpunkt*], the genesis of life... Thus, all living morality begins when for reasons of virtue I act contrary to virtue; with this begins the life of virtue, through which, perhaps, capacity increases infinitely. (Cited in SW1:152; GS1:66)<sup>69</sup>

The immediate context of this quotation is Benjamin’s attempt to think through the notion of ‘self-judgement’, discussed above. Another quotation not used by Benjamin, and this time from

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<sup>68</sup> KFSA 2.39.

<sup>69</sup> The full quotation from Novalis ends: ‘capacity [*Möglichkeit*] increases infinitely, without ever losing its boundary—that is, the condition of the possibility of its *life*’. Novalis, ‘Logological Fragments I’ (number 79) in *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. by Margaret Mahony Stoljar (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 47-66 (p. 64)

Novalis's encyclopedic notebook reveals something else about this 'leap' that demonstrates its capacity to exceed its own systematic requirements:

On the phenomenon of reflection—that reflexive force which can *leap onto its own shoulders*. (Structure of motion.)

(*Solidification* of time—concentration of thought.)<sup>70</sup>

A power or force that can leap onto its own shoulders in an act of reflection illustrates what Novalis means by 'the act of overleaping oneself'. Such a 'leap' is less a transition between discrete and identifiable poles of reflection than an unprecedented turn or contortion, which itself bears the character of a 'leap': by necessity, a 'leap' is open to being something else. The potential difference at the heart of the leap's identity also finds expression in Romanticism's diagnosis of a tautology integral to Fichte's positing of self-consciousness.<sup>71</sup> As in Benjamin's identification of a 'peculiar paradox' in the Romantic principle of criticizability, the purpose of this recognition is not to reveal a logical flaw, redundancy or inconsistency in Fichte's argument, but to accentuate the linguistic heterogeneity at the foundation of the positing of self-identity.<sup>72</sup>

## 10. A 'mere expression': The Name of Criticism

Whereas the image of the leap is central to the systematic epistemology that has been associated with Benjamin's reconstruction of the Romantic absolute's theory of reflexive interconnection, the heterogeneous generativity of this figure suggests the fundamental instability of the relation

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<sup>70</sup> Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopedia*, trans. and ed. by David W. Wood (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 17; translation modified (entry 993).

<sup>71</sup> Werner Hamacher's reading, for instance, sees the Schlegelian 'leap' as an indication that there can be a statement such as Fichte's 'I am I' only under the conditions of its impossibility. Werner Hamacher, *Premises*, p. 233. Rebecca Comay likewise proposes that an 'inevitable lapse into representation' is performed by Fichte's thesis, which the Romantics recognize as an expression of the fact that every positing of immediacy is in fact mediated (Comay, 'Ambiguities', p. 137). The mediating role of representation is also stressed in Azade Seyhan, *Representation and its Discontents: The Critical Legacy of German Romanticism* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 3-4.

<sup>72</sup> In a succinct formula, Hector Kollias writes that the significance of Fichte, Schlegel and Novalis lies 'precisely insofar as their "ontologies" do not allow Being to simply be, be identical with itself, and thus be merely an entity, but, in what must remain a tentative formulation, allow Being to be disclosed through its difference with itself.' Hector Kollias, 'Positing/Hovering: The Early Romantic Reading of Fichte', *Plü: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, 10 (2000), 127-40 (pp. 127-28). Whilst Kollias argues, rightly in my view, that Benjamin is attentive—if in a muted way—to Schlegel's revision of the Fichtean tautology and thus recoils from his own emphasis on reflection, Marcus Bullock has argued that the dissertation unknowingly prioritizes reflection against Schlegel's own affirmation of the 'productive imagination': Bullock, 'The Coming of the Messiah', pp. 38-39. Similarly, Winfried Menninghaus proposes that Benjamin's emphasis on reflection mischaracterizes Romanticism: see 'Walter Benjamin's Exposition of the Romantic Theory of Reflection', in Benjamin and Hanssen (eds.), *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, pp. 19-50.

between original and unfolding reflection, between criticism and criticizability. A precarious instance of self-affection is necessary for the non-subjective Romantic ‘self’ to first emerge; a work and its criticizability only emerges in the act of criticism. Likewise, the uncertainty of the ‘leap’ suggests that the relation between an artwork and the medium of art is always inflected by the figures of ‘reception’ scattered throughout the text.<sup>73</sup> In the first sentence of the second section of the dissertation, Benjamin states: ‘Art is a determination of the medium of reflection—probably the most fruitful one that it has received [*Die Kunst ist eine Bestimmung des Reflexionsmediums, wahrscheinlich die fruchtbarste, die es empfangen hat*]’ (SW1:149 GS1:62). The relation between art and the absolute is one of determination (*Bestimmung*)—the totality of artworks constitutes the idea of art as a privileged medium of reflection—but the relation is not only that, since it is also characterized, Benjamin tacitly proposes, by an active reception. The link between a work of art and the idea of art as a medium of the absolute involves an active translation, in which both the artwork and the medium of reflection are touched and thus brought into being.

This mutual activity is most clearly in evidence in the section of the dissertation entitled ‘System and Concept’, which addresses the fragmentary imperative of Romanticism proclaimed in Schlegel’s famous (and fragmentary) statement on the necessity of combining systematicity and non-systematicity.<sup>74</sup> The original conclusion reached by Benjamin is that systems do not sublimate individuals but count as individuals themselves. As such, Benjamin writes that ‘for Friedrich Schlegel in the *Athenaeum* period, the absolute was the system in the form of art. Rather than attempting to grasp the absolute systematically, however, he sought conversely to grasp the system absolutely’ (SW1:138; GS1:45): the system is, in a multiplicity of singular cases, grasped absolutely as an individual. Like his portrayal of self-judgement, Benjamin’s response to Romantic systematicity thus demonstrates the provenance of its concerns in the third *Critique*, insofar as Kant therein proposes, according to an interpretive tradition that can be traced back to Romanticism itself, that the bridging of the abyss between nature and freedom occurs only on singular occasions. Whereas Kant argued that the subjective pleasure in a judgement of the beautiful was universally communicable without the mediation of a concept, however, or indeed that the purposiveness of organic beings could be recognized without recourse to a conceptual purpose, the ‘concept’ here has a significant role to play in the relation between individual and

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<sup>73</sup> Among a series of probing questions at the end of her essay on Benjamin and Romanticism, Comay asks: ‘Does the criticism that fulfills by annihilating the work equally render it untouchable?’ Benjamin’s subtle presentation of the role of feeling in the dissertation suggests to me that this is not the case. See Comay, ‘Ambiguities’, p. 147.

<sup>74</sup> The fragment in its entirety runs: ‘It’s equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two.’ Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 24 (Athenaeum Fragment 53).



system, without being a means by which the former are generalized in order to be incorporated into the latter. If Benjamin's interest in the heterogeneity of criticism in relation to its 'concept' manifests itself furtively in a number of modes discussed above—the paradox by which criticism precedes criticizability, the nature of the reflection 'imprinted' in an artwork's form, the role of self-judgement in works of art, and the self-exceeding figure of the leap—these disconnected and apparently serial strategies are brought together as the dissertation comes to consider the linguistic force of 'concepts', in a manner evidently informed by Benjamin's 1916 essay on language.

'Schlegel's thinking is *absolutely conceptual*—that is, linguistic': so Benjamin writes in the dissertation (SW1:140; GS1:49; translation modified).<sup>75</sup> In Benjamin's transformation of Kantian terminology, the concept is not simply a representation that brings together other representations in order to combine with intuitions in acts of judgement, but is instead symbolic: Romanticism's terms are said to be most akin to 'hieroglyphic expressions' that remain irreducibly individual (SW1: 141; GS1:50).<sup>76</sup> A thinking that is 'absolutely conceptual' is one in which the 'concept' can be grasped in such a way that immediately unfolds the totality of its systematic connections—but only in necessarily singular instances, such that the relation between concepts remains as difficult to determine as the relation between fragments (are concepts to be considered as parts of a pre-existing whole that might progressively be reconstructed, or is every concept, like an infamous characterization of the fragment, 'complete in itself like a porcupine'?<sup>77</sup>). The Romantic theory of wit (*Witz*), for example, is likened to an 'attempt to call the system by its name—that is, to grasp it in a mystical individual concept in such a way that the systematic interconnections are comprised within it' (SW1:140; GS1:48-49). Benjamin's identification of the romantic concept as a name does not seem to be capricious. Yet even as he points to the almost magical function of the concept, the limitations of this mode of thinking are also registered. Thus Benjamin notes (with reference to Schlegel) the 'continually new names [*ständig erneuerten Benennungen*] he devises for the absolute' (SW1:140; GS1:47-48) and comments,

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<sup>75</sup> Linguistic thinking here attains to the definition of language laid down in Benjamin's 1917 fragment 'On Perception': 'Philosophy is absolute experience deduced in a systematic, symbolic framework as language [...] Absolute experience is, in the view of philosophy, language—language understood, however, as a systematic, symbolic concept' (SW1: 96).

<sup>76</sup> Thomas Pfau proposes that that the symbolic or hieroglyphic nature of Benjamin's 'concept' necessitates a notable break with the Hegelian frame in which the vocabulary of the dissertation is (he argues) rooted: 'Whereas in Hegel, all individuality is systematized by progressively subsuming the totality of its positions, for Benjamin the system is individualized due to his radically different view of the conceptual.' Pfau, 'Thinking Before Totality', p. 1081. For the argument that Hegel provides the conceptual lexicon for the dissertation, see p. 1073.

<sup>77</sup> Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 45 (Athenaeum Fragment 206)

somewhat caustically, on this terminological plenitude: ‘The absolute appears now as education, now as harmony, now as genius or irony, now as religion, organization, or history’ (SW1:138; GS1:44). Although a genuine theory of art, the Romantic one is ‘still absorbed in concepts’ (SW1:155; GS1:71-72)

One concept stands out above others, however. The ‘Romantic concept of criticism’, Benjamin writes, ‘is itself an exemplary instance of mystical terminology’ (SW1:141; GS1:50) and can be characterized as ‘the esoteric, cardinal concept [*Hauptbegriff*] of the Romantic school’ (SW1:142; GS1:50-51). As Benjamin demonstrates, the reverence for criticism stems from its ‘almost magical’ status in the Romantic reading of Kant, which emphasized criticism’s objective, productive and creative capacities. The symbolic significance of criticism is manifested in a set of quotations Benjamin draws from Schlegel: “‘every fragment is critical’”, “‘critical, and in fragments would be tautological’” (SW1:142; GS1:51-52). All of this chimes with the Romantic notion of the absolute as a medium of interconnected centres of reflection, which begs the question: why, if it is not only a matter of criticism’s particular philosophical pedigree, does Benjamin specify this term as the privileged expression among a plurality of Romantic hieroglyphs, of which he writes that the number is ‘indeed large’ but among which none share the ‘philosophical fruitfulness’ of criticism (SW1:138; GS1:42)? Why does criticism stand above other concepts and also thereby reveal the deficiencies in Romanticism’s abundance of names?

If Benjamin’s early work seeks to prove that ‘all system was to be thought of as symbol’<sup>78</sup>, it should be remembered that, in Benjamin’s writing on language, the symbol does not imply an immediate reference between sign and thing, but is ineluctably attended by a kernel of something that is noncommunicable.<sup>79</sup> Contrary to the idea that its significance derives from its immediate absorption into the Romantic absolute, the concept of criticism might then be considered as a symbol that keeps this incommunicable core intact. This can be understood, on Benjamin’s terms, as the refusal of the concept of criticism to give way to any particular ‘content’. In the afterword to his dissertation, Benjamin refutes the Romantic decision (‘especially in the *Dialogue on Poetry*’) to dress up the formal essence of the idea of art in the ‘accouterments of the poetic absolute’ (*Überdeckungen des poetischen Absolutums*) such as mythology, religion and ethics—all of the ‘names’ that the absolute takes in Romanticism, but of which Benjamin remains wary (SW1:179; GS1:111). Benjamin thus voices a problem that has preoccupied literary criticism since its Romantic inception and which has given rise to literary

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<sup>78</sup> Beatrice Hanssen, ‘Language and Mimesis in Walter Benjamin’s Work’ in Ferris (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, pp. 54-72 (pp. 56-57).

<sup>79</sup> In ‘On Language as Such’, Benjamin writes: ‘language is in every case not only communication of the communicable but also, at the same time, a symbol of the noncommunicable’ (SW1:74; GS2:156).

criticism's own multiplicity of names: what is the status of a discipline, institution or practice, whose object—literary texts—are not identifiable according to pre-determined criteria, and whose resistance to being reduced to examples of an ideal object renders it impossible to speak about them in anything other than their own 'literary' language? This problem is made redundant for other disciplines when they consider themselves to be the sciences or modes of knowledge pertaining to a certain set of objects. Criticism, however, which—according to Benjamin's letter to Belmore—concerns solely the institution of the 'word', and losing itself in preserving this word, faces its lack of object directly, when the problem of its own concept comes to light.

Given the links between Benjamin's early work on language and his theory of criticism that have been manifested throughout this chapter, it is no surprise that the concept of criticism is problematized at the level of the name. The noncommunicable kernel that accompanies every symbol is thinkable as the sheer materiality of the name, as voiced in 'On Language as Such and on Human Language'. In a recent intervention that does not draw on Benjamin but nonetheless foregrounds a similar paradox to the one that grounds criticizability, Kevin Newmark argues that in the *Dialogue on Poetry* (specifically the "Talk on Mythology") Schlegel 'confronts the perplexing power of the name'.<sup>80</sup> The following questions gleaned from the "Talk on Mythology" form the vehicle for an enquiry whose solution in Schlegel's writing is as perilous as the 'standard' that Benjamin advances, but just as quickly withdraws: 'Should the power to inspire that is indeed Poetry forever split itself to pieces...ultimately and alone falling mute? Should the holiest always remain nameless and formless, left in darkness to chance?'<sup>81</sup> In other words, should the power to form be itself formless, and should the power to name itself be nameless? At the same time as Schlegel yokes the possibility of Romantic freedom to 'a kind of naming that would simultaneously be a determinate form and a formation, a *Bild* and a *Bildung*,' a threat is introduced, glossed as 'the possibility of a kind of naming whose relation to form and formation would remain curiously indeterminable or empty.'<sup>82</sup> In short, the problem identified is that the force of naming itself lacks a name.<sup>83</sup> And the only name that it takes on in Schlegel's text—'mythology'—resolves the paradox at the risk of eternally fashioning 'self-deception' as much as

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<sup>80</sup> Kevin Newmark, *Irony on Occasion: From Schlegel and Kierkegaard to Derrida and de Man* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), p. 25.

<sup>81</sup> Cited in Newmark., p. 29.

<sup>82</sup> Newmark, p. 30.

<sup>83</sup> Newmark, p. 31. Reflecting on Peter Szondi's 'Über philologische Erkenntnis', and the variety of names under which the text was published, Thomas Schestag considers 'the question of the name [...] not only as the question of the *proper* name of the discipline or mode of knowledge in question, but also as the question of the origin and orientation of denominating and naming—and renaming—in general'. Thomas Schestag, 'Philology, Knowledge', trans. Nils F. Schott, *Telos*, 140 (2007), 28-44 (p. 29).

‘self-identity’.<sup>84</sup> Mythology names nothing but an ‘enigma’, then, exposing the indeterminacy of the name to another contingency.

Later in the dissertation, this problem is manifested as Benjamin reflects on the term ‘symbolic form’, which is, it is proposed, is not an expression of anything, but rather a ‘mere expression [*bloßen Ausdruck*] of the self-limitation of reflection’ (SW1:171; GS1:96-97). Mere expression expresses the critical moment of forming itself, and Benjamin alludes precisely, if not explicitly, to the problem of naming it:

The expression ‘symbolic form’ points in two directions: in the first place it marks the reference to the different conceptual rubrics [*Deckbegriffe*] of the poetic absolute, principally the reference to mythology. The arabesque, for example, is a symbolic form that alludes to a mythological content. In this sense, the symbolic form does not belong to this context [*Zusammenhang*]. In the second place, it is the imprint of the pure poetic absolute in the form itself [*die Ausprägung des reinen poetischen Absolutums in der Form*]. (SW1:171; GS1:97)

By naming it the ‘imprint of the pure poetic absolute in the form itself’—that which will be said to be an ironic limitation and elevation at the same time—Benjamin attempts to purge the symbolic form of its place in the context (*Zusammenhang*) of a particular content, or a particular name that would always be a misnaming. When, in a passage cited earlier, Benjamin writes that, in its ‘last office’ (*letzten Ausprägung*) criticism goes beyond observation, the idea of an immediately-erased self-judgement is introduced as the grounding act of criticism. The different meanings of the term *Ausprägung*, however, are put into play at both points in Benjamin’s text. As this term suggests, criticism is a characteristic or peculiarity of the Romantic work, of the kind that allows it to be considered as a kind of task or ‘office’, as the English translation has it, but it is also a shape, a stamping or an imprint (an ‘orifice’ perhaps, a word with a shared etymological root as ‘office’ in English). Benjamin’s use of ‘imprint’ or *Ausprägung* in the final section of the text again suggests that, as a forming (*prägende*) force that is practically without any object, criticism itself remains unnameable.<sup>85</sup>

What might this detour reveal about Benjamin’s encounter with Romanticism and the problem of conceptualizing criticism? The name of criticism, Benjamin seems to signal, is so unique among Romanticism’s conceptual vocabulary not because of the rigour by which

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<sup>84</sup> Newmark, *Irony on Occasion* pp.31-32

<sup>85</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the idea of the idea of ‘prägende Gewalt’, which appears in Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* book, see Thomas Schestag, ‘Porcelain’, trans. Jason Kavett, *The German Quarterly*, 87.2 (Spring 2014), 216-28, p. 217.

criticism unfolds the potential of works in the medium of art, but because criticism demands an unparalleled attention to the material event of naming. Criticism is the foremost name, because it is balanced on the act of naming, whose own potency derives from the lack of any connection between the human word and the thing it names. Unlike any other word in Romanticism's corpus, 'criticism' names the enigmatic incomprehensibility of poetic force or of naming itself, that which had gone unnamed in Schlegel or had been misnamed when placed into other contexts. Romanticism's 'linguistic thinking' acknowledges not only the reciprocal claim that every system is a fragment and every fragment a system, but also a far less tangible thought: that of the verge *between* fragment and system, before the system ever attains the self-consistency of a term like mythology.<sup>86</sup> Language allows for the thought of the edge which separates criticism and the concept of criticism, or criticism and criticizability, and it gives voice to the paradox that means criticism precedes criticizability, and that an 'act', like the pre-conceptual acts of criticism evoked in Benjamin's letter to Belmore, can precede, and let flourish, a potentiality.

## 11. Suspending Criticism

'Criticism' is also unique amongst a plethora of names or concepts, however, precisely because it is the index of a failed attempt to fully grasp or conceptualize its object. Hence, Benjamin writes of the word 'criticism':

it affirms that, however highly one estimates the worth of a critical work, it can never furnish the last word on its subject. In this sense, under the name of criticism, the Romantics at the same time confessed the inescapable insufficiency of their efforts, sought to designate this insufficiency as necessary, and so finally alluded, in this concept, to its necessary 'incompleteness of infallibility' [*die notwendige Unvollständigkeit der Unfehlbarkeit*] as it might be called'. (SW1:143; GS1:52)

The name of criticism is unique because, just as it attempts to conjure an entire context, it also points to the inescapable 'insufficiency' of its efforts. In doing so, it successfully registers the abyss separating the pre-conceptual act of criticism and its attempted conceptualization. Insofar as the failure of 'criticism' is regarded as something the Romantics sought to render as 'necessary', however, Benjamin indicates a dissatisfaction with the Romantic model of art's

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<sup>86</sup> For a relevant analysis of the originary entanglements between myth and literature, see Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. by Peter Connor (Minneapolis, MA; Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), especially the opening pages of 'Literary Communism' (trans. Peter Connor), pp. 71-81.

potentiality that arises on account of the impossibility of any one act of criticism ever having the 'last word'. The word that survives this impossibility of the last word, and which denotes this potentiality, is, as this chapter has argued, 'criticizability'. The suspicion that Benjamin seems to harbour as the concept of 'criticizability' is challenged in the afterword to his dissertation is not necessarily, then, that the concept of criticism appropriates an illegitimate content, and that the liberalism of early Romantic form degenerates into the political and aesthetic conservatism associated with the later Friedrich Schlegel. It is instead, perhaps, that, even as it steadfastly refuses to be determined by any content, Romantic criticism, whose poetic force comprises the sheer, nameless exposure of the materiality of naming, is preserved in the principle of 'criticizability' only if this force is lost, and only—by extension—if its link to the materiality or 'material content' of the name is subordinated to 'symbolic form'.

As was noted above, Benjamin draws a sharp distinction between Romanticism's theory of the knowledge of nature and its idea of art, proposing that, whilst both objects of nature and works of art are characterized by self-knowledge, only works of art undertake acts of self-judgement, and so are unique in harbouring the various paradoxical forms discussed in the previous sections. Benjamin's probing investigation into Romantic concepts also emphasizes the peculiarity of art and criticism: whereas other Romantic 'names' indicate a tendency toward discrete forms of knowledge oriented by particular contents, criticism remains suspended at the level of naming itself. It is only this suspension that seems to encourage Benjamin to take his distance from criticism, and perhaps allows the concept of criticism to become an object of an academic dissertation in the first place. Inasmuch as Benjamin's analyses of criticism seem to borrow the terminology of 'naming' from his early essay on language, however, it might be the case that Benjamin's dissertation elicits a more direct confrontation with materiality, and with the relation between language and the world, than normally assumed. If the peculiarity of self-judgement in art allows Benjamin to prioritize criticism over other centres of reflection in the Romantic absolute, in a way that punctures the totality of Romantic epistemology, then the eventual insufficiency of criticism to maintain its poetic force suggests that it is possible to reconsider this critical force with reference to objects that are not necessarily or primarily artistic, or which challenge this distinction. It is this irreducible possibility that sets the stage for Benjamin's encounter with the term 'uncriticizability', which promises to hold itself differently with regard to material content.

As has been argued throughout this chapter, the name only allows for a consideration of human language's freedom in relation to the world: in its 'reception' of that which is cast as a nameless language, the name allows human language to be considered not as a way of

comprehending the world through abstract concepts, or relating the finite to the infinite, but as an openness to the heterogeneity of things, figured as a heterogeneity of languages. However, just as criticizability—on close inspection of Benjamin’s dissertation—appears as a conceptual image which preserves but obscures the poetic force of naming that is at the root of Benjamin’s early theory of criticism, the image of nature as a network of mute languages also appears, increasingly, *as* an image. As the notion of Romantic criticizability is decisively challenged in Benjamin’s thought, so too is this image of nature. The development of Benjamin’s thinking about art and its criticism, if it is to uphold the ‘force’ of naming, also demands a renewed attention to things.

## Chapter 3

### ‘Piecework’: Uncriticizability and its Discontents in Moritz and Goethe

#### 1. Displacing Aesthetics: The Staging of Uncriticizability in *Elective Affinities*

‘[H]uman opinion is much too various to be unanimous on so much as a single point, even in regard to the most reasonable proposition’.<sup>1</sup> This is the maxim, gleaned from ‘experience’ (*Erfahrung*), under which one of the protagonists of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* (*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, 1809) issues a rare negative judgement in a book largely concerned with art and its interpretations. The Captain, who has come to live with the married couple Eduard and Charlotte, has just carried out a review of their estate’s grounds, and has severe misgivings about the park which has been constructed under the design and instruction of Charlotte. The opening page of the novel would seem to confirm the Captain’s maxim about the radical differences of human taste. Unprompted, and unchastened by his employer’s apparent indifference, a gardener offers Eduard a glowing evaluation of the new park: ‘It’s all been beautifully done and you’re bound to like it, my lord [...] The path up the cliff is laid out very fine. Her ladyship understands these things. It’s a pleasure to work under her.’ (EA:19; WA:3-4). As his reference to ‘the most reasonable propositions’ suggest, however, the Captain’s misgivings about Charlotte’s design owe not only to his belief in the diversity of opinion—not only, that is, to an empiricist theory of taste which recognizes an irreducible heterogeneity of pleasure and displeasure in human responses to sensory phenomena. He argues, rather, that Charlotte’s design, in failing to prioritise the rational, functional purpose the park is supposed to serve, betrays a characteristic irrationalism, incapable of critical decisions:

Like all who engage in such things only for amusement she is more concerned to do something than that something should be done [*mehr daran gelegen, daß sie etwas tue, als daß*

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1971), p. 40; *Goethes Werke. Herausgegeben im Auftrag der Großherzogin Sophie von Sachsen*, 143 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1887-1919), I:XX, p. 33. References will be made to these editions and will come parenthetically within the text, first to the English translation (abbreviated as EA, followed by a page number), then to this volume of Goethe’s *Werke* (as WA, followed by a page number). When I refer to other volumes of the *Werke* in this chapter and throughout the thesis, I do so by giving the relevant volume number, as well as the page number, after the abbreviation WA. On occasion, as is the case throughout the thesis, I have amended existing translations and made a note to this effect.



*etwas getan werde*]. This sort of person fumbles with nature, prefers this little spot or that, dares not venture to remove this or that obstacle, isn't bold enough to sacrifice anything, cannot imagine in advance what is supposed to be created, experiments—it may work out, it may not—makes changes and changes perhaps what ought to be left alone; and so in the end it remains nothing but a piecework [*Stückwerk*] that may turn out pleasing and stimulating but can never fully satisfy. (EA:40; WA:33; translation modified)

In castigating Charlotte as an amateur who proceeds from subjective fancy rather than pursuing the objective and orderly necessities dictated by the imperatives of the work itself, the Captain invokes the theory of dilettantism sketched by Goethe and Schiller in 1799. Whereas the genuine artist, according to this unfinished project, undertakes the 'exercise of art according to science' (*Ausübung der Kunst nach Wissenschaft*), and so works from the 'presupposition of an objective art' (*Annahme einer objektiven Kunst*),<sup>2</sup> the 'dilettante' takes everything as a game, as a pastime' and 'usually has a merely secondary purpose'.<sup>3</sup> Lacking a coherent vision of the whole, Charlotte is, the Captain alleges, unable to distinguish between the necessary and the inessential, and so the park is a mere 'piecework' (*Stückwerk*), a labour of disconnected parts that fails to fulfil its required function: 'she has laboriously toiled her way through the rocks and now, if I may so put it, everyone she conducts up there also has to toil. Neither side by side nor in file can you walk with any real comfort. At every moment the stroke of one's step is broken [*Der Takt des Schrittes wird jeden Augenblick unterbrochen*]; and there are many more objections that might be raised' (EA:41; WA:34; translation modified).<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps because of his budding infatuation with Charlotte, or perhaps because of the inconsistencies that drive his own polemic, the Captain insists to Edward that his account of the park remain confidential. When the latter, to whom the criticisms appear 'quite just' (*so gerecht*),

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Helen Fronius, *Women and Literature in the Goethe Era 1770-1820: Determined Dilettantes* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 63. For the centrality of gender to the argument about dilettantism (a theme which will not be explored further here), see Fronius, especially pp. 63-67, and Linda Dietrick, 'Women Writers and the Authorization of Literary Practice', in *Unwrapping Goethe's Weimar: Essays in Cultural Studies and Local Knowledge*, ed. by Burkhard Henke, Susanne Kord and Simon Richter (New York; Suffolk: Camden House, 2000). On Goethe's criticism of women writers, see Barbara Becker-Catarino, 'Goethe as a Critic of Literary Women', in *Goethe as a Critic of Literature*, ed. by Karl J. Fink and Max L. Baeumer (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), pp. 160-81. For a compelling analysis, which sees dilettantism as integral to Goethe and Schiller's idea of culture, see Paul Fleming, *Exemplarity and Mediocrity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), particularly the chapter 'The Average Artist (Goethe and Schiller on Dilettantism)', pp. 76-119. For a more general overview: Richard Hibbitt, *Dilettantism and its Values: From Weimar Classicism to the fin de siècle* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge; Modern Humanities Research Association, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Fronius, *Determined Dilettantes*, p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> Claudia Brodsky repurposes the Captain's remarks in a different context, noting how the designation 'piecework' allows for a thinking of nature that is architecturally and linguistically perceived. *In the Place of Language: Literature and the Architecture of the Referent* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), pp. 99-101.

eventually relays the negative judgement to Charlotte, her response struggles to reconcile the claims of criticism with the mere existence of the park:

Charlotte was confounded [*Charlotte stand betroffen*]. She could see at once that the Captain was right, but what she had done contradicted him [*das Gethane widersprach*]. It was now done—done as it had been—and she had found it right and good. Even what was criticized was dear to her in every part and particular. She resisted conviction, she defended her little creation, she chided the men with flying off into the vast and grandiose, with wanting to turn a pastime into a labour, with failing to think of what a more ambitious plan would cost. She was agitated, hurt, upset. She could not relinquish the old ideas nor entirely reject the new. (EA:42; WA:35; translation modified)

Just as the Captain launches a diatribe against Charlotte's unpurposive design under the aegis of an empiricist theory of aesthetic preference, Charlotte's reaction incorporates an array of tropes associated with eighteenth-century discourses of taste, careering from those that ground the autonomy of art—her dismissal of 'abstract' conceptualizations in favour of the particularity of any given creation; her implied prioritization of play over work—to an entirely practical case, no longer compatible with the principle of art's genuine autonomy, for the financial viability of her design. Her spiralling defensive reaction, however, is less notable for its blurring of the languages of aesthetics than for the remarkably sure, yet barely articulated footing that grounds her initial confoundment: the sheer contradiction between the Captain's assessment and her own, affirmative recognition of the park's worth. From this perspective, indeed, the contiguity of the familiar arguments, both 'aesthetic' and 'instrumental', into which Charlotte's thought descends suggests the irrelevance of their distinction and, more generally, of the language of philosophical aesthetics around 1800, in the face of the opaque recalcitrance of the park's existence: as the impersonal noun *das Gethane* suggests, the work, once created, has its own capacity to 'contradict' evaluations. Unlike the Captain's objections, which ambiguously blur a 'rational' argument with an aesthetic, empiricist one, and unlike Charlotte's own spiral of reason, her initial confoundment—or, to use another term that Goethe associated with the dilettante, 'incurability'—is entirely incommensurable with a rational discourse 'about' art, even that which, taking place under the name aesthetics, renews the relation between art and reason under the sign of art and aesthetic judgements's non-determination by instrumental or conceptual imperatives.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Fronius, *Determined Dilettantes*, p. 64.

This is not all, however. Charlotte's shock in the face of the Captain's critique dramatizes an idea or sensibility that pre-existed the philosophical and theoretical texts discussed in the previous chapters of this thesis, Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and the fragmentary writings of early German Romanticism. At issue is the notion that a work of art cannot or should not be criticized. The idea of art's 'uncriticizability' (as Walter Benjamin would come to term it in the afterword to his doctoral dissertation on German Romanticism, to be discussed in Chapter 4) had a peculiar currency in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. As this chapter will argue, the idea can be most fruitfully traced to the complex reception of Spinoza and Leibniz, and more particularly to the renewal of the question of whether a Spinozist idea of nature leaves any room for aesthetics, that is, for acts of perception (either creative or receptive) capable of generating novelty in a world determined by necessary laws. Leibniz's *Discourse on Metaphysics* critically understood Spinoza's philosophy to have rejected teleology and denied sufficient reason—that is, to have rallied against idea that everything is explainable by rational principles.<sup>6</sup> From Leibniz's perspective, Spinoza's philosophy naturalizes and so essentially negates all value judgements.<sup>7</sup> As Kant puts it in the third *Critique*, 'Spinoza would suspend all inquiry into the ground of the possibility of the ends of nature and deprive this idea of all reality by allowing them to count not as products of an original being but as accidents inhering in it' (CJ:264; AA5:393).

The historical transmission and reception of this problem is, nevertheless, by no means simple. The question—the extent to which natural determination prohibits human creativity, even the possibility that humans are capable of attributing value—is bound to fold in upon itself, insofar as the very possibility of asking it could be considered as a presumption of the possibility of breaking with determinate laws.<sup>8</sup> It thus bequeaths an arduous problem for the already tempestuous late eighteenth-century revival of Spinoza, which Goethe's poem 'Prometheus' had played a significant role in inaugurating. *Elective Affinities* offers a peculiar and privileged insight into this problem. Because the idea of art's uncriticizability comprises the incommensurability of

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<sup>6</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, 'Discourse on Metaphysics', in *Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett, 1989), pp. 35-69.

<sup>7</sup> In Lee C. Rice's summary of this view, Spinoza believes that 'all value judgements arise through the interaction of the human body with its environment, and none originate in the soul or mind independently of such a physical interaction'. Rice, 'Spinoza's Relativistic Aesthetics', *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, 58.3 (September 1996), 476-489 (p. 477).

<sup>8</sup> Peter Fenves is especially attentive to how Spinoza and particularly Leibniz each cultivated a style of philosophical writing that sought to eliminate contingency and yet was unable to banish the indeterminate and infinite 'flow of discourse' that renders all language tropic. See 'Of Philosophical Style—From Leibniz to Benjamin', *boundary 2*, 30.1 (2003), 67-87 (especially pp. 70-78). Of particular interest for Fenves is Spinoza's comment in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) that 'God does not have a particular style of speaking' (p. 73).

art with critical discourse *about* art, it threatens to render in advance all theoretical statements inadequate, tautologous or irrelevant. In this sense, it shares a problem with the Romantic model of criticizability, which seems to render belated any commentary *on* Romanticism, incorporating such diagnoses, as repetition, within itself.<sup>9</sup> Yet the idea in question, I will seek to show, does not only pre-date Kant's critical philosophy and the Romantic inauguration of a modern form of literary criticism that followed in its wake. In a way that is perhaps testament to its incommensurability with the foundational arguments of philosophical aesthetics and of modern literary criticism, the 'pre-critical' notion of art's uncriticizability *survives*, in a complex manner, the institution of a model which emphasizes the philosophical significance of criticism, that Benjamin comes to call 'criticizability'.

Like the idea of uncriticizability itself, this endurance is difficult to assess because its conditions and stakes are not immediately evident: as in the scene that opened this chapter, one can never quite decide whether the idea of uncriticizability is resistant to, or simply ignorant of, the premises and claims of criticism. One of the arguments pursued in this chapter is that, as a novel—that is, as a form of narrative fiction capable of questioning, refiguring, and reflecting upon the ways that linguistic material both allows and subverts the order of time and ideas that condition the very possibility of an idea's 'survival'—*Elective Affinities* explores this problem in unprecedented and largely unexamined ways. In the novel, Charlotte's stupefaction ultimately fails to shore up her creation against the force of the Captain's criticism: the park is eventually modified with almost no narrative fanfare. Yet the implication might be that the uncelebrated erasure of Charlotte's work is a testament to the imperceptibility of the idea of uncriticizability in an aesthetic regime that places value only on the possibility that artworks position themselves in the arena of criticism. In *failing* to adequately incorporate Charlotte's feeling of the work's 'uncriticizability' into the narrative proceedings of the novel, and moreover in imperceptibly erasing the work itself, Goethe makes a pointed comment about the intractable nature of 'uncriticizability'. Even Charlotte's own response indicates the extreme precarity of her belief in her 'creation': she accepts the Captain's indictment at the same time as the existence of the garden 'contradicts' it. The scene, and its own unobtrusive incorporation into the novel, then, paradoxically confirms the Captain's diagnosis at the same time as it refutes it, and suggests that

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<sup>9</sup> For a cogent unpicking of this problem, see Zachary Sng (ed.), 'Introduction', *New Work on German Romanticism*, special edition of *Romantic Circles* (2016) <<https://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/german/praxis.2016.german.sng.html>> [accessed 14/01/2019]. Sng makes a brief but salutary reference to *Elective Affinities* (which he considers as a 'novella') as a text indicative of problems pertaining to the prioritization of 'the new' around 1800: 'Each of the most significant "events" in the novella's plot is presented as determined but also contingent, as necessary as it is unexpected, equal measure human caprice and divine intervention. What could the "new" possibly mean under such conditions?' (para. 6 of 17).

this simultaneity of acceptance and denial, for which the Captain's term 'piecework' (*Stückwerk*) is a suitable moniker, might itself provide a clue for understanding the idea, and the fate, of 'uncriticizability'.

This chapter will trace this set of problems in three closely related contexts: the essays of Karl Philipp Moritz, an important source for Goethe's idea of uncriticizability; Goethe's own critical and theoretical writings about art and literature; and *Elective Affinities* itself. In every case, the idea of art's uncriticizability is simultaneously announced and undermined.

## 2. Karl Philipp Moritz: The Tarnished Mirror and the Loosened Text

Where does Goethe's novel begin and where does it end? Questions like this one have had a notorious influence on the reception of *Elective Affinities*, as readers have bound the literary text and its plot to the details of Goethe's life. Yet the question of the work's relation to criticism raises a less determined aspect of its reception. The novel's dramatization of art's resistance to criticism frames Goethe's own defensiveness when confronted with a range of hostile reviews and reactions upon its publication. On the last day of 1809, Goethe wrote to Karl Friedrich Graf von Reinhard to express disdain for the reading public whose reception of *Elective Affinities* had proven to be notably cold. 'The public, especially the German one, is a foolish caricature of the demos', Goethe lamented: 'It really imagines that it forms a kind of court or senate and can vote down in life and in reading [*Leben und Lesen*] this or that which it does not like.'<sup>10</sup> Goethe's rejection of public opinion as a measure of art's value is not in itself at odds with philosophical aesthetics. Less than twenty years after Kant's own critical court had upheld that judgements of taste were not to be grounded on the collecting of votes (*Stammensammlung*), but arose according to a *sensus communis* that linked the free play of a subject's faculties to the feeling of pleasure, and of that pleasure's universal communicability (CJ:162; AA5:281), Goethe's letter strikes out at the failure of the public to form a true community of taste.

This disdain for, or indifference to, public opinion was not a new or unusual stance for Goethe. An early, critical review of Johann Georg Sulzer's *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste* stresses the 'sensations and powers' (*Empfindungen und Kräfte*) of the artist against the meaningless reactions of the 'gaping public' (*gaffenden Publikum*).<sup>11</sup> A piece on Aristotle's *Poetics* notes the equivocal intention of the text, which in a 'characteristically objective way' is supposed to be about the 'structure of tragedy' but whose theory of catharsis is a 'surrogate solution'

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<sup>10</sup> Cited in Tantillo, p. 6; translation modified (WA IV.21.153).

<sup>11</sup> WA I.37.213

presumptive of art's moral efficacy.<sup>12</sup> The essay 'On Harsh Judgements' simply prescribes that 'the true artist must ignore his public'.<sup>13</sup> As these and other examples suggest, Goethe makes a categorical distinction between the work of art and its reception. Nevertheless, his letter to Reinhard continues, describing a strategy of patience that proleptically imagines a unification of author and readership: "There is no means of countering this, but a quiet holding-out [*Dagegen ist kein Mittel als ein stilles Ausbarren*]. How I look forward to the effect that this novel will have in a few years on many people upon reading it."<sup>14</sup> As in the novel itself, Goethe's reaction to his contemporaries' criticism of *Elective Affinities* reveals contradictory impulses that attest to the complexity of the problem of uncriticizability: on the one hand, Goethe insists on the structural principle of the work's immunity from criticism while, on the other, he implicates himself in the desire for an uncriticizable work, exposing the idea of art's uncriticizability—and its pedigree in philosophical accounts of natural necessity—to differentiating, if not negating, vectors.<sup>15</sup>

As Goethe's disparaging remarks about the public suggest, the idea that artworks should not be criticized hinges on an asymmetrical distribution of significance between the production and the reception of artworks: art's potency, Goethe seems to imply, lies solely in its creation whereas its immediate reception remains at best irrelevant and at worst damaging. Whilst it is impossible to account for the full range of potential sources for this insight, it undoubtedly owes much to the writings of Karl Philipp Moritz, particularly 'On the Formative Imitation of the Beautiful',<sup>16</sup> on which Goethe had, to a contested degree, collaborated during his stay in Rome and of which a lengthy but highly significant excerpt appears in the *Italian Journey*.<sup>17</sup> Like his other major contribution to debates in aesthetics, 'An Attempt to Unify All the Fine Arts and Sciences

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<sup>12</sup> Goethe, 'On Interpreting Aristotle's *Poetics*', *Collected Works* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994-1995), III, *Essays on Art and Literature*, trans. by Ellen von Nardrof and Ernest H, ed. by John Gearey (pp. 197-99).

<sup>13</sup> Cited in René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950*, 8 vols. (London: Jonathan Cape [later New Haven: Yale University Press], 1955-1992), I, *The Later Eighteenth Century* (1955), p. 216.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Tantillo, *Critics*, p. 6; translation modified.

<sup>15</sup> As Tantillo's wide-ranging account shows, Goethe himself sought to shape the interpretation of his work by offering a privileged platform to positive reviews; those of Abeken and Solger in particular essentially became 'authorized' readings. Tantillo, *Critics*, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> I primarily refer to the partial English translation of Moritz's essay, as 'On the Artistic Imitation of the Beautiful', in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. by J.M. Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 131-44, though I also draw on the translation of the sections incorporated into Goethe's *Italian Journey* as 'On the Creative Imitation of Beauty', in Goethe, *Collected Works*, VI, *Italian Journey*, trans. by Robert R. Heitner, pp. 431-36. I also occasionally reference the German original: 'Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen', in *Schriften zur Ästhetik und Poetik*, ed. by Hans Joachim Schrimpf (Tübingen: Niemeyer Verlag, 1962), pp. 63-92. As is obvious, the translation of 'bildende' remains contentious. While acknowledging the intractability of this problem, I have opted to use the term 'formative' when referencing the text, primarily since 'formative drive' and 'formative power' seem the most appropriate and common translations of *Bildungstrieb* and *Bildungskraft*, terms which appear regularly in Moritz's text.

<sup>17</sup> The extent of Goethe's contribution to Moritz's text has been the subject of some debate. For an overview of some responses, see Cornelia Zumbusch, *Die Immunität der Klassik* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012), p. 98.

under the Concept of That Which Is Complete in Itself, Moritz's text<sup>18</sup> is a crucial document for reconstructing the late eighteenth century reception of Spinoza and Leibniz, and Goethe's part therein.<sup>19</sup>

Moritz is best remembered for the insight, which condenses the troublesome reception of Spinoza in the late eighteenth century artworks, that artworks are the products of creative geniuses and can be designated microcosms of a rationally organized nature. In his doctoral dissertation, Benjamin would count Moritz beside Herder as a figure who employed 'general concepts of harmony and organization' which were 'incapable of establishing a criticism of art' (SW1:155; GS1:71-71). Although Moritz's monist idea of nature is conceived along Spinozist lines, seeing nature as a self-enclosed totality, its structure and order indicate a reliance upon Leibniz's critique of the world's reduction to one substance. In a relatively early text (written between 1677 and 1680), Leibniz had criticized 'two sects of naturalists fashionable today', the 'new Epicureans' and the 'new Stoics'.<sup>20</sup> Whereas Hobbes, in Leibniz's view, upheld Epicurus's belief in the corporeality of all things, and thus forfeited the possibility of divine, non-material 'providence', Spinoza and his followers were said to have advanced a Stoic view of a God whose absolute manifestation in the 'blind [...] mechanical necessity' of the world amounted to a 'providence in name only'. 'They believe that all possible things happen one after the other', Leibniz writes, 'following all the variations of which matter is capable'.<sup>21</sup> Though the material basis of the two naturalisms differs, they ultimately converge when Leibniz comes to consider how human beings are to comport themselves in the world:

And as for what is of consequence and what concerns the conduct of our lives, everything reduces to the opinions of the Epicureans, that is, to the view that there is no happiness other than the tranquillity of a life here below content with its own lot, since it is madness to oppose the torrent of things and to be discontented with what is immutable. If they knew that all things are ordered for the general good and for the

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<sup>18</sup> Karl Philipp Moritz, 'An Attempt to Unify All the Fine Arts and Sciences under the Concept of That Which Is Complete in Itself', trans. by Elliott Schreiber, *PMLA*, 127.1 (January 2012), 94-100. The task of translating this essay's title—'Versuch einer Vereinigung aller schönen Künste und Wissenschaften unter dem Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten'—is no less difficult.

<sup>19</sup> Another major text in the reception and revival of Spinozism was Herder's *God: Some Conversations*. For an analysis of Goethe's reception of Herder's text, which seeks specifically to counter the widely held assumption of Spinoza's atheism, see Nicholas Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age*, vol. 1, *The Poetry of Desire, 1749-1790* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 497.

<sup>20</sup> Leibniz, 'Two Sects of Naturalists', in *Philosophical Essays*, pp. 281-84.

<sup>21</sup> 'Two Sects', p. 282.

particular welfare of those who know how to make use of them, they would not identify happiness with simple patience.<sup>22</sup>

In hinting toward the philosophical underpinnings of his own *Theodicy* (not published until 1710) Leibniz undoes the identity of matter and rationality that grounds Spinoza's thought, thus providing the spur for later, voluntarist accounts of rational—including aesthetic—activity. With the doctrine of pre-established harmony of monads, human reason is endowed with a particular capacity by an 'extra-mundane' God, himself understood as a creator capable of having provided the 'ultimate reason' for the world. The influence of this idea on philosophical aesthetics, and the range of philosophical systems that followed, was momentous. Leibniz had considered Spinoza to have lacked a theory of perception, that is, an account not only of 'passive power of being able to be affected' but of what Leibniz terms an 'active power'.<sup>23</sup> Later thinkers like Jacobi, Schelling and Hegel, likewise, all considered Spinoza's monism to have neglected the heterogeneity between positive and negative: having conceived of being in purely logical terms they claimed, he failed to answer the question of why there is something rather than nothing, the question of creation itself.<sup>24</sup> Lacking any notion of beginning, Spinoza's system remains immobile and static; for Hegel, particularly, it lacks a critical moment of negativity.

This history, however, is anything but frictionless, and the contradictory impulses of Goethe's statements about the relation between art and criticism attest to a cogent awareness of the irreducibility of such problems to their historical outcomes. Kant's early responses to the tradition of theodicy, for example, rejected Leibniz's doctrine of pre-established harmony, which in Kant's pointed restaging relied on the fallacious image of a God who could choose from a number of possible worlds. In an early text on 'optimism', Kant conjures the materialist figure of 'an Epicurus' to question the supposed need to distinguish between the primary and secondary dimensions of life, between good and evil: the materialist tradition, which recognizes that 'bread is the reward not of virtue, but of toil', leads Kant into affirming the perfection of the world and beginning from this point of view, rather than seeking to make a judgement upon the world based on theological presuppositions.<sup>25</sup> Kant's refusal to prioritize theological sovereignty over

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<sup>22</sup> 'Two Sects', p. 282.

<sup>23</sup> 'Discourse on Metaphysics', p. 60.

<sup>24</sup> Frederick Beiser usefully reconstructs the difference between *natura naturans* in Spinoza and Schelling, seeing (in opposition to Spinoza's monism) Schelling to have inaugurated a structured and hierarchical order, in which the emergence of human consciousness—which crucially remains a part of nature—gives nature the ability to reflect upon itself. See Beiser, 'The Paradox of Romantic Metaphysics', in *Philosophical Romanticism*, ed. by Nikolas Kompridis (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 217-237 (p. 227).

<sup>25</sup> Kant, 'An Attempt at Some Reflections on Optimism' and 'Appendix: Three manuscript reflections on optimism', in *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770*, pp. 67-84 (p. 78, p. 82). As some of the most pointed recent



the ‘reality’ of the material world effectively amounts to a displacement of the premises on which theodicy was based. Less pointedly but just as importantly, Goethe also displaces the terms on which Leibniz’s critique of Spinoza occurs, leading some commentators to remark that the influence of the two thinkers is impossible to disentangle in Goethe’s thought and writing.<sup>26</sup> Goethe himself commented on his reluctance to vocalize his understanding of Spinoza in a letter to Jacobi of 9 June 1785: ‘I at least am extremely loath to explain myself in writing on such a matter, indeed I find it virtually impossible’ (WA IV.7.62). The fate of the idea of art’s uncriticizability, however, helps to capture some dimensions of the problem that Goethe recognizes. Literary criticism’s continuing existence in the face of ‘uncriticizability’, and uncriticizability’s survival in the wake of the conceptualization of criticism, allows us to consider how Goethe inherited the materialist notion that ‘all possible things happen one after the other’, a trope that might have been found in the Captain’s polemic against Charlotte’s park, as much as in Leibniz’s critique of Spinoza’s monism.

For Moritz, the activity pursued by the creative artist, a figure marked by a particularly receptive nature, is analogous to *natura naturans*, what Spinoza identified as the ongoing, processual and creative productivity of nature: its becoming as opposed to the finality of its created products (*natura naturata*). Yet art, Moritz maintains, is not merely receptive and imitative. Leibniz’s conception of the human as a being impressed with the creative force that gave rise to nature—in other words, the human’s status as a particular kind of monad or ‘metaphysical point’—authorizes in Moritz a conception of art that is creative as well as imitative, hence the eponymous concept of ‘formative imitation’. At one level, Moritz’s subscription to this idea means that his contribution can be counted amongst those of the Leibnizian school of aesthetics, which includes thinkers such as Christian Wolff and, later, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and Moses Mendelssohn. For these figures, judgements of taste are based on a clear but confused—because ineluctably sensory—perception of the world’s perfection. ‘On the Formative Imitation of the Beautiful’, in line with this tradition, regularly refers to the ‘dark premonition’ or ‘dim presentiment’ (*dunkler Ahndung*) of the ‘relationships of the great whole’.<sup>27</sup> Moritz, however, does not just seek to recognize art’s philosophical significance by attempting,

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commentaries on Kant have argued, the influence of this materialist tradition on his thought is largely missed by the traditional courses plotted by the history of philosophy. Geoffrey Bennington argues that Epicurus appears as ‘a kind of ancient version of Hume, and yet more worrisome than Hume, more present’, throughout Kant’s writing. See Bennington, *Kant on the Frontier: Philosophy, Politics, and the Ends of the Earth* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), p. 49.

<sup>26</sup> On the difficulty of disentangling Spinoza and Leibniz in the late eighteenth-century reception, particularly in Goethe, see David Bell, *Spinoza in Germany from 1670 to the Age of Goethe* (London: Institute of Germanic Studies, 1984), pp. 147-170.

<sup>27</sup> Moritz, ‘Imitation’, p. 142.

like the fledgling science of aesthetics, to draw a link between sensual perception and reason. Rather, he introduces a further distinction, arguing—in what amounts to an early affirmation of art's autonomy—that the production of artworks differs in kind from their reception in feeling.

As in Kant, this autonomy is intricately linked to the kind of reception that artworks seem to demand. Like the third *Critique*, Moritz insists in 'An Attempt to Unify' that, for the 'pure and unmixed' quality of a work of art to come to light, our subjective appreciation of it must be without instrumental interest, a state described as a kind of self-forgetting akin to 'selfless love'.<sup>28</sup> This disinterest paves the way for a claim about the work's own inner purposiveness. Insofar as subjective interest in the work diminishes the value of its 'beauty', Moritz demands (on the ground that nothing rational can be entirely unpurposive) that the purpose of a work be immanent to it. As commentators have noted, Moritz's insight foreshadows Kant's account of 'purposiveness without purpose', though whereas he attributes this 'inner purposiveness' objectively to the work itself, Kant attributes it to the form of the subject's response.<sup>29</sup> Like Kant, nonetheless, Moritz draws a link between art and human reason by binding the subjective appreciation of an artwork to the feeling of—and non-coercive demand for—its universal communicability. He identifies 'our impatient demand that everyone pay homage to what we have recognized as beautiful: the more generally it is recognized and admired as beautiful, the more valuable it becomes in our eyes as well. Hence our displeasure at an empty theatre, excellent though the performance may be.'<sup>30</sup> 'On the Formative Imitation of the Beautiful' begins by reasserting this non-coercive compatibility of the non-instrumental (or useless) and the beautiful: 'A thing does not become beautiful merely because it is not useful, but only because it does not *need* to be useful'.<sup>31</sup> It is the extraction of the object from any need whatsoever that distinguishes the beautiful from other forms of existence.

So as to distinguish the particular totality of a beautiful object from another totality such as 'the state', however, 'On the Formative Imitation of the Beautiful' stipulates that what we judge to be beautiful must be given to us as an object of sensory experience. Moritz extends this logic to argue that the world in itself is not beautiful, since—like a Kantian idea—at no point are we capable of sensually experiencing its totality<sup>32</sup>:

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<sup>28</sup> Moritz, 'Attempt to Unify', p. 98.

<sup>29</sup> Zumbusch, *Immunität*, p. 99. A more tangible relation, though one that is beyond the scope of this chapter, might be that between the objective purposiveness of Moritz's work of art and the purposiveness of the organism in the 'Critique of Teleological Judgment'.

<sup>30</sup> Moritz, 'Attempt to Unify', p. 98.

<sup>31</sup> Moritz, 'Imitation', p. 137.

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan M. Hess argues that Moritz was 'not just not a Kantian', and that his writings show an almost implausible lack of interest in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Moritz here, however, seems to be aware of Kant's ideas of reason as concepts of which there can be no intuition. See Hess, *Reconstituting the Body Politic*:

For the same reason we cannot attach the concept of beauty to the whole connection of things, all the more so because the connection, *in its entirety*, is given neither to our senses nor is grasped by our imagination, even if it can be thought by our understanding [...]

The concept of beauty, which for us has arisen from the fact that it need not be useful, thus requires not only that it exist as a self-contained whole, but that it be given as a self-contained whole to our senses, or can be grasped as such by our imagination.<sup>33</sup>

For Moritz, artistic products differ from the totality of nature, whose ‘great interconnection of things is really the only, the true whole’. Recognition of this difference allows for Moritz’s most acute articulation of the mediated nature of the artistic product, which is conceived as a privileged monad capable of expressing, albeit confusedly, the world’s perfection: ‘Each beautiful whole coming from the hand of the artist is thus an impression in miniature of the highest beauty of the whole of nature; *mediated* through the hand of the artist, it recreates that which does not immediately belong to the great plan’.<sup>34</sup> Moritz deploys the idea of a formative power (*Bildungskraft*) to depict the particular capacity with which creative humans have been endowed: ‘Whoever has been impressed by nature with a sense of the creative power in his whole being, and has received the impression of the *measure* of the beautiful in his eye and soul, cannot content himself merely to observe it; he must imitate it, strive after it, eavesdrop on nature in its secret workshop and make and create with blazing flames in his heart, as nature itself does.’<sup>35</sup> As these passages suggest, ‘On the Formative Imitation of the Beautiful’ is emphatic about the difference between the production and reception—or mere observation—of art, premised on the notion of the artist’s unique ability to reconstitute nature’s dynamic wholeness.

Yet Moritz’s account of the production of the artwork by no means imagines a simple mediation of nature’s productivity. Despite clearly privileging the productions of the creative genius, the text continues to consider what it means to encounter a work of art, pursuing a problem that had already assumed great importance in ‘An Attempt to Unify’. In the earlier text, Moritz insists upon the necessity of an encounter between the artwork and the subject, going so far as to base the very existence of the work itself on a moment of phenomenological recognition: ‘we do not need to be delighted by the beautiful; instead, the beautiful needs us in

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*Enlightenment, Public Culture and the Invention of Aesthetic Autonomy* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), p. 30.

<sup>33</sup> Moritz, ‘Imitation’, p. 138.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Imitation’, p. 139.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Imitation’, p. 139.

order to be recognized. We can easily exist without contemplating beautiful works of art, but they cannot very well exist without our contemplating them'.<sup>36</sup> In 'On the Formative Imitation of the Beautiful', testifying to the insolubility of this problem, the possibility of a receptive encounter with art comes to paradoxically inflect the apparently autonomous space of artistic creation, confusing what comes first and what comes last:

Since, however, those great relations, in whose complete compass beauty resides, lie outside the jurisdiction of the power of thought, the living concept of the creative imitation of beauty can only emerge when one is conscious of the active power producing the imitation, in the first moment of origin [*im ersten Augenblick der Entstehung*], when the work, as though already completed [*als schon vollendet*], suddenly, in dim presentiment, appears before the mind in all the degrees of its gradual development, and, in this moment of its first conception, is there, so to speak, before it really exists [*in diesem Moment der ersten Erzeugung gleichsam vor seinem wirklichen Dasein da ist*]. From this, then, springs that unnameable charm [*unnennbare Reiz*] which impels the creative genius to continue producing art perpetually.<sup>37</sup>

The work of art is 'already completed' and 'steps all at once before the soul in dim presentiment', Moritz argues. On the one hand, this seems to chime with Goethe's notion about the essential irrelevance of art's reception: 'Our *subsequent pleasure*' in a work is 'only the *consequence* of its being; and in the great plan of nature, the creative genius exists first *for his own sake* and only then for our sake', Moritz claims in a related passage.<sup>38</sup> Yet his argument seems to go further, since he contends that even in the 'moment of the first generation', the work 'is there, so to speak, before it really exists'. Moritz's text is notable for the radically singular balance it strikes between a work's autonomy and its dependence on subjective recognition. It is as if a depiction of the subjective encounter with the work is necessary, but only in order to demonstrate the work's apparent non-reliance on and antecedence to all subjective encounters. What matters ultimately, Moritz seems to imply—in a manner that presages how Goethe will relate to Spinoza and Leibniz—is art's peculiar capacity to allow the co-existence of both theories.

Despite emphasizing the difference between the immediate totality of the natural world and the mediated whole of the artistic product, then, Moritz's need to account for the reception

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<sup>36</sup> 'Attempt to Unify', p. 98.

<sup>37</sup> Moritz in Goethe, *Italian Journey*, p. 432. I have here used (and slightly amended) the Heitner translation, which far more effectively registers the temporal problem at stake.

<sup>38</sup> 'Imitation', pp. 142-43.

of works leads him to consistently defer the work of art's autonomous self-presence. This problem can be expressed relatively simply: Moritz wants to stress the autonomy of works, but is equally required to express their difference from the totality of nature, a demand that forces him to consider the murky realm of feeling. Moritz seeks to navigate this problem by introducing a textile metaphor, allowing him to see the domain of art as a suitably malleable surface of nature: the artist 'loosens the finest seams of nature with his glowing insight. He then rebuilds the seams even more beautifully on the surface'.<sup>39</sup> The depiction of the artist's work as the labour of loosening and rebuilding the textural weave of the natural world does not only allow Moritz to illustrate that the mimesis of nature is an active re-presentation of nature's Spinozist productivity, rather than a mere imitation of its completed products.<sup>40</sup> The particularity of the textile image, more crucially, allows Moritz to consider how different artistic productions can exist alongside one another, and yet remain autonomous:

The creative genius's horizon of active power must be *as extensive as nature itself*, that is, its organization must be spun so finely [*muß so fein gewebt sein*] and must contain infinitely many *points of contact* [*Berührungspunkte*] to all-encompassing nature, that the *farthest extremities* of all relations to nature in general [*Verhältnissen der Natur im Großen*] can stand next to each other in miniature [*im Kleinen*], and will have enough space not to be allowed to eclipse each other.<sup>41</sup>

For Moritz, the plurality of artistic works is articulated, through the image of a 'finely spun' organizational nature, at the exact same time as their monadic singularity. This revision of Leibniz's monadology seems to presage a major problem that meets Kant's account of the artwork's singularity: though Moritz also sees artworks as singular and autonomous, they are nonetheless co-existent with each other from the beginning. There is no need, as in Kant, to first articulate the singularity of aesthetic judgements and then to address—in increasingly acrobatic ways—how we can, as socially and culturally embedded beings, have an intellectual interest in our capacity for disinterested judgment. Precisely because they are 'in miniature', works are able to 'stand next to each other'. Like Leibnizian monads, such abbreviations attest to the 'law of continuity' at the same time as they mark an escape from it.

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<sup>39</sup> 'Imitation', p. 139.

<sup>40</sup> Walter Benjamin's early essay on Hölderlin also employs the image of the 'loosening up' (*Auflockerung*) of organic totality, but in Benjamin's text the organic totality is already that of the poem, from which its *a priori* 'poetized' can be freed (SW1:19; GS2:106).

<sup>41</sup> 'Imitation', p. 141.

By overlapping his account of the production and reception of art, Moritz also problematizes, in advance, the third *Critique's* account of genius. Whereas Moritz forecasts the idea that the genius is a kind of second nature, he goes a step further than Kant, who limits genius to this essential secondariness (to put this differently, Moritz explicitly enacts the tension that was found in Chapter 1 of this thesis). For Moritz, there are always potentially multiple natures at work; according to him, the artist 'can no longer be satisfied with the consideration of the *singular* in the nexus of nature', but must loosen the coherence of nature 'at large' (*im Großen*) so as to allow the possibility of things existing side by side 'in miniature' (*im Kleinen*).<sup>42</sup> This claim relies on a further specification of the textile metaphor, which concerns the peculiar receptivity of the productive genius. More specifically, Moritz's text shows how the image of a loosened texture exists side by side with—and so in fact displaces—another, more primary one: namely, that of the 'organic' totality of the artist. The artist has an 'organic structure' that must be 'textured finely enough to offer the inflowing whole of nature as many as many points of contact as are needed to mirror completely all its great relations in miniature'.<sup>43</sup>

It is significant that it is precisely here that the *Italian Journey's* extensive citation of Moritz's essay begins. But why is this metaphor, and the displacement of the image of 'organic' totality, so crucial for Goethe and for the tentative theory of 'uncriticizability' explored so far in this chapter? The image, as suggested above, allows Moritz to account not only for the singularity of artworks but for their plurality, which relies upon the fact that artworks, as 'appearances', do not demand exclusivity. A particular account of (non-)mimesis thus underwrites Moritz's argument:

And this object in turn could not exist, if it *were really* what it depicted, that is, if it became a self-contained whole which, in relation to the connection to nature, could not tolerate a self-contained whole outside of itself; this brings us to a point which was made once before, namely that the inner being must turn itself into appearance before it can be

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<sup>42</sup> 'Imitation', p. 141.

<sup>43</sup> The person who is not an artist is missing at least one of these points, Moritz writes, and so is capable only of feeling, rather than creating, beauty. Moritz essentially argues that it is futile to distinguish between different levels of feeling: 'The creative capacity implanted in the finer texture of the organic structure is damaged just as much by the last point it lacks in completeness as by a thousand.—The highest value it could have as a capacity for feeling is of no more importance to it as creative power than the least would be' ('Imitation', p. 434 [Heiter trans.]). As soon as there is anything missing in the nature of our receptivity, Moritz suggests, we are in the debased realm of feeling rather than creation; and, since a small hole in the fabric is as damaging as a big one, the 'capacity for feeling' is always secondary. As Zumbusch shows, Moritz considers this gap in sexual terms. For Zumbusch: 'The discourse of purity thus supports the difference between creative activity and receptive feeling and soberly demarcates artistic productivity from aesthetic enjoyment, which in no case may be mixed.' *Immunität*, p. 102.

turned through art into a whole existing for itself alone, and can thus reflect the relation of the great whole of nature *unhindered* in its full parameter.<sup>44</sup>

Art's fallibility, Moritz seems to imply, is also its greatest resource. A self-contained whole could not 'tolerate' the existence of other self-contained wholes: art's weakness—its self-limitation to 'appearance'—is its strength, because it is only by failing to achieve complete self-containment that it can have a sufficiently loose relation to other existences. Art's limitation to 'appearance' is what allows for the plurality of works, for every work to 'have enough space' that it is not overshadowed by others.

Goethe's lengthy citation of Moritz in the *Italian Journey* has an important dual function, then. By embedding a crucial part of 'On the Formative Imitation of the Beautiful' within his text, Goethe is able to articulate and unite two ideas that might otherwise compete for prominence in any theory of art. On the one hand, Moritz's text provides a theoretical foundation for the idea of art's uncriticizability: whereas Goethe's occasional critical writings regularly seek to depict the artist at a remove from an uncomprehending and unsympathetic public, Moritz's philosophical text practically absolutizes this difference. This means that the public is unable to adequately distinguish *between* artworks, which—anticipating the depiction of both artworks and organic beings in Kant's third *Critique*—are figured as autonomous and incomparable: 'the power of thought completely lacks a *point of comparison* from which to judge and consider the beautiful', Moritz maintains.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, however, Goethe begins to cite Moritz's text at the precise moment that the absolute singularity of the work of art is both reaffirmed and subtly questioned. Moritz's textile metaphor grounds the living singularity of works (the tight weave that forms a complete circle is rendered 'organic') and at the same time decentres this organicism: the textile metaphor allows Moritz to show how works of art are precisely *not* organic, how they can exist alongside one another, how they are loosened up so as to allow their co-existence. Understood from this perspective, the 'appearance' whose centrality Moritz affirms is less a positive quality of a work of art than an indicator of a minimal difference that allows it to be an artwork and not an organic whole. An artwork is conceived, if we had to pull a definition from this tangled weave, as a self-contained whole that does not exclude or sublimate other self-contained wholes.

What also unites the approaches, moreover—and connects the two texts by Moritz under discussion—is a realisation that, although the reception of a work might not be the

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<sup>44</sup> 'Imitation', p. 142.

<sup>45</sup> 'Imitation', p. 143.

exclusive site of its potential fulfilment (as in the Romantic theory of criticizability) it is not for that reason invalid. Pleasure is described as a ‘subordinate goal, or rather only a natural consequence of beautiful works of art’.<sup>46</sup> As in Kant, this insight democratizes taste by undermining the validity of pre-existing hierarchizations; more fundamentally, however, it also affirms the continued relevance of a Spinozist understanding of pleasure as an irreducible ‘consequence’ of a being’s existence in the world.<sup>47</sup> Moritz sees pleasure or happiness, on the one hand, and ‘perfection’ on the other, as running in two parallel lines, whose meeting can never be determined in advance. Pleasure, so the essay suggests, is something that will happen anyway:

the pleasure one has in a beautiful work of art is as composite as the artwork itself. How, then, can I regard it as something simple toward which the parts of the artwork aim? Just as little as the representation of a painting in a mirror can be the goal of the painting’s composition, for this representation will always occur on its own, without my having to bother about it in the least. Now, the more perfect the artwork, the more imperfectly a tarnished mirror will represent it, but surely that is no cause for making the work less perfect, so that there is less beauty to lose in the tarnished mirror?—<sup>48</sup>

The pleasure we experience in the face of a beautiful object, Moritz suggests, is not simple—not a direct and immediate manifestation of the world’s perfection—but, like beautiful things themselves, ‘composite’. It is also necessary, however, and, like the representations of a tarnished mirror that looks back at the world whether we want it to or not, bound to occur, no matter if human desires sway one way or another. Moritz thus opens up a narrow but largely unexplored path for aesthetics: like Kant’s third *Critique*, it insists that a true judgement of the beautiful must be disinterested and without purpose, but it does so without breaking with earlier theories of the universe’s perfection. The ‘Attempt to Unify’ stresses the necessity of a subjective encounter with a beautiful artwork, but concludes by asserting the radical contingency of this encounter: it is something that is bound to happen, but we can never say how or why.<sup>49</sup> Like the ‘tarnished

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<sup>46</sup> ‘Attempt to Unify’, p. 99.

<sup>47</sup> As Rice shows, this pleasure is both passive and active. ‘Spinoza’s Relativistic Aesthetics’, p. 484.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Attempt to Unify’, p. 100.

<sup>49</sup> Zumbusch discusses the ambiguous image of the ‘mirror’ in Moritz’s ‘On the Signature of the Beautiful’. For Moritz, according to Zumbusch, the mirror shows how beauty oscillates between an image of metaphysical greatness and a sign of a subjective attitude whereby the subject only comes to see themselves. See *Immunität*, pp. 100-01. For an important discussion of the image of the mirror in *Elective Affinities*, turning around the problem of the term *Folie*—which designates the material backdrop or ‘tain’ of a mirror and thus problematizes the mirror’s metaphorical function—see J. Hillis Miller, ‘Review Essay: Translating the Untranslatable’, *Goethe Yearbook*, 5 (1990), 269-78.



mirror' that reflects back an image whether we wish it to or not, the reception of an artwork can be important purely for its insignificant and almost asignifying recalcitrance: criticism continues to take place and to modulate the linguistic sphere of artworks, in spite of its inability to add anything.

### 3. Breaking Step: Goethe's Theory and Practice of Criticism

As we have seen, Goethe's reaction to the hostile reception that greeted *Elective Affinities* upon its publication echoed the novel's most pronounced staging of the limits of criticism: Charlotte's confoundment at the Captain's admonition of her planning of the park. In the wake of criticism of his novel, Goethe voiced his disillusion with the reading public and—echoing Moritz—asserted his belief that the public was unfit to criticize works of art, given their essential separation from the productive energies of the artist. As the above reading of Moritz suggests, though, there is a complex and entangled relation between the theoretical recognition of a work's autonomy and the contingent business of criticism against which that recognition comes into relief: almost against himself, Moritz implicitly suggests that only with the latter can the former be manifested, thus undoing the putative priority of the work's circular and all-encompassing organicism and instead advocating the destabilizing position that a work's totality only really comes to life with its irreducibly textual, and thus inherently destabilizing, repetition. Whereas Goethe's reaction to the critical reception of his work emphasizes his philosophical belief in any individual work's singularity and uncriticizability, his own critical practice testifies—like Moritz's philosophical treatises—to the impossibility of upholding this idea in practice.

Goethe, in other words, practices criticism in spite of his belief in the uncriticizability of works. This curious situation forms a crux that prevents any clear picture of Goethe's theory of criticism from taking shape. Against this limit, which practically every attempt to provide an overview of Goethe's contribution to literary and art criticism encounters, the diversity, occasionality and contingency of Goethe's critical writing comes into view.<sup>50</sup> Rather than simply admitting the impossibility of a coherent picture of Goethe's understanding of criticism, and instead affirming the sheer heterogeneity of his critical writing, however, this body of work's

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<sup>50</sup> As René Wellek proposes, the difficulty of consolidating an idea of Goethe's critical activity is almost unsurpassable: 'One must go to Goethe's private letters, notes, and conversations to get anything like a complete picture of his literary opinions. Many of his most striking judgments are made casually, when he feels free to speak his mind and can use a less formal tone. He dislikes polemics and avoids public pronouncements on his critics and enemies.' Wellek, *Modern Criticism*, p. 201, p. 223. As Wellek reaffirms, 'a survey of Goethe's literary opinions hardly seems called for. It would be in effect a survey of the world's literature; and since many of Goethe's pronouncements are only *obiter dicta*, not analyses, they throw little light on principles' (p. 224).

irreducibly plural nature should be considered precisely in relation to the demand that the work be uncriticizable. Goethe's critical writings, then, can be considered like the 'piecework' the Captain accuses Charlotte's park of being: whereas from one perspective it is the product of a mind that 'dares not venture to remove this or that obstacle, isn't bold enough to sacrifice anything, cannot imagine in advance what is supposed to be created from', from another it is the index of a tension between the uncriticizable autonomy of the work and its inevitable exposure to criticism. In other words, Goethe's critical practice outlines again and again the demand that the work be uncriticizable, alongside the unattainability of this demand.

Before returning to *Elective Affinities*, a clearer picture of this tension can be gleaned from some of Goethe's critical and theoretical remarks about literature. In a letter of 14 November 1808, Goethe writes to his publisher, Johann Friedrich Cotta, that '[g]enuine works of art carry their own aesthetic theory implicit within them and suggest the standards according to which they are to be judged'.<sup>51</sup> Goethe's claim clearly shares an insight common to early German Romanticism: that judgement, rather than an evaluation imposed from the outside and advanced according to what Goethe elsewhere terms an 'an imaginary standard' that serves only the interest of the critic, should be immanent to a work of art.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, the nature of the immanent criticism at stake here is different from the kind theorized by Romanticism and explored in Chapter 2: here, the work carries a 'standard' for criticism that, apparently immune to the historically or contextually-inflected position of interpreters, is embedded within its self-enclosed totality. Like Moritz's image of the tarnished mirror, which mutely and ineffectively represents an artwork back into the world, this relocation of critical activity to the work itself fundamentally diminishes the critical responsibility for interpretation and judgement. Whereas for Romanticism (to condense the explicit reading offered by Benjamin's doctoral dissertation), criticism refers an individual work to the totality of works comprising the idea of art, Goethe's notion of criticism limits the insights of any critic to an affirmation of the intentions of the artist.

Confusingly, perhaps, Goethe's name for this—which he opposes to 'destructive criticism'—is 'productive criticism':

The former is very easy: for one need only set up an imaginary standard, some model or other, however foolish it may be, and then boldly assert that the work of art under consideration does not measure up to that standard, and therefore is of no value. That settles the matter and one can without further ado declare that the poet has not come up

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<sup>51</sup> WA: IV.20.215.

<sup>52</sup> Cited in Wellek, *Modern Criticism*, pp. 223-224.

to one's requirements. In this way the critic frees himself of all obligations of gratitude toward the artist. Productive criticism is much harder. It asks: what did the author set out to do? Was his plan reasonable and sensible, and how far did he succeed in carrying it out? If these questions are answered with discernment and sympathy, we may be of real assistance to the author in his later works.<sup>53</sup>

Criticism is productive, Goethe seems to suggest, only from a purely pragmatic point of view: as in the contemporary idiom 'constructive criticism', the critic's task is to assist the author in improving their future works, rather than contributing to the philosophical recognition and transformation of the present one. As Benjamin's diagnosis, to be explored in Chapter 4, suggests, Goethe's theory of 'productive criticism' seems to leave little space for genuine novelty in acts of criticism. Nonetheless, one implication of Goethe's theory might sound another echo of Moritz's text: like the representations of the 'tarnished mirror', criticism is necessarily 'productive' in spite of its non-productive nature, a possibility that demands a reconsideration of what its productivity and unproductivity might mean.

This possibility, and Goethe's own understanding of the divergence of his own notion of the 'standard' from Romanticism, can be gleaned in a letter to Schiller of 28 April 1797, in which he discusses Schlegel's reading of *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*. Here, Goethe characterizes Schlegel's understanding of epic poetry as anachronistic, considering it to be guided by a 'more recent idea', which sees the works as 'more dismembered than they really are', a condition under which a text, having apparently forgone its unity, 'ceases to be a poem'.<sup>54</sup> Goethe continues: 'For the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, even though they may have passed through the hands of a thousand poets and editors, show the powerful tendency of poetic and critical nature towards unity.' For Goethe, criticism does not disrupt or distort the eternal unity of either of these poems. In fact, he is less concerned with how criticism affects poetry, still less how it completes it, than with what poetry allows us to say about criticism: the survival of a poem as a unity, despite the diverse contexts in which it is received across geographical and temporal distances, 'shows' the 'tendency' of criticism and poetry to tend toward unity. This claim appears to align Goethe's theory with the most famous of empiricist theories of reception, namely Hume's 'Of the Standard of Taste' (which employed the same example to make its point).<sup>55</sup> In arguing for the immanence of a standard, one that

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<sup>53</sup> Cited in Wellek, *Modern Criticism*, p. 224.

<sup>54</sup> WA IV.12.105.

<sup>55</sup> By placing readers in a 'state of nature', as Goethe argues in one of the *Maxims and Reflections*, poems of the classical tradition in fact relieve us of 'the frightful burden which the tradition of several thousand years has rolled upon us'. *The Maxims and Reflections of Goethe*, trans. by T. Bailey Saunders (London; New York: MacMillan, 1906), p. 162 (Maxim 447).

criticism can only confirm, Goethe's position appears to be in league with the view that 'taste', rather than forming a community of potential but non-coercive agreement, is simply what it has become.

Whereas this letter foregrounds the conservative aspects of Goethe's belief in poetry's resistance to criticism, a terminological example can serve to elucidate the shape and complexity of Goethe's thought. The word pair *Haltung* (which might be translated as 'bearing', 'composure', or 'behaviour') and *Erhaltung* ('conservation', 'maintenance', or 'preservation') illustrates the link between a 'standard' and its survival. *Haltung* captures, at one level, the way a person holds or moves their limbs or vocal chords, as for example in Goethe's 'Rules for Actors', whose prescriptions for bodily gesture and tonal expression even extend to a section called 'The Bearing of the Actor in Everyday Life' (*Haltung des Schauspielers im gewöhnlichen Leben*). The term can also, however, denote the way someone or something behaves, comports, or carries themselves: as with the Greek term *hexis*, the inseparability of one's actions from one's essence means that *Haltung* also denotes inner attitude, disposition or character, traits that have a duration, but which nonetheless remain inseparable from physiological existence.

The temporality of *Haltung* is thus intimately linked to a theme of the highest importance for classicist aesthetic theories: *Erhaltung*, meaning preservation or conservation against loss, destruction, death or transformative processes. Goethe indeed recognizes how art relies upon a relationship between the physical manipulation of matter and the maintenance of this gesture. The title of the *Propylaea*, the periodical he founded with Johann Heinrich Mayer in 1798, self-consciously sought to substantiate an intermediary zone such as that between *Haltung* and *Erhaltung*. The inaugural issue's introduction sought to express, and paradoxically conserve, the transience of 'a step, a gate, an entrance, an antechamber, an area between the inside and the outside, between the sacred and the profane'.<sup>56</sup> Goethe here notes that art's task (and its rarity, on account of this task's difficulty) lies not only in its manipulation of 'raw material' (*rober Stoff*),<sup>57</sup> but in its preservation of this gesture: "The German artist, and any modern northern artist, finds it difficult if not impossible to transition from the formless to form [*Formlosen zur Gestalt*], and even if he were to penetrate this point, to maintain it [*zu erhalten*]."<sup>58</sup> By emphasizing the fragility of any transition between *Haltung* and *Erhaltung*, Goethe demonstrates a fact that any productive criticism has to take into account: even the existence of a work of art cannot be taken for granted, if a work is at once a gesture of formation *and* the ongoing tension which maintains and

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<sup>56</sup> 'Introduction to the Propylaea', *Essays on Art and Literature*, pp. 78-90 (pp. 78-79); WA I.47.5; translation modified.

<sup>57</sup> 'Propylaea', p. 81; WA I.47.12.

<sup>58</sup> 'Propylaea', p. 85; WA I.47.20-21; translation modified.

upholds that gesture.<sup>59</sup> Criticism, it follows, might lie in the in-between space of the ‘step’ itself, in that which at once belongs to the work of art and estranges it from itself. If Goethe shows that criticism adds nothing to the work of art, it is because—like Moritz—he sees the work’s standard not as a guarantee of its self-sufficiency, but as an agent of its self-differing, its inability to ever fully close in on itself. Criticism, these passages suggest, draws our attention to this. Like the awkward design of Charlotte’s park, which the Captain laments but which Goethe perhaps secretly celebrates, it breaks our step at every moment.

Just as *Haltung* immediately demands *Erhaltung*, thus surrendering its self-identical character, the latter is an equally heterogenous term. Within the parameters of Goethe’s writing on art, the word’s meaning and function were liable to change, as if the singular gesture of *Erhaltung* could all too easily slip into a generalizing conservatism: ‘As noble as the antique exhibition is’, Goethe writes in the *Italian Journey* about a visit to an exhibition of ancient sculptures in Verona, ‘it is obvious that the noble conservation [*edle Erhaltungsg Geist*], which founded it, no longer lives in it [*nicht mehr in ihr fortlebt*]’.<sup>60</sup> Just as Kant’s third *Critique* held that ‘spirit’ (*Geist*) was the ‘animating principle’ required to make a work that was original rather than merely imitative, *Erhaltung* demands an *Erhaltungsg Geist* if it itself is to be kept alive rather than simply memorializing what was alive. Since this *Geist* is capable of renewing itself like a living body but one that is always different from itself—both an animating spirit and a spectre of difference—*Erhaltung*, Goethe implies, is not simply the conservation of a discrete form, but the conservation of conservation itself, its conservation *against* all determined forms of conservation, a paradox that allows *Erhaltung*, like the subterranean ‘standard’ shared between Romanticism and Goethe, to be rendered present only in the most minimal traces.

The inscription of a ‘standard’ in every work of art, however, raises a further question, one that is of perennial interest to anyone concerned with the relation between literature and theory, or in the relation between life and writing. If a work necessarily leaves traces of its own standard whether it is commented upon or not, if it exists only by virtue of maintaining and renewing its unique point of emergence, then what exactly is at stake—or what is the point—in drawing theoretical attention to something that ‘happens’ anyway? Goethe’s scattered theoretical

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<sup>59</sup> As Kevin McLaughlin argues in a perceptive reading of Benjamin’s ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’ essay, an investigation of *Erhaltung* may shed light on Benjamin’s own understanding of the relation between truth content and material content. *Erhaltung* does not simply conserve a supposedly substantial truth content (*Gehalt*), McLaughlin argues, with reference to the novella embedded within *Elective Affinities*; rather, the novella bears a certain ‘bearing’ (*Erhaltung*) itself. McLaughlin, ‘The Coming of Paper: Aesthetic Value from Ruskin to Benjamin’, *MLN*, 114.5 (1999), 962-990 (pp. 979-80).

<sup>60</sup> WA I.30.63-64.

reflections may simply amount to a ‘critical relativism’, an ‘emphasis on good intention’ that is unable to evaluate works beyond the measure of how well they achieve the aims of the author.<sup>61</sup> As Goethe himself suggests, criticism may simply be a register of the ‘influence’ that books have on a reader, a privileged node of the ‘pragmatic maxim’ that ‘only what is fruitful is true’.<sup>62</sup> More perilously, Goethe’s theoretical interventions might simply work to create confusion, like his remarks in the wake of the publication of *Elective Affinities*. If these interpretations of Goethe’s understanding of criticism appear to have largely determined the reception of *Elective Affinities*—and the reception of its reception—one intention of this chapter is to propose that this could occur only on the basis of a particular mode of ascribing literary value, an ethos which esteems only that which is novel, productive and visible.

In short, Goethe’s novel challenges the dominion of an epistemology of literature that is invariably, perhaps inevitably, accompanied by social norms that moralize *about* the application of epistemological laws, and relegate anything non-confirming to the margins.<sup>63</sup> In contrast, one insight of Goethe’s theory is that criticism can say something by not saying anything. Considered from this perspective, rather than being simply tautologous, Goethe’s theoretical writing on art and literature functions, like literary language itself, as a (critical) comment upon the positivism of an epistemological-social nexus: in this case, Goethean criticism disrupts the notion of criticism as an activity that considers itself, like the organic being, as a whole, as wholly self-present, and thus as capable of responding to itself without having to account for the linguistic difference introduced *into* such a system by acts of criticism.<sup>64</sup> Against the idealizing reduction of the history of literature and criticism to the shared construction of a public who could collaboratively identify and generate meaning, Goethe’s acute sensitivity to the contingency and fragility of the processes by which works of art come into being and survive draws attention,

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<sup>61</sup> Wellek, *Modern Criticism*, p. 224.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Some of my well-wishing readers have told me for a long time that instead of exposing a judgement on books, I describe the influence they have had on me. And at bottom this is the way all readers criticize, even if they do not communicate an opinion and formulate ideas about it to the public.’ WA I.37.279-80; cited in Wellek, p. 224.

<sup>63</sup> I draw here on a Kantian problem articulated by Rei Terada’s compelling attempt to delineate a more complementary relationship between the first and third *Critique* by showing that the need for the latter arises in part because of the social coercion of the insights about ‘fact perception’ in the former: ‘fact perception, as the application of concepts to object perception, is epistemic, but society moralizes epistemology, makes its requirements into social obligations’. Terada, *Looking Away*, p. 111.

<sup>64</sup> For an account of the emergence of an organic notion of literary-critical life as a significant cultural form for the intellectual self-understanding of the nation-state in nineteenth century Germany, to which Goethe is opposed, see Peter Uwe Hohendahl (ed.), ‘Literary Criticism in the Epoch of Liberalism, 1820-70’, trans. by Jeffrey S. Librett, in *A History of German Literary Criticism, 1730-1980* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), pp. 179-276. See also Angus Nicholls, ‘Goethe, Romanticism and the Anglo-American Critical Tradition’, *Romanticism on the Net*, 28 (2002) <<https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ron/2002-n28-ron560/007207ar/>> [accessed 17 July 2018] (para 22 of 54).

paradoxically, to the *necessity* of critical reading, what more recent critics such as Paul de Man and Carol Jacobs would identify as an epistemological event that necessarily occurs prior to an ethical or aesthetic decision.<sup>65</sup> This dimension of literary-critical practice registers the continued and perhaps unassimilable influence of materialist philosophies of nature on literary-critical appropriations of organicism. Even in the early nineteenth century, *Elective Affinities* was condemned for its apparent recourse to a ‘physiological’ model of life, as Jacobi, referencing Schelling, wrote to Köpper on 12 January 1810: “This work of Goethe’s is materialist through and through, or, as Schelling puts it, purely physiological.”<sup>66</sup> Rather than being a living, organic community of texts and commentators, which would imply that it is infinitely alive, and thus not really alive at all, criticism, Goethe’s writing suggests, is instead born anew each time, introducing an ellipsis into the organic model of literary-critical life.

#### 4. Writing ‘nothing’: *Elective Affinities* and the Impossibility of Unproductivity

Goethe’s critical practice—fictionally reconstructed in the staging of an uncriticizable ‘artwork’ embedded within *Elective Affinities*—is guided by his reception of Spinoza and Leibniz’s philosophical corpuses, as they were taken up and modified by eighteenth-century theories of art. Goethe’s pieced-together theory of art criticism questions whether anything new can ever be said about artworks, and seems to respond in the negative. His denial of this possibility, as has been suggested however, not only relocates the difference that criticism is able to make (according to early German Romanticism) to the level of the work of art itself. It also—again, like Moritz’s text—furtively encourages readers to consider what might be at stake in a practice of criticism that is constitutively incapable of adding anything new to its object, and yet continues unabated. The problem of ‘uncriticizability’, and the practice of criticism, therefore speaks not only to the *substantial* question of whether works of art are autonomous and self-enclosed totalities or entities reliant upon subjective determination (or even something in between). These are the options that Moritz’s text begins with, not the radically decentred argument his treatises eventually articulate, whose oscillations are echoed by means of citation in Goethe’s *Italian Journey*. Much more pointedly, precisely insofar as its demand is never heeded, ‘uncriticizability’

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<sup>65</sup> In other words, Goethe exemplifies what de Man has identified as the foremost feature of Jacobs’ early critical practice: that in going ‘against the grain of what one would want to happen in the name of what has to happen [...] she does openly what we have no choice but to do anyway’. Paul de Man, ‘Foreword’ to Carol Jacobs, *The Dissimulating Harmony: The Image of Interpretation in Nietzsche, Rilke, Artaud, and Benjamin* (London; Baltimore, MA: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. vii-xiii (p. xi-xii).

<sup>66</sup> Cited in Norbert Bolz, ‘Die Wahlverwandtschaften’, in *Goethe-Handbuch*, ed. by Bernd Witte et al, 4 vols. (Stuttgart; Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 1996-1999), III (1997), pp. 152-86 (pp. 152-53).

registers a problem that continued to preoccupy Spinozism and all philosophies (or fundamental ontologies) that sought to account for nature's wholeness, including the *Naturphilosophie* that held sway around 1800, and theories of artistic production such as Moritz's: namely, why does an all-encompassing and lawful philosophy of nature require the supplement of law?<sup>67</sup> What does it mean that the most comprehensive philosophical systems are constructed and disseminated through texts that are inherently unfaithful to their objects?

*Elective Affinities* is in many ways a novel about the kind of fundamentally unproductive effect that Goethe imagines a paradoxically named 'productive' criticism to have. The novel constructs and navigates an epistemological terrain in which nothing new is or even can be said. Its narrative introduces plots that go nowhere, characters who add nothing, stories that tail off or which expound morals that go unheeded. Structurally, as commentators have long noticed, the novel repeats itself, being composed of two parts, each with eighteen chapters, and featuring a number of reiterated symbols and tropes. Reading it, and reading its internal readings, we trip up over ourselves, like we do—according to the Captain—on the path designed by Charlotte, a character who makes the observation that art offers not formal variety, but 'a thousand repetitions' (EA:159; WA:205). The novel, however, does not present this tendency to repetition as a homogeneous problem. Rather, if the novel at one level is a document of its own uncriticizability, and of the uncriticizability of natural laws, it is also about the inevitable violation of those laws in the processes of their articulation.

The novel dramatizes the idea of (its own) pure unproductivity, in short, but it also stages the impossibility of this very idea and its fracturing—or unweaving—into smaller, tangled wholes and multiple natures that can no longer be considered according to the 'organic' model of natural totality. If a work's uncriticizability relies, in its pure form, on its monadic separation from all other phenomena, Moritz's text implies that this absolute condition is never fully achievable; works are 'composite', after all, rather than the 'simple substances' Leibniz considers monads to be in the very first sentence of the *Monadology*.<sup>68</sup> This irony is further expounded in Goethe's novel. Rather than reflecting upon the criticizability of particular works of art, however, *Elective Affinities* considers (its own potential) uncriticizability by depicting not artworks, but human beings, as monadic entities. Doing so, as will be argued in this section, attests

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<sup>67</sup> As I seek to show at the conclusion of this chapter, this is inseparable from a political theme that is subtly probed in Goethe's novel: namely, the supposedly natural status of political forms such as 'rights' (including human rights). On this problem, in a different context which draws on John Locke and the Leveller Richard Overton, see Werner Hamacher, 'The One Right No One Ever Has', trans. Julia Ng, *Philosophy Today*, 61.4 (2018), 947-962. This question is pursued in relation to *Naturphilosophie* in Peter Fennes, 'Thankless Trouble: Ethical Contemplation of Nature', *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature*, 58 (2012), 57-70.

<sup>68</sup> Leibniz, 'The Principles of Philosophy, or, the Monadology', in *Philosophical Essays*, pp. 213-25 (p. 213).



exemplarily to the asymmetrical distribution of such ideas that we have already witnessed, for this characterization cannot be applied to nature or humanity per se, but is rather reserved for specific human beings, namely women: ‘Every woman by her nature excludes every other woman: for every woman is required to do everything the whole sex is required to do [*Jede Frau schließt die andre aus, ihrer Natur nach: denn von jeder wird alles gefordert, was dem ganzen Geschlechte zu leisten obliegt*]', suggests the Schoolmaster (EA:208; WA:281). Like every monad, ‘every woman’ is sealed unto herself as an individual, but she is also supposed to contain the non-individual, ‘natural’ functions of her ‘whole sex’ (the obvious implication, moreover, is that a woman’s natural function as a *woman* is that of reproducing humanity as *humanity*). When the novel touches most obviously on philosophies of nature, it demonstrates the impossibility of their seamless transferral into the lawless fields of social life, gender and textuality.

The first indication of this impossibility of a purely unproductive language arises in the novel’s very first chapter, during the discussion that takes place between Eduard and Charlotte regarding the potentially damaging effects of the Captain’s arrival on the couple’s domestic situation, whose fragility is explicitly voiced by Charlotte but ambiguously avoided by Eduard. Eduard is in favour of inviting his old friend to live on the estate, while Charlotte is wary of his potentially unsettling influence. When Charlotte reminds Eduard of the troublesome trajectory of their own relationship—both were compelled for financial and familial reasons to enter into loveless marriages with others—Eduard responds by asserting that the balance of the household will not be upset but simply vivified: he expresses ‘the thought that the Captain’s presence will disturb nothing, but rather expedite and enliven everything [*alles beschleunigt und neu belebt*’ (EA:24; WA:11). Eduard’s reply leverages a trope common to contemporaneous discourses on life and animation (*Belebung*), asserting that only an intensification of the domestic sphere’s living balance, rather than a redistribution of its parts or functions, is possible. His confidence, in other words, lies in the totalizing infinitude of the idea of life.<sup>69</sup> This is predicated, however, on a blindness to particular effects, which reveals over the course of the novel a failure to comprehend what is at stake in the relation between science and human relationships, above all with regard to the metaphorical character of ‘elective affinities’.<sup>70</sup>

Eduard’s faith in the balance of the household is soon contradicted by Charlotte’s assertion that the similarity of their respective positions in relation to the Captain and Otilie,

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<sup>69</sup> Eduard’s confidence would be another example of what Hillis Miller refers to as ‘taking anastomosis [...] in its most positive sense, as a channel between two independent entities in which one supports and vivifies the other.’ See J. Hillis Miller, ‘Interlude as Anastomosis in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*’ *Goethe Yearbook*, 6 (1992), 115-22 (p. 120).

<sup>70</sup> See Claudia Brodsky, ‘The Coloring of Relations: *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* as *Farbenlebre*’, *MLN*, 97.5 (December 1982), 1147-1179.

whom Charlotte now wishes to invite from boarding school, does not amount to a nullifying equilibrium. For Charlotte, the difficulty the two protagonists are put in calls for sympathetic solidarity rather than an impersonal abdication of responsibility: ‘We both, you see, bear similar sorrows in a kind and loyal heart. Let us bear them together since they do not cancel one another out’ (EA:30; WA:18). Despite Eduard’s protestations, the novel’s first chapter ends as the couple tentatively resolve not to invite the Captain to the estate. Even their attempt to communicate this decision, however, becomes fraught, as what it means to communicate ‘nothing’ is subject to differentiation:

‘But what am I to write to the Captain?’ Eduard exclaimed, ‘for I am to set about it right away.’

‘A calm, sensible, soothing letter,’ said Charlotte.

‘That is as good as no letter at all,’ Eduard replied.

‘And yet,’ said Charlotte, ‘in many instances it is more necessary and more kind to write nothing than not to write.’ (EA:26; WA:13; translation modified)

This exchange, which concludes the chapter, revises what ‘nothing’ can mean, as Charlotte recognizes it to be meaningful only in a linguistic or textual context. In the previous passage, Eduard disregards Charlotte’s concerns on the grounds that the Captain’s arrival will disturb ‘nothing’—though the fact that Charlotte’s resolve is eventually worn down attests to the originary imbalance of this provisional settlement: ‘I do not feel strong enough to oppose you any longer’, she eventually concedes (EA:35; WA:26). Here, on the other hand, Charlotte shows that ‘nothing’ is never a neutral signifier. Perhaps drawing on literary challenges to how ‘nothing’ operates in the context of ‘life’ (such as the preface to Kant’s ‘Dreams of a Spirit-Seer’, which ‘promises nothing’ to its reader), Charlotte’s reply shows that ‘nothing’ has at least a dual reality: it is impossible, insofar as it is the dream of an entirely balanced life, yet it is possible as the index of how language can operate in fluid situations.<sup>71</sup>

Goethe also presents this problem as one pertaining to the relation between fate and agency. The social tensions brought to the surface by the arrival of Otilie and the Captain are not merely denied or neglected by the characters as a homogenous group that collapses nature into fate (as readings inspired by Walter Benjamin’s essay often suggest); rather, the tensions that

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<sup>71</sup> I draw here on important work carried out in a different context by Elaine Showalter. See especially ‘Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism’, in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. by Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 77-94.

arise solicit fundamentally different responses indicative of the different ways this relation is upheld.<sup>72</sup> The narrator regularly suggests not only that the idea of ‘necessity’ influences how the characters understand and orient themselves in relation to surrounding events: the characterization of Eduard, more particularly, indicates how necessity can be *valued*, an activity—the novel seems to suggest—that deforms the character of necessity, insofar as it is forced to accord to subjective preconceptions. When there is general unease about the extent of Otilie’s birthday celebrations, we read that ‘Eduard did not want to speak about it because according to him, everything should happen as if of its own accord, surprisingly, and of course pleasingly’ (EA:120; WA:152). Toward the conclusion of the novel, Eduard’s imbrications of desire and necessity—his intentional endeavours to give value to the accident—become so frequent as not to be merely accidental: ‘He didn’t resist: he had to do it’ justifies his decision to stage an encounter with Otilie (EA:279; WA:385); ‘And so he stayed as he wanted to, as he had to [*Und so blieb er, wie er wollte, wie er mußte*]’ (EA: 286; WA:396).

Indicating that this is not merely a problem pertaining to individual characters, but an epistemological and linguistic one, the process of binding value to necessity even inflects the voice of the narrator. In the final paragraph of the twelfth chapter, the novel is still employing a familiar past tense to weave a complex picture of Charlotte’s emotional state. ‘But now she was standing in her bedroom,’ the paragraph begins, ‘where she had to feel and regard herself as Eduard’s wife [*Nun aber stand sie in ihrem Schlafzimmer, wo sie sich als Gattin Eduards empfinden und betrachten mußte*]’ (EA:112; WA:140). The ambiguous sense of compulsion that Charlotte feels—the modal verb *mußte* forces us to question even the apparent immediacy of feeling—is confirmed in the paragraph’s final sentence, which describes a ‘sweet weariness’ (*süße Müdigkeit*) taking hold of her as she falls asleep. At the beginning of the thirteenth chapter, however, the novel switches suddenly to a discomfiting present tense: ‘Eduard is for his part in quite a different mood [*Eduard von seiner Seite ist in einer ganz verschiedenen Stimmung*]’ (EA:113; WA:141). Just as quickly, however, does it retreat to the past tense—only to switch back yet again, the final few paragraphs recounting in the present tense the diverse states of the characters, and concluding with the following sketch:

So everyone carries on with their daily lives, each in their own way, with and without reflection. Everything appears to be taking its usual course, just as a person, even in

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<sup>72</sup> See for example, N.K. Leacock, ‘Character, Silence, and the Novel: Walter Benjamin on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*’, *Narrative*, 10.3 (October 2002), 277-306.

monstrous cases—when everything is at stake—always, still, lives on, as if nothing were ever said. (EA:118; translation modified)

*So setzen alle zusammen, jeder auf seine Weise, das tägliche Leben fort, mit und ohne Nachdenken; alles scheint seinen gewöhnlichen Gang zu gehen, wie man auch in ungeheuren Fällen, wo alles auf dem Spiele steht, noch immer so fortlebt, als wenn von nichts die Rede wäre.* (WA:149)

At the level of plot and narrative voice, *Elective Affinities* dramatizes what it might mean to live a life ‘as if nothing were said’. This panorama, with its subtle transition from *fortsetzen* (carrying on) to *fortleben* (living on, or lingering on, or even ‘living away’) moreover, incorporates the problem of life into this question.<sup>73</sup> In so doing, the novel queries what it means for anything to live on—to survive—on the putative condition that it cannot be spoken of.

These references to balance, vivification and distribution—and to the possibility and impossibility of saying ‘nothing’—prepare readers for what is perhaps the novel’s most famous scene, in which the eponymous scientific theory of ‘elective affinities’ is announced and explicated. Appositely, this scene unfolds at the same time as language is announced to be tautologous in the context of science: the Captain comment that ‘it sounds truly curious when you express something that goes without saying [*Es klingt freilich Wunderlich, wenn man etwas ausspricht, was sich ohnehin versteht*]’ (EA:51; WA: 48-49). This moment of reflection on language’s possible superfluity pertains immediately to the chemical theory in question, for the Captain has just begun to explain the concept of elective affinities by noting that the first thing we observe about all natural phenomena is that ‘they have a relation of adherence to themselves [*daß sie einen Bezug auf sich selbst haben*]’ (EA:51; WA:48; translation modified). A thing’s relation (its *Bezug*) to itself, as Charlotte then surmises, allows us to consider the relationships shared between things: ‘Just as each thing has an adherence to itself, so it must also have a relationship to other things [*Wie jedes gegen sich selbst einen Bezug hat, so muß es auch gegen andere ein Verhältnis haben*]’ (EA:52; WA:49-50). The priority of relation displaces the identity of any given thing; the mere fact of adherence reveals that relations structure what we consider to be unalloyed identities. In a novel that consistently evokes the tension between natural laws and their errant articulations, however, this is not all. The Captain’s remark questions what it means to speak about such theories;

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<sup>73</sup> A compelling investigation of the way the nominalized verb *Fortleben* describe translation in the work of Benjamin can be found in Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities*. Like Goethe here, Weber identifies in Benjamin’s essay on translation a sense in which life has always-already escaped the attempt to capture it: ‘*Fortleben* is a life that already is moving elsewhere: a life lost in translation’. Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities*, p. 67.

precisely when the (scientific, chemical, but also metaphorical) precedence of ‘relation’ is affirmed, subverting the priority of identity, the novel queries the communicability of this law.

As the character whose enquiries first inaugurate the discussion, Charlotte’s interventions reveal a receptivity that best dramatizes these tensions. ‘Be assured of my full attention [*Sein Sie meiner ganzer Aufmerksamkeit versichert*]’ she tells Eduard and the Captain (EA:51; WA:48). Her attention, however, encompasses an openness that exceeds what her fellow protagonists are willing to offer: Charlotte consistently asks about the specific, contextual meaning of the scientific terms in question, which are left ambiguously, and deliberately, open by Eduard and the Captain, as Charlotte’s mannered but pointed rejoinder suggests: ‘As I do not wish to lead you too far away from the present subject [...] I wonder if you would tell me just briefly what is actually meant here by affinities [*wie es eigentlich hier mit den Verwandtschaften gemeint sei*]?’ (EA:50; WA:47). As soon this question is asked, however, Eduard and the Captain begin to reflect on the general conditions of modern science which dictate that knowledge becomes quickly outdated, prompting another measured but firm response from Charlotte: “‘We woman are not so particular about that,’” said Charlotte; “and, to be frank, all I am really interested in is knowing what the word means; for nothing makes you look so silly in society as to misapply an unfamiliar coinage [*Kunstwort*]. That is why all I want to know is in what sense this expression is employed in the present context’ (EA:50-51; WA:48).

As well as cutting through her interlocutors’ ambiguous employment of the term ‘elective affinities’, Charlotte also intuits its famously double metaphorical character.<sup>74</sup> Not only does the scientific theory of ‘elective affinities’ provide the model according to which the social drama of the plot seems to develop; moreover, the scientific term is itself transposed from the realm of human relationships, as Goethe’s own advertisement for the novel made clear. Charlotte articulates the term’s dual character not by tracing its original meaning, however, but by asserting that the metaphor might better apply to social formations:

‘It doesn’t take much,’ said Charlotte, ‘to see in these simple forms people one has known; what they especially suggest is the social circles in which we live. But most similar of all to these inanimate things are the masses which stand over against one another in the world: the classes, the professions, the nobility and the third estate, the soldier and the civilian.’ (EA:52; WA:50)

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<sup>74</sup> See Christina Lupton, ‘The Made, The Give, and the Work of Art: A Dialectical Reading of Goethe’s *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*’, *New German Critique*, 88 (Winter 2003), 165-190 (p. 188).

Charlotte goes on to further unfold the possible social significance of the chemical theory: ‘It is in just this way that truly meaningful friendships can arise among human beings: for antithetical qualities make possible a closer and more intimate union’ (EA:53; WA:51). Though these accounts of the social implications of elective affinities seem at first to be speculative, likely misguided attempts to draw links between scientific forms and social life, the major insight of Charlotte’s intervention is a negative rather than positive one. It is Charlotte, after all, who most forcefully *denaturalizes* the theory of ‘elective affinities’ by noting in the same interjection that ‘when you call all these curious entities of yours affined, they appear to me to possess not so much an affinity of blood as an affinity of spirit and soul [*wenn Sie diese Ihre wunderlichen Wesen verwandt nennen, so kommen sie mir nicht sowohl als Blutsverwandte, vielmehr als Geistes- und Seelenverwandte vor*]’. On the one hand, Charlotte’s remark simply reaffirms the idea that chemical elements, like human beings, have an apparent capacity for choice, which supersedes their mechanical determination. Yet *Geist* hardly acts as a positive determinant of the kind of choice at stake, implying less the carrying-over of a scientific theory into a social context, than an indication that the scientific theory can have no substantial reality for human beings at the level of what is usually understood to govern human affinity or kinship.<sup>75</sup> Most obviously, the chemical theory of elective affinities, so Charlotte implies, cannot entail the (ultimately theological, especially Christian, and now thoroughly discredited) notion that natural entities, human beings included, are related to one another through the transmission of blood. Rather than fortifying the pre-subjective relationality that is shared between human and non-human beings, the notion of *Geistesverwandte* indicates a space of non-determination or even non-relation. The social context—as all that remains—is the real, undetermined field at which ‘affinities’ occur: this, rather than the proleptic construction of Otilie as the ‘D’ to the ‘A’, ‘B’ and ‘C’ of the other protagonists, might be the lesson of the scene.<sup>76</sup>

## 5. Sacrifice and the Discourse of Rights

By exposing the supposedly fundamental relationality of human and non-human beings to the indeterminate arena of social life—and so to a linguistic determinability that is the condition of both possibility and impossibility for a truly unproductive language—*Elective Affinities* positions the problem of uncriticizability as, in equal parts, a register and a concealer of this indeterminacy

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<sup>75</sup> A similar decentring of the thetic scientific argument in the novel is made in Johannes Twardella, ‘Experimente im Treibhaus der Moderne. Versuch einer kommunikationstheoretischen Analyse von Goethes “Wahlverwandtschaften”’, *Neophilologus*, 83.3 (July 1999), 445-60.

<sup>76</sup> My reading chimes on this point with that of Hillis Miller. See ‘Interlude as Anastomosis’, p. 116.

(and of its subsequent overdeterminations). In other words, the novel becomes a privileged lens for considering the relation between criticism, uncriticizability and their attendant mythologies. Nowhere is this more apparent than the novel's consistent evocation of the idea and language of 'rights', whose status as a natural quality of human beings is consistently tested.

References to 'rights' punctuate the novel and often facilitate pertinent shifts between registers. At the end of the eleventh chapter of the first part of the novel, Eduard and Charlotte encounter one another in the night, though their thoughts still lie with their respective objects of desire, Otilie and the Captain. The notorious 'double infidelity' (*doppel Ehebrüche*) scene that follows references existing legal rights—presumably, above all, Eduard's sexual 'right' to his wife—before seeming to transpose the category of 'right' onto other affects.<sup>77</sup> In the first instance, Eduard loses sight of his legal privileges: 'he didn't think of the fact that he had rights [*er dachte nicht daran, daß er Rechte haben*]' (EA:106; WA:131; translation modified). When such 'rights' recede from view, however, imagination and (sexual) inclination assert themselves in the same legal form: 'In the lamplit twilight inner inclination and the imagination at once asserted their rights over the real [*In der Lampendämmerung sogleich behauptete die innre Neigung, behauptete die Einbildungskraft ihre Rechte über das Wirkliche*]. Only with this emergence and entanglement of the 'rights' of imagination and inclination is Eduard (and with him Charlotte) able to combine his desires: 'and so, miraculously enough, the absent and the present wove themselves into one another, charmingly and blissfully' (*und so verwebten, wundersam genug, sich Abwesendes und Gegenwärtiges reizend und wonnevoll durcheinander*).

Whereas this passage suggests—as if approximating a parody of the surviving legal terminology in Kant's third *Critique*—that the reframing of imagination and inclination as 'rights' accommodates their differences in a harmonious interplay, the opening of the following paragraph strips away the temporary feeling of harmony thus induced: 'And yet the present will not be robbed of its monstrous right [*Und doch läßt sich die Gegenwart ihr ungeheures Recht nicht rauben*]. The monstrous nature of the present's 'right', which seems to oppose the 'charming' intertwinement of presence and absence, of the real and imaginary, appears so destructive not only because it confirms that present sexual inclinations are bound to win out against imagined relationships, but also because, in the context of the novel, it is apparently inseparable from the rueful unfolding of the future events that are the effect of such inclinations. The conclusion to the first entry of Otilie's diary cited in the novel posits a similar idea, noting, via a discussion of portraiture, that the 'second life' of art is as ephemeral as human life: 'As over people, so over

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<sup>77</sup> On the ambiguity of rights in this scene, see Judith Ryan, 'Kunst und Ehebruch: Zum Nachleben von Goethes *Wahlverwandschaften*', *Goethe Yearbook*, 3 (1986), 179-196.

memorials time will not be deprived of its rights' (EA:165; WA:215). The right of time—which is always the right of the present—is so monstrous that it also makes a claim on what is to come, the novel suggests. On the one hand, this ambiguity serves to confirm the thesis about the predominance of myth in the novel, which drives the first section of Walter Benjamin's seminal essay: the sexual drives of the characters are not merely natural and innocent but are always already entwined with the mythical nexus of fate that passes guilt on to the next generation (here in the form of the child, born of this encounter, that is perceived to bear the features not of his 'biological' parents but of Otilie and the Captain). On the other hand, however, Goethe's framing of the scene as a contest of 'rights' itself acts as an ironic comment upon this unfolding of the novel. Only by strenuously upholding its 'right'—a legal convention as arbitrary as martial rights—is the matrix of present inclination and fate-like necessity able to stretch out over the novel, a circumstance that suggests the novel's awareness not only of its own complicity in maintaining this matrix but also of other possible manifestations of the link between human sexuality, imagination, and a narrative time that is not bound by the self-assurance of the legal present.

Only indirectly, however, does the novel open these alternative possibilities. The death of the child to which Charlotte gives birth is, like the death of Otilie, an event around which readings of the novel have long pivoted, and both have given rise, in particular, to interpretations of the role of sacrifice in the text. Less closely examined, however, is the closely related discourse of rights, which justify the child's death according to Eduard and the Captain. Their attempts to attribute value to the death are brought into relief against Charlotte's conflicted understanding of the event: she explicitly considers her own actions to have contributed to the death of the child—'through my hesitation and opposition I have killed my child'—and even after lamenting the apparent obstinacy of 'fate' (*Schicksal*), goes so far as to imagine this idea might be a byword for her own unconscious wishes: 'In reality, what fate is now doing is fulfilling my own desire, my own intention, which I have been thoughtlessly trying to thwart' (EA:266; WA:366-67). Charlotte's explanation no doubt appears to bear an overdeveloped sense of responsibility that morphs into the kind of guilt complex that would, around a century after the novel's publication, be identified by Freud. The text's unresolved and ambiguous presentation of Charlotte's act of self-judgement, moreover, suggests that psychoanalytic interpretation, of which this serves as a nascent example, is itself liable to issue in a totalizing mythology, generative, like guilt (or debt, *Schuld*), of its own proliferation.<sup>78</sup> When prompted by the Captain (now the Major) to consider

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<sup>78</sup> For an early psychoanalytic reading, which suggests Otilie's desire to drown the baby, see J. Hárnik, 'Psychoanalytisches aus und über Goethes *Wahlverwandtschaften*', *Imago: Zeitschrift für Anwendung der Psychoanalyse auf die Geisteswissenschaften*, 1 (1912), 507-18.



their potential future together, nonetheless, Charlotte offers a response that not only avoids a definitive evaluation of the event but troubles the possibility of any evaluation, inflecting her (non-)answer with a sense of indebtedness, and pitching herself between what it means to be indebted and what it means to deserve: ‘Let me owe you the answer to that [*Lassen Sie mich Ihnen die Antwort schuldig bleiben*]; ‘We have not been encumbered to be unhappy, but neither have we deserved to be happy together [*Wir haben nicht verschuldet unglücklich zu werden; aber auch nicht verdient zusammen glücklich zu sein*]’ (EA:267; WA:368; translation modified). Whereas at one level this response can be read as a calculative comment on a specific situation, or as an ambiguous retreat from decision, in a less local sense it suggests that Charlotte is capable—perhaps uniquely in this novel—of disentangling happiness and unhappiness from the spheres of value that govern notions of debt and guilt, on the one hand, and ‘right’ or ‘just deserts’ on the other.

In contrast, Eduard sees the child’s death as ‘fortunate’, while the Captain sees it even more emphatically as a righteous sacrifice:

The Major went away, deeply sorry for Charlotte, yet unable to regret the poor departed child. Such a sacrifice as this seemed to him necessary to their general happiness. He thought of Ottilie with a child of her own on her arm as the most perfect recompense for that of which she had deprived Eduard; he thought of a son of his own on his knee who would have more right than the departed child to bear his likeness. (EA:267)

*Der Major entfernte sich, Charlotten tief im Herzen beklagend, ohne jedoch das arme abgeschiedene Kind bedauern zu können. Ein solches Opfer schien ihm nöthig zu ihrem allseitigen Glück. Er dachte sich Ottilien mit einem eignen Kind auf dem Arm, als den vollkommensten Ersatz für das, was sie Eduarden geraubt; er dachte sich einen Sohn auf dem Schoose, der mit mehrerem Recht sein Ebenbild trüge, als der abgeschiedene. (WA:368)*

Like Eduard’s comments about necessity, the Major’s depiction of the child’s death as a necessary sacrifice is made in the service of an idea, in this case the fantasy of a child’s ‘right’ (or lack thereof) to bear his likeness (*Ebenbild*).<sup>79</sup> Insofar as he leverages the language of necessity, particularly in the context in which natural features are aestheticized, the Major draws the idea of natural right into the sphere in which the idea of art’s uncriticizability attains significance, where necessity, creation and judgement both support and thwart one another. This in turn relies upon a fantastical transactional sphere that also imagines a potential child born of Ottilie as a ‘most

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<sup>79</sup> For a reading of this scene and of the notion of *Ebenbild*, see Gabrielle Bersier, *Goethes Rätselparodie der Romantik. Eine neue Lesart der “Wahlverwandschaften”* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1997), pp. 125-38.

perfect recompense' (*vollkommensten Ersatz*) for the death of the baby Otto. The novel appears to highlight the imaginary nature of this idealized economy of 'general happiness' (*allseitigen Glück*) by bookending it with two instances of a far less dogmatic comportment: Charlotte's pained self-questioning, discussed above, and (at the opening of the next chapter) a depiction of Charlotte as turning 'so far as was possible for her [...] back towards life' (EA:270; WA373).

## 6. 'All rights are equal': Reception, Myth

In representing themselves as indispensable, the logic of sacrificial economy and the attendant idea of natural rights emphasize an apparently impersonal idea of relationality over and above the determinable, textual sphere of social relations that *Elective Affinities* hesitantly opens. To this extent, these forms of evaluation arguably share with the idea of art's uncriticizability a tendency to bestow upon human products a natural form. It is unsurprising, then, that this sacrificial logic was so integral to early twentieth-century readings of the novel which, arising at the height of Goethe's cultic exaltation, posited the novel as being beyond criticism, whilst seeking to determine it as the representational product of a timeless conflict between individual desires and impersonal cosmic forces or laws. From this perspective, manifested above all in Friedrich Gundolf's *Goethe* (1916), Otilie's death is recognized as a heroic sacrifice, an act of personal renunciation (*Entsagung*) that fulfils an impersonal law whose demands only she is adequate of meeting.<sup>80</sup> For Gundolf, for whom there is a natural distinction between masculine activity and feminine, plant-like passivity, the abundance of detail in the novel—rather than indicating the social and textual swerving of natural laws—only testifies to an abiding part-whole relationship between characters and cosmic forces.<sup>81</sup> Yet, contrary to Gundolf's mythical reading—to be explored further in the next chapter—the novel's frequent evocation of 'rights' both guarantees and undermines the matrix of natural law that is solicited to imbricate human and non-human life.

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<sup>80</sup> Friedrich Gundolf, *Goethe* (Berlin: Georg Bondi, 1916), pp. 548-75. For an alternative viewpoint on Otilie's vegetal nature, see Cornelia Zumbusch, 'The Metamorphosis of Otilie: Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften* and the Botany of the Eighteenth Century', *European Romantic Review*, 28.1 (2017), 7-20.

<sup>81</sup> Gundolf, *Goethe*, p. 562; for his comments on sexual difference, see p. 572. For a highly relevant reading of the letter in which Spinoza proposes the famous image of the 'worm in the blood' in order to encourage a perspective on the indivisibility of substance, see Gil Anidjar, 'We Have Never Been Jewish: An Essay in Asymmetric Hematology', in *Jewish Blood: Reality and Metaphor in History, Religion, and Culture*, ed. by Mitchell B. Hart (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 31-56. For Anidjar, the fact that blood—as a highly naturalized material—remains an 'example' indicates the irreducibility of metaphoricity or exemplarity in Spinoza's argument, thus denaturalizing the part-whole relationship.

In the twelfth chapter of the novel's second part, when his announcement of his plan to divorce Charlotte and marry Otilie is met with scepticism by the Major, Eduard emphasizes, in violent diction, his intention to proceed regardless:

I can see well enough [...] that it is not only from enemies but from friends too that you have to take what you want by force [*muß was man wünscht, erstürmt werden*]. What I want, what I cannot do without, I shall keep firmly in view; I shall take it, and surely. I know well enough that such relationships as these cannot be dissolved and created without much that is firm falling, and much that would like to persist having to give way. Such things cannot be dealt with through consideration; before reason [*Verstande*] all rights are equal, and a counterweight can always be found for the light end of the scales. So resolve, my friend, to act on my behalf and your own, and for my sake and your own to disentangle this situation. Let no consideration deter you; we have already given the world something to talk about, we shall now give it something else to talk about, but then it will forget us as it forgets everything when it has ceased to be a novelty, and will let us go our way as best we can without taking any further interest in us. (EA:254; WA:349-50)

Eduard's statement of his intentions marshals a deliberate and violent ambiguity: drawing on the temporal power of the present, reinforced throughout the novel, he maintains that his deeds, however destructive, will be duly forgotten once they cease to be 'a novelty'. This reflects, moreover, another ambiguity: by giving agency to human relationships (*Verhältnisse*) themselves, rather than to those involved in such relationships, Eduard absolves himself from the act of 'consideration' (*Überlegung*), and ironically maintains the existence of a neutral measure that modulates human interactions, thus his claim that 'all rights are equal' before reason.

Eduard's claim sheds ironic light on an earlier scene, in which 'a man who looked more insolent than needy [*mehr frech als bedürftig*]' answers Eduard's refusal to give him alms by claiming the 'rights of beggars [*die Rechte des Bettlers*]' (EA:67; WA:63). In an ultimately fragmentary text, contemporaneous with the writing of his essay on Goethe's novel, Walter Benjamin famously cites a 'satirical' statement by Anatole France that succinctly captures the ironic functioning of 'rights' in the novel: 'Poor and rich are equally forbidden to spend the night under bridges'. For Benjamin, the maxim illuminates the 'mythic ambiguity' of the notion of equal rights (SW1:249; GS2:198). Rights are mythically, even demonically, ambiguous, because, their naturalization conceals the violence that institutes them, and which maintains inequalities that persist under it; Benjamin deploys a Goethean term to argue that the ur-phenomenon (*Urphänomen*) of such

‘lawmaking violence’ is the establishment of borders, understood, according to the logic of cosmopolitan liberalism, to be the ‘task of peace’. In the novel, the arbitrary threat of violence underwriting the domain of ‘rights’ is made explicit: shortly after denying the beggar, Eduard gives him money, only to once again castigate him the following day.<sup>82</sup>

As this chapter has sought to argue, the idea of uncriticizability in Goethe and Moritz never advances a simple mediation, harmony or identity between life and art, and so its various appeals—to ‘life’, to the possibility of an unproductive language, to ideas of natural necessity and relationality, and above all to ‘rights’—problematize as much as validate the notion that art’s ability to ‘contradict’ criticism lies in its capacity to seamlessly function as a microcosm of the natural world. Art’s particular form of ‘appearance’ instead uniquely registers the irreducibility of the problems determining the eighteenth-century reception and renewal of natural philosophy. Rather than cordoning art off from linguistic, historical and social difference, these problems come to be articulated in a theory and practice of criticism that (as the next chapter will argue in more detail) considers a different relation between critical language and art—between poetry and the poetry of poetry—than the one found in the Romantic concept of ‘criticizability’. Nonetheless, at a crucial point of his essay on *Elective Affinities*, Benjamin raises the troubling possibility of a continued link between poetry and the language of ‘rights’:

All mythic meaning strives for secrecy. Therefore, Goethe, sure of himself, could say precisely of this work that the poetized [*das Gedichtete*], like the event [*das Geschehene*], asserts its rights [*behauptete sein Recht*]. Such rights are here indeed owed [*verdankt*], in the sarcastic sense of the word, not to the poetic work but rather to the poetized—to the mythic material layer of the work. (SW1:314; GS1:146)

Benjamin immediately goes on to address how Goethe’s contemporaries recognized his ‘unapproachable’ comportment and unwillingness to address criticism. In arguing that the assertion of rights extends even to the ‘poetized’—to the sphere of literature’s non-subjective intentionality to which he devoted attention in his early essay on Friedrich Hölderlin—Benjamin recognizes that the work’s uncriticizability indexes apparently insoluble links between legal and poetic form, even and perhaps especially at its deepest material levels. Rather than simply claiming its rights, Benjamin’s argument suggests that such assertions of rights are inseparable from the creation of guilt and debt, from an economy in which things are always and again

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<sup>82</sup> In a fragmentary note written in the early 1930s, Benjamin expounds the temporal complexity of this matrix, implying that myth not only founds inequalities but is generated on their basis: ‘As long as there is a single beggar, there will still be myth’ (SW2:688; GS6:207-08).

'owed'. *Elective Affinities* opens the way for a critical language that escapes the pitfalls of Romantic criticizability, but threatens to do so only at the cost of entrenching the ambiguity of right.

## Chapter 4

### **‘Readiness for withdrawal and disappearance’: Myth, Material Content, and Uncriticizability in Goethe and Benjamin**

#### 1. A Gentler Tale: ‘The Curious Neighbours’ Children’

In the second part of Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*, criticism, absolved of its philosophical function to fundamentally alter the work of art, gets out of hand. The narrator describes the behaviour of Luciane, a character said to bear an ‘altogether inhuman [*ganz grausam*]’ demeanour (EA:198; WA:265), in the following way:

And as she criticized the people, so did she criticize their goods, their homes, their furniture, their crockery. Wall decorations of any kind especially excited her mockery. From the most ancient wall-carpets to the latest wallpaper, from the most venerable family portraits to the most frivolous current copperplates, all had to go through it, she pulled them all to pieces, so that you had to marvel that anything for five miles around continued to exist. (EA:185; WA:245)

Such ‘destructiveness’ mirrors the narrative profligacy of *Elective Affinities*. With the appearance of Luciane, the architect, the English ‘nobleman’, and the nobleman’s companion, Goethe introduces characters who seem to add nothing, and plots that seem to go nowhere. The effect is above all one of distraction and disorientation; this pertains not only to the plot but also to the novel’s relation to criticism. Luciane is described as being ‘forever incapable of distinguishing the profitable from the unprofitable’ (EA:185, 198; WA:245, 265), an incapability that threatens to parody the insights derived from the novel in the previous chapter. Pivoting around an unheralded encounter between criticism and uncriticizability, Chapter 3 contended that, rather than enforcing an idea of art’s incommensurability with linguistic and social life, ‘uncriticizability’ registered an ongoing relation to the natural philosophies from which it emerged. Whereas the novel’s other protagonists, particularly Eduard and the Captain, leverage ideas of language’s unproductivity and of scientific equilibrium to defend the harmonious balance of a domestic sphere that is ultimately predicated on sacrifice and inequality, Charlotte, it was argued, tentatively associates art’s uncriticizability with an indeterminate idea of relation irreducible to a

totalizing concept of relationality. As argued, *Elective Affinities* barely registers the fate of ‘uncriticizability’, yet this failure registers all the better the idea’s furtive survival into the nineteenth and twentieth century. The second part of *Elective Affinities*, as Luciane’s outbursts suggest, is partly driven by the pathos left in the wake of this fate.

No derailment embodies the novel’s enigmatic literary economy, however, as much as the story told by the nobleman’s companion, ‘The Curious Neighbours’ Children’ (*Die wunderlichen Nachbarskinder*). Perhaps nowhere in the novel is the fate of uncriticizability as trenchantly explored as in this story and its framing. ‘For the most part,’ ends the first paragraph of the chapter that follows on its heels, and which describes its equivocal reception, ‘everything and nothing remains as it was [*Es bleibt zuletzt meist alles und nichts wie es war*]’ (EA:245; WA:336). The tale concerns a pair of young neighbours who, since childhood, experience a sense of connection toward one another, which manifests itself as hostility. Although they laugh about their ‘childhood unreasonableness’ as adults who have each found other lovers, the woman’s desire for the man elicits suicidal feelings. When she jumps into the water during a sailing trip, the man saves her, and they are clothed in the wedding attire of a couple from a nearby home. While their ‘strange disguise’ makes them unrecognizable at first to their friends and family, they announce themselves as who they are, and ask for the ‘blessing’ of their loved ones.

The story is unreliable in a number of ways. Although the narration relays that it contains details of the Captain’s own youth and of his romantic encounters with another woman, it does not offer concrete details about the story’s provenance in his life, nor does it suggest that the tale bears a definitive moral message for those who hear it. Moreover, it is potentially untrustworthy: its details are said to have ‘passed firstly through mouths of the crowd and subsequently through the fantasy of an imaginative and stylish narrator’ (EA:245; WA:336). Finally, the story’s relation to the proliferation of narratives in the second half of the novel is indeterminate, forcing readers to hesitate as to the nature and extent of its uniqueness. The nobleman’s companion is said to tell a series of ‘singular, instructive, amusing, touching and terrible tales’ (*manche sonderbare, bedeutende, heitere, rührende, furchtbare Geschichten*) (EA:236; WA:322). The abundance of adjectival markers complicates the relation between singularity and succession: every ‘story’ is singular but also perhaps only recognizable or accountable—tell-able—within the domain of storytelling in general, which is always in flux. This tale, however, the only one that the novel retells, is said to describe a ‘singular but gentler event’ (*sondbaren, aber sanfteren Begebenheit*).

Although this description of the story’s ‘gentle’ nature is ironic in light of its uncanny familiarity to the audience—the nobleman fears his companion has made a ‘blunder’ in telling

it—the tale’s equivocal reception suggests that it also bears a less obvious and ultimately more significant meaning. What distinguishes this story, readers might ask, from the others that the companion tells? What distinguishes it from the novel itself? At the conclusion of the second part of his essay ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’, Walter Benjamin turns his attention to this story (or ‘novella’), in a reading that is notably attentive to this indeterminate, yet indubitably affecting, ‘gentler’ character. The final paragraph of this section runs as follows:

With all this, it can certainly be considered incontrovertible that this novella is of decisive importance in the structure of *Elective Affinities*. Even if it is only in the full light of the main story that all its details are revealed, the ones mentioned proclaim unmistakably that the mythic themes of the novel correspond to those of the novella as themes of redemption. Thus, if in the novel the mythic is considered as the thesis, then the antithesis can be seen in the novella. Its title points to this. It is precisely to the characters in the novel that those neighbors’ children must seem most ‘curious,’ and it is those characters, too, who then turn away from them with deeply hurt feelings. A hurt that, in accordance with the secret and perhaps even hidden meaning of the novella—one that was, perhaps, in many respects even hidden from Goethe—motivated him in an external way without thus robbing this matter of its inner significance. Whereas the characters of the novel linger more weakly and more mutely, though fully life-sized in the gaze of the reader, the united couple of the novella disappears under the arch of a final rhetorical question, in the perspective, so to speak, of infinite distance. In the readiness for withdrawal and disappearance, is it not bliss that is hinted at, bliss in small things [*Seligkeit im Kleinem*], which Goethe later made the sole motif of ‘The New Melusine?’ (SW1:332-333; GS1:171; translation modified)

Benjamin’s structural positioning of the story’s theme of redemption as the dialectical ‘antithesis’ to the role of myth in *Elective Affinities* is clear.<sup>1</sup> This passage of his essay, however, appears to disallow such an interpretation at the same time as encouraging it. The ease with which one may distinguish the story’s ‘gentler’ singularity from the way the novel’s characters ‘linger more weakly’ is far from obvious: this is not only because the ‘gaze of the reader’ (*Blick des Lesers*) is hard to distinguish from the gaze of the critic (though, as will be shown below, Benjamin consciously exploits the idea of the ‘reader’ to both distinguish and undermine the specificity of

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<sup>1</sup> This is according to an order that casts the fleeting appearance of hope in the thirteenth chapter of the novel’s second part an equally fleeting dialectical synthesis. For the structure according to which Benjamin wrote the essay, see GS1:835-37.



his own interpretations, a tactic that appears to parody the explicit elitism of Friedrich Gundolf's reading). Beyond this, the crux of Benjamin's remark is that the 'secret and perhaps even hidden meaning' of the novella has an 'inner significance' which cannot be so readily identifiable, and indeed only manifests itself in the 'deeply hurt feelings' of the novel's protagonists. In other words, the matrix of 'feeling', language and interpretation that Benjamin identifies in the story's reception *within* the novel prohibits an external reader or critic from assuming a coherent perspective on the distinction of novel and novella. If the novella has a distinct meaning, it is as inaccessible to Benjamin's critical essay—and to its readers—as it is to Goethe. This is because, like the novel itself, it concerns the possibility of a language, and a mode of reading or critical attention, that is apparently unproductive, even invisible: like the young couple, it 'disappears'. 'The Curious Neighbours' Children' concludes with a rhetorical question that absolves its protagonists from the judgement of the community: 'And who could have refused them?' (EA:244; WA:335; translation modified). In a manner that, as is argued throughout this chapter, is indicative of his comportment with regard to Goethe's novel, Benjamin tacitly proposes his own identification with this language by employing the rhetorical tone of the question in order to bring this section of his essay to a close: 'In the readiness for withdrawal and disappearance [*Bereitschaft zum Entfernen und Verschwinden*], is it not bliss that is hinted at, bliss in small things [*Seligkeit im Kleinem*], which Goethe later made the sole motif of "The New Melusine?"'

'Goethe's Elective Affinities' identifies the 'secret and perhaps even hidden meaning' of the novella precisely with this 'readiness for withdrawal and disappearance', a condition that pertains not only to its characters' willingness to sacrifice their lives for love, but also to its uniquely recessive language: 'The Curious Neighbours' Children' redeems the novel, but only by allowing itself and its language's propositional force to wither, shrink and withdraw from all forms of recognition. This has implications for criticism of the novel. Benjamin's essay tacitly suggests that only an 'infinitely distant perspective' (*unendlich fernen Perspektive*) is capable of glimpsing this secret matter. Presumably beyond the cognitive or perceptual capabilities of any one reader, this perspective leads beyond judgement and toward a state of pre-subjective 'bliss' (*Seligkeit*) associable with Spinoza's philosophy and its troublesome eighteenth-century revival. To complicate matters further, however, this bliss does not pertain to a state of absolute dissolution, but remains a 'bliss in small things'. Precisely when Benjamin introduces the possibility of an infinitely recessive language, the problem that punctuated Moritz's and Goethe's work on 'uncriticizability' returns to view: namely, the fact that the presentation of nature's totality continues to be best served 'in miniature' (*in Kleinem*), in forms of experience that attest to the vexing, monadological relation between continuity and discontinuity. For Moritz and

Goethe, as Chapter 3 demonstrated, this problem solicited an equally vexing solution, which recognized art's capacity to imitate nature's productivity only inasmuch as art's 'organic' existence was always already textural, metaphorical.<sup>2</sup> In the concluding chapter of this thesis, I will discuss how Benjamin explores this problem further, by examining his scattered references to the other text alluded to in the passage above, Goethe's story 'The New Melusine'. As suggested, however, the perspective that opens onto the 'bliss in small things' associated with this story is never given in advance. The aim of this chapter, then, is to consider how Benjamin's reading of Goethe's novel constructs an *anticipative* relation to the state of bliss, a 'readiness for withdrawal and disappearance' in Benjamin's words. The resonance of the linguistic retreat that characterizes the novella—a retreat which throws into doubt the possibility of a comprehensive perspective on the novel, including the dialectical one that Benjamin proposes—thus demands a sustained engagement not only with 'The Curious Neighbours' Children' but with the novel as a whole and with the diverging ways that this 'secret and perhaps even hidden meaning' presents itself throughout the text.

This calls above all for a renewed engagement with some of the major themes of Benjamin's essay, particularly myth, ambiguity and 'material content'. Readers have often understood Benjamin's essay to yield a definitive critique of myth, one that is advanced through a series of oppositions, akin to that between the novel and novella.<sup>3</sup> Yet the clarity that such oppositions generate is only achieved at the cost of neglecting a problem that troubles all of Benjamin's writings: 'myth' occupies a prominent place in Benjamin's analysis not because of the incapacity of particular human actors (such as the novel's protagonists or Goethe himself) to reach a point of ethical clarity, responsibility or decision—as Benjamin's essay sometimes seems to argue and as many critical interpretations repeat—but because Benjamin recognizes 'myth' to stand in whenever something appears to escape human understanding.<sup>4</sup> Rather than standing

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<sup>2</sup> By the time he writes 'On The Image of Proust' in 1929, an essay particularly attentive to literature's capacity for weaving and intertwining, Benjamin considers this relation of continuity and discontinuity as a 'dialectics of happiness'. Proust, in this account, exemplifies a tension between 'the unheard-of, the unprecedented, the height of bliss' and eternal return, the irreducibility of literary 'repetition' (SW2:239; GS2:313). The writer's reverence for Spinoza and Plato thus gives rise to a view of eternity as 'intertwined time, not boundless time' (SW2:244). The idea is also expressed in a fragment that touches on particular interpretations of Goethe: see SW2:285-87; GS6:200-03.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: Alison Ross, 'The Ambiguity of Ambiguity in Benjamin's "Critique of Violence"', in *Towards the Critique of Violence: Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben*, ed. by Brendan Moran and Carlo Salzani (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 39-56; Sigrid Weigel, 'The Artwork as Breach of a Beyond: On the Dialectic of Divine and Human Order in Walter Benjamin's "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*", trans. by Geraldine Grimm, in Hanssen and Benjamin (eds.), *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, pp. 197-206 (especially p. 203); Winfried Menninghaus, 'Walter Benjamin's Variations of Imagelessness', trans. Timoty Bahti and David Hensley, in *For Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Ingrid and Konrad Scheurmann (Bonn: AsKI, 1993), pp. 166-179.

<sup>4</sup> For discussions in the context of myth and political theology, which are generally more inquiring about the oppositional character of Benjamin's terminology, see Brendan Moran, 'Exception, decision, and philosophic

above myth, as if able to detect and diagnose it in a neutral language, Benjamin's essay occupies a unique and liminal position, where myth has been divested of its totalizing function, yet where language lacks the resources for the articulation of a lasting alternative.<sup>5</sup> Between myth and the impossibility of its absence, then, all the essay can do is diagnose moments when myth becomes formalized as mythology, that is, when myth gives rise to epistemo-mythological *forms* of knowledge—including the subject-object relation itself, as Benjamin's 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' made clear—that erase their own origin in myth. This is not to say, of course, that Benjamin does not recognize erasures like this in Goethe's novel, in his wider corpus, or in its reception: as we will see, the essay recognizes many such instances. Nonetheless, these instances point to a problem rather than solving it: Benjamin's explores myth through literature, precisely because myth cannot be dissolved through reason alone.<sup>6</sup>

Chapter 3 considered how Goethe and Moritz navigated the idea of an uncriticizable work of art, and sought to show how considerations of art's creation and reception both relied upon and undermined the organicism that underwrites them. Benjamin's essay shares much in common with these arguments, yet his work also queries the *exceptionality* of art. Because they are ultimately oriented in the direction of language—and of a language that practically relinquishes its own apophantic power, receding almost totally to the obscure point of a 'bliss in small things'—Benjamin's considerations of 'uncriticizability' in this essay are not limited to artworks, but touch upon aspects of poetic and biological experience that elude sustained contemplation, leading to a perspective on life and literary language that is no longer predicated on what is supposedly shared between the two.

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politics: Benjamin and the extreme', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 40.2 (2014), 145-170); Samuel Weber, 'Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt', *diacritics*, 22.3-4 (Autumn-Winter 1992), 5-18; Kirk Wetters, *Demonic History: From Goethe to the Present* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014), especially pp. 111-34.

<sup>5</sup> In seeking to query how myth functions in Benjamin's text, I am not trying to revive older debates about the legitimacy or otherwise of Benjamin's notion of myth, nor, in arguing for the necessity of a closer reading of Goethe's novel, am I in agreement with those critics who dismiss Benjamin's interpretation as an unsophisticated simplification of the literary text. See, for an example of this argument, Ulrich Schödlbauer, 'Der Text als Material. Zu Benjamins Interpretation von Goethes "Wahlverwandtschaften"', in *Walter Benjamin – Zeitgenosse der Moderne*, ed. by Peter Gebhardt et al (Kronberg: Scriptor, 1976), pp. 94-109. In an insightful, if often partial, bibliographical essay, Vivian Liska interrogates these and other streams of Benjamin's essay's reception. See her 'Die Mortifikation der Kritik. Zum Nachleben von Walter Benjamins *Wahlverwandtschaften*-Essay', in *Walter Benjamin und die romantische Moderne*, ed. by Heinz Brüggemann and Günter Oesterle (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2009), pp. 247-62.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Fenves contextualizes Benjamin's relation to myth in a particularly lucid way: 'Kant was confident that the transcendental illusions that reason generates by virtue of its finitude could be dissolved by means of reason alone. For Benjamin, by contrast, who follows Marx in this regard, objective illusions cannot be so dissolved, and they can be analysed in terms of "myth" because they protect themselves from "logical" dismantling.' *Messianic Reduction*, p. 213.

## 2. 'Terra Incognita': Goethe's Theory of Art in Benjamin's Doctoral Dissertation

Writing on 31 July 1918 about returning to work on his doctoral dissertation, Benjamin informs Ernst Schoen of one of his current scholarly obligations: 'studying Goethe's theory of art', a domain described as '*terra incognita*'. Yet, by the time he comes to write the 'esoteric epilogue' (C:141; B1:210) to his dissertation, which would be shared with Schoen and other close friends, Benjamin had mapped Goethe's ideas to the extent that they could be schematically opposed to the early Romantic theory of art criticism: 'The entire art-philosophical project of the early Romantics can therefore be summarized by saying that they sought to demonstrate in principle the criticizability of the work of art. Goethe's whole theory of art proceeds from his view of the uncriticizability of works [*seiner Anschauung von der Unkritisierbarkeit der Werke*]' (SW1:179; GS1:110). As it is curtly expressed in the afterword, the Romantic relation between artworks and the idea of art is that 'the infinity of art is fulfilled in the totality of works [*in der Allheit der Werke erfüllt sich die Unendlichkeit der Kunst*]'; the Goethean relation is one whereby 'the unity of art is found ever again in the plurality of works [*in der Vielheit der Werke findet sich die Einheit der Kunst immer wieder*]' (SW1:183; GS1:117; translation modified). In the letter to Schoen, Benjamin writes that it is only with the afterword that the dissertation becomes his own work, rather than an academic exercise. In the absence of an expansive continuation of this statement, readers are left to question why the afterword is so crucial: is it because of the opposition between Goethe and Romanticism, or because of the Goethean theory of art itself?

In the afterword, the solidity of this distinction comes under strain. Benjamin argues that the opposition between criticizability and uncriticizability marks the 'critical stage [*kritische Stadium*]' of 'the history of the concept of art criticism' (SW1:178; GS1:110). In this attempt to situate and evaluate the distinction in a 'problem-historical' manner, the relevant terminology appears to fold in on itself: specifically, 'critical' appears divested of the character it has just been granted in the preceding dissertation, since it no longer points to an immanent capacity for infinite reflection and instead marks a point of inertia or crisis. As Eva Geulen contends, the opposition thus constitutes a 'threshold' (*Schwelle*) for Benjamin's thinking about criticism, and marks both 'the possibilities and limits of the theory of art' in general. The afterword, from this point of view, forms a structuring impasse rather than a conceptual starting point.<sup>7</sup> Further problematizing the possibility that the terminology of a 'problem-historical' analysis can ever be

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<sup>7</sup> Eva Geulen, 'Nachlese: Simmels *Goethe*-buch und Benjamins *Wahlverwandschaften*-Aussatz', in *Morphologie und Moderne: Goethes 'anschauliches Denken' in den Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften seit 1800*, ed. by Jonas Maatsch (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 195-218 (p. 211). This article shows that a similar impasse is reached in Georg Simmel's 1906 essay 'Kant und Goethe', which fails to offer the synthesis that might be expected (p. 210).

independent of the problems in question, however, this impasse between two incommensurable sides—Romanticism and Goethe—is shown to be asymmetrical insofar as one side, Goethe’s theory of uncriticizability, is also defined by impasse.<sup>8</sup> As the previous chapter of this thesis sought to demonstrate, Goethe’s theory of criticism, unlike the critical-historical uptake of the Romantic idea of art’s infinite ‘criticizability’, repeatedly runs up against the spectre of its own redundancy. Rather than being merely accidental, impasse and inertia, tautology and repetition are its conditions of possibility and legibility. Equally so, they are its conditions of impossibility: any given act of criticism might never be legible as such. It is this inexorable possibility of the unredeemed *invisibility* of true criticism that prompts Goethe’s lament, issued in a letter to Riemer of 30 June 1813, that contemporary critics are ill-prepared to point out merit in works of art: to do so is to risk appearing as a mere acolyte, or, for better or worse, not appearing at all. Goethe considers such critics among the ‘mindless people who insist, with such great zeal, on the purification of language [*Sprachreinigung*]; if ‘they do not appreciate the value of an expression, they easily find a surrogate’ (WA:4.23.374). Rather than accepting that singular literary language might demand an affirmative form of critical engagement (whose own ability to appear shares in the risky newness of the work), such readers simply disregard the peculiarity of literature altogether, subjecting it to an alien regime of ‘judgement’. It is not by accident, however, that Goethe leaves open the question of what another kind of criticism would look like.

Suitably then, as if attesting to the asymmetry at hand, the frontier-like quality of the criticizability-uncriticizability opposition finds expression, for Benjamin, in Goethe’s own inability to give his thought clear presentational form, matched only by an equal inability to refrain from writing criticism altogether:

Not that he stressed this opinion more than occasionally, or that he had written no works of criticism himself. He was not interested in the conceptual elaboration of this view, yet in his later period, which is the one mainly at issue here, he composed more than a few

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<sup>8</sup> Geulen also argues that the opposition of Romanticism and Goethe can be placed in the background for similar reasons of asymmetry: the ‘real occasion’ for the excursus on Goethe concerns the relationship between art and nature that is found in Goethe himself, she argues (‘Nachlese’, p. 211). Whereas my argument here obviously shares much with Geulen’s, it differs insofar as I am interested less in a conceptual and historical elaboration of this relationship—which Goethe and Benjamin (and Simmel) undoubtedly pursue—than in the specifically literary issues of impasse, repetition and (in)visibility that arise when natural appearances are conceived linguistically, a problem that I consider unique to Benjamin and Goethe. For example, Geulen argues that, unlike Simmel, Benjamin is not interested in a philosophical concept of life or a ‘flowing life-process’ (*flutenden Lebensprozeß*) but rather solely in the possibility of critique opened by an artwork’s ‘afterlife’ (p. 210). As I seek to show in this chapter and throughout the thesis, however, Benjamin’s (non-conceptual) interest in ‘life’ comes to problematize the priority of critique, precisely when the latter is held as a ‘possibility’ through the assertion of its afterlife.

critical works. One finds in many of them, though, a certain ironic reserve [*eine gewisse ironische Zurückhaltung*], not only in regard to the work but in regard to his own occupation; at all events, the intention of these critiques was only exoteric and pedagogic. (SW1:179; GS1:110)

An awareness of the inseparability of Goethe's theory of art from the insistent occasionality of its presentation conditions the textual and citational form of Benjamin's own engagement with this theory, which—in a manner that has gone largely unnoticed in the existing literature—effaces practically all particular statements by Goethe.<sup>9</sup> Benjamin's apparently intimate familiarity with Goethe's critical-theoretical work and its forms of publication—in a letter sent to Scholem on 23 February 1918, for example, he reserves specific praise for the 'unsurpassed and rigorously philological' Weimar Sophien edition of the *Maxims and Reflections* (C:117; B1:177)—makes this sparsity of citational references to Goethe all the more remarkable.<sup>10</sup> Any number of reasons could have determined this state of affairs, but one is particularly convincing in light of the context in which Goethe is placed: Benjamin does not want to treat Goethe's *aphorisms* the same way he treats the Romantic *fragment*, a form which thematizes and puts to work the tension between monadic separation and processual serialization. In other words, Benjamin recognizes the serial form of Goethe's aphorisms and, eliminating any similarity to the Romantic fragment, takes it to the extreme, blending every thought of Goethe's into 'Goethe's theory of art', a shifting totality with no clear starting or stopping points.

The opposition of Romantic criticizability and Goethean uncriticizability explored in Benjamin's dissertation no doubt constitutes a critical moment, a conceptual and historical crisis in the most pregnant sense. As was argued in Chapter 2, however, Benjamin's dissertation itself furtively undermines the primacy of the *concept* of criticism, and so of any notion of history, and of the historical life or afterlife of artworks, that would proceed on the basis of the conceptual stability of criticism. Rather than seeking to solve or even to simply acknowledge this crisis conceptually or historically, then, Benjamin displaces it onto a theory whose own unproductivity, defined by 'absence of beginning' (*Anfanglosigkeit*) and 'Eleatic stasis' (SW1: 181; GS1: 114),

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<sup>9</sup> On the 'overwhelmingly occasional nature' of Goethe's body of critical writings, see Stefan H. Uhlig, 'Goethe's Figurative Method', in *The Oxford Handbook of European Romanticism*, ed. by Paul Hamilton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) pp. 315-339 (p. 317).

<sup>10</sup> As early as 1910, Benjamin's letters rally for the critical edition: 'he does not belong in an anthology', he writes to Herbert Belmore on 22 July 1910 (C:5; B:28). Goethe himself also indicated his dislike for Madame de Staël's 'fragmentary' presentation of his work, preferring to work with editors who took his writing as a whole (see Wellek, *Modern Literary Criticism*, p. 19). See also Siegfried Unseld, *Goethe and His Publishers*, trans. by Kenneth J. Northcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

upsets the continuity of criticism and ‘life’, even in the form of the ‘afterlife’ of works fundamental to Romanticism.

### 3. Open secrets, Appearance, and the Ambiguity of Nature

Through the dissertation’s comparison of Goethe and Romanticism, Benjamin finds a *negative* reason for the absence of a link between literature and life in the former: unlike the critical and poetological writings of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, which react to the problem of ‘life’ in the late eighteenth century, particularly as formulated by Kant, and give rise to a sustained literary ‘life’, Goethe’s critical writings and ‘Eleatic’ outlook fail to inaugurate anything approaching a coherent literary theory. As the dissertation intimates, however, and as ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’ proposes at greater length, the *absence* of a coherent link between literature and life in Goethe is filled by the author’s ambiguous attempts to bind his reflections on art and his contemporaneous scientific writings. On the basis of Benjamin’s explicit arguments about *Elective Affinities*, which give rise to his consideration of the novel as a ‘mythic thesis’, this imbrication is generally understood as a weakness or mythic tendency of Goethe’s thinking. On closer inspection, though, Benjamin’s response to this mythic dimension of Goethe’s thought may be understood as a sustained attempt to reconsider what ‘myth’ means, to address the possibility or impossibility of criticizing myth, and so to reflect, at the deepest level, on the potential ‘uncriticizability’ of artworks. This second interpretation rests on the question of legibility that Goethe’s own acts of criticism raise: what is the status of criticism when it is not legible *as* criticism, when it takes place in spite of the real possibility of its invisibility? Just as Goethe puts criticism’s legibility into question—a condition from which it nonetheless gains its anti-representational, anti-organicist power—the outstanding problem that Benjamin identifies in Goethe’s embroilments of art and science is precisely one of visibility: namely, the relation between the visible world of phenomena and an ‘intuitable’ realm of ‘ur-phenomena.’

Benjamin’s identification of the ambiguous and mythic tendency of Goethe’s imbrication of art and science turns primarily on the idea of the ‘ur-phenomenon’ (*Urphänomen*). As commentators and historians have shown, the status of this idea shifted significantly throughout Goethe’s life: after imagining the ur-phenomenon to be empirically discoverable (as an archetypal plant capable of revealing in its individuality what is common to the heterogeneous species we group under the genus ‘plants’), Goethe conceived of it as a ‘model’ and later still as a ‘formula’.<sup>11</sup> It is ultimately considered by Goethe to register what Ernst Cassirer calls ‘a limit not

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<sup>11</sup> Boyle, *Goethe: The Poetry of Desire*, pp. 500-501.

only to thought, but to vision’, and what Elaine P. Miller has more recently termed ‘the structural coherence of all nature’.<sup>12</sup> Though ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’ presents a relatively static picture of the ur-phenomenon, the idea’s potency in Benjamin’s broader corpus was equally varied, influencing his account of origin (*Ursprung*), which he later recognizes as a ‘rigorous and decisive transportation of this basic Goethean concept from the domain of nature to that of history’.<sup>13</sup>

As the evidence from his correspondence and conversations with Schiller makes clear, the idea of the ur-phenomenon had been diagnosed as philosophically confused since its earliest articulations: Schiller contested that Goethe had misunderstood the nature of Kantian ideas, which were supposed to be merely regulative for our judgements, while Goethe, on other hand, continued to assume that his own scientific studies *constituted* a mediation between ideas and phenomena.<sup>14</sup> In a similar vein, Benjamin also diagnoses Goethe’s employment of the ur-phenomenon as an ambiguous solution to the problem of how nature’s unity was to be related to its heterogeneous appearances in spatial-temporal phenomena: the idea enacts a ‘contamination of the pure domain and the empirical domain’ (SW1:315; GS1:148). For Benjamin, Goethe’s solution is especially ambiguous, however, since it incorporates art into its circle. According to the reconstruction of this issue in Benjamin’s dissertation, the problem faced by Goethe has two dimensions. Firstly, nature as a coherent, living totality has to be conceptually distinguished from the immediacy of ‘the appearing, visible nature of the world’ (SW1:181; GS1:113). Since this cannot occur by means of a traditional process of conceptual abstraction from representations (which would, as for *Naturphilosophie* around 1800, fail to grasp the dynamic vitality of nature), Benjamin suggests that ‘art’ best denotes this distinction. Secondly, however, in order to prevent the establishment of a dualism, art must be shown to lie in ‘essential unity’ with the phenomenal world. This demand leads Benjamin—still in the position of clarifying Goethe—to consider the

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<sup>12</sup> Ernst Cassirer, ‘Goethe and the Kantian Philosophy’, in *Rousseau, Kant, Goethe: Two Essays*, trans. by James Gutmann et al (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945), pp. 61-97 (p. 83); Elaine P. Miller, *The Vegetative Soul: From Philosophy of Nature to Subjectivity in the Feminine* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), p. 51.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 462 (N2a,4). Many critics have sought to elucidate the significance of the ur-phenomenon for Benjamin’s subsequent writing, from his postdoctoral work on German *Trauerspiel* to his excavation of the phantasmagorias of nineteenth-century Paris. The work of Uwe Steiner is especially committed to this task. For a prolonged discussion of Benjamin’s later engagement with Goethe and the transposition of the ur-phenomenon from nature into history, see his ‘Das Höchste wäre: zu begreifen, daß alles Factische schon Theory ist. Walter Benjamin liest Goethe’, *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, 121 (2002), 265-84. See also ‘Exemplarische Kritik. Anmerkungen zu Benjamins Kritik der *Wahlverwandtschaften*’, in Hühn, Urbich and Steiner (eds.), *Benjamins Wahlverwandtschaften*, pp. 37-67 and *Walter Benjamin*, p. 72 for a consideration of the ur-phenomenon’s relation to a notion of Romantic criticism that remains ‘binding’. On the relation between ur-phenomenon and *Ursprung*, see Giorgio Agamben, ‘Linguistic Categories’, p. 59. For more general discussions, see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 1989), and Matthew Charles, ‘Speculative Experience and History: Walter Benjamin’s Goethean Kantianism’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Middlesex University, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Cassirer, pp. 74-76.



true natural world as ‘intuitable’, rather than visible.<sup>15</sup> The resolution posed by Benjamin, which seeks to unite these provisional solutions, is, like the solution to the Romantic concept of ‘criticizability’, self-consciously ‘paradoxical’: ‘the true, intuitable ur-phenomenal nature would become visible after the fashion of a likeness, not in the nature of the world but *only* in art, whereas in the nature of the world it would indeed be present but hidden (that is, overshadowed by what appears)’ (SW1:181; GS1:113).<sup>16</sup> The paradox Benjamin recognizes, and celebrates, is that nature’s deepest essence can ‘become visible’ not through nature but only through art.

With this insight, Benjamin claims to identify what Goethe failed to register, with the result that the latter’s scientific studies, particularly the *Theory of Colours*, rests on ‘an ambiguity—sometimes naïve, sometimes doubtless more mediated—in the concept of nature’ (SW1:314; GS1:147). Goethe’s use of this concept fails to distinguish between the phenomenal and the intuitable, and so conflates a scientific method by which phenomena are judged according to a model (*Vorbild*) with the specificity of artistic intuition, which ought to see the ‘ur-phenomena as archetype’ (*Urphänomenen als Urbild*) (SW1:315; GS1:314-15). Yet in Goethe’s scientific work, as we have seen, the ur-phenomenon becomes a ‘model’ because it is taken as an ‘idea’ which, even if it itself corresponds to no empirical object (or, *pave* Kant, empirical intuition), nonetheless regulatively guides or ‘illuminates’ the empirical work of science and the observer’s relation to phenomena. This ambiguity of phenomenon and intuition—understood by Benjamin to be mythical—thus only serves to reaffirm what Benjamin sees as an equally mythical Kantian conception of science as an endless progression in the direction of receding objects, the ‘infinite task’ that Benjamin initially considered making into the subject of his doctoral dissertation. With this identification of the ambiguity of Goethe’s concept of nature also emerges one of

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<sup>15</sup> In Eli Friedlander’s reading of these passages, Goethe’s indebtedness to §76 and §77 of the third *Critique* means that for him, and for Benjamin, ‘intuition does not have the intentional structure of perception. The intuited archetype is an “image,” but not one to be identified with the perception of any particular. It is concrete reality recognized as a totality.’ *Philosophical Portrait*, p. 53. This insight agrees with the general picture of Goethe’s experimental scientific process generated in Eckart Förster’s work: see for example, ‘Goethe’s Spinozism’, in *Spinoza and German Idealism*, ed. by Eckart Förster and Yitzhak Y. Melamed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 85-99. For a more inquisitive and ultimately more convincing argument, however, see Wetters, *Demonic History*, p. 127. Wetters contends that the lack of hierarchy between ‘perceptive appearances’ and ‘intuited primal forms’ is what actually drives Benjamin’s critique. Wetters makes an intriguing link between this problem and Goethe’s morphology, showing how both are ineluctably conditioned by their theoretical, viz. linguistic presentations: ‘the lawless analogizations of morphology reveal the same tendency to intuit a unifying “primal” order, which becomes highly unstable and ununified whenever it is hermeneutically or analytically deployed in life’ (p. 127). Geulen is similarly attentive to the linguistic stakes of the problem, arguing that the ‘ur-phenomenon’ is one name among others for Goethe’s general morphological problem, namely, to think together nature’s unity with its ‘infinitely varied appearance in time and space’. See Geulen, ‘Serialization in Goethe’s Morphology’, *Compar(a)ison*, 2 (2008), 53-70 (p. 55).

<sup>16</sup> On this point, Geulen notes the ‘uncanny’ similarity of Benjamin’s afterword with Simmel’s article ‘Kant and Goethe’, which argues that in Goethe’s concept of nature art has been ‘uplifted’ (*erhoben*). ‘Nachlese’, pp. 210-11.

Benjamin's most direct statements about 'uncriticizability': 'This insight into nature, with which the author believed he could always accomplish the verification of his works, completed his indifference toward criticism [*Gleichgültigkeit gegen Kritik*]. There was no need of it. The nature of the ur-phenomena was the standard; the relation of every work to it was something one could read off it [*ablesbar jeden Werkes Verhältnis zu ihr*]' (SW1:315; GS1:147-48).<sup>17</sup> Whereas Goethe's writings on literature implicate critical reading in the fragile task of maintaining the 'standard' immanent to every work of art, to such an extent that criticism might never be legible as such, Benjamin proposes that the ambiguous imbrication of Goethe's aesthetic and scientific writings transforms art into a mere approximation of an 'idea' of nature: the risky and potentially self-abnegating act of reading becomes the reading-off of a pre-determined relation between work and idea.

Relevant statements can be gleaned from Goethe's *Maxims and Reflections* to support this reading. 'The Beautiful is a manifestation of secret laws of nature, which, without its presence, would never have been revealed';<sup>18</sup> 'There is no surer way of evading the world than by Art; and no surer way of uniting with it than by Art'.<sup>19</sup> Between these two statements, Goethe casts art as a decoder of nature's secrets: 'The person to whom nature begins to reveal her open secret feels an irresistible longing for her worthiest interpreter, art'.<sup>20</sup> Such statements make it easy to see why Benjamin calls Goethe's theory of art ambiguous. Not unlike the protagonists of *Elective Affinities*, Goethe appears at once to blur the distinction between nature and art and to maintain it under the aegis of a particular condition. Moreover, he appears to direct attention to art, as nature's 'worthiest interpreter', precisely at the moment that art's interpretive powers become entirely superfluous, since nature is in the process of 'revealing herself' anyway.<sup>21</sup> Since the aphorism fails to legitimize the interpretive relation between nature and art on their own terms, readers would be justified in attributing this connection to the projective fantasies of the author.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky neatly parses the problem by simply noting that Goethe's indifference to criticism stems from the fact that 'it is the same ur-phenomenon that Goethe seeks in nature and presupposes as the *Urbild* of artworks'. See 'Bezugnahme', p. 244.

<sup>18</sup> *Maxims*, p. 171 (Maxim 481).

<sup>19</sup> *Maxims*, p. 172 (Maxim 485).

<sup>20</sup> *Maxims*, p. 171 (Maxim 483); translation modified ('Wem die Natur ihr offenbares Geheimnis zu enthüllen anfängt, der empfindet eine unwiderstehliche Sehnsucht nach ihrer würdigsten Auslegerin, der Kunst').

<sup>21</sup> On this 'neurotic' aspect of the aphorism, see Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 3-4.

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin's essay quotes a pertinent letter to Zelter about *Elective Affinities*: 'I hope you shall find in it my old manner. I have put many things in it, and hidden much in it. May this open secret give pleasure to you, too.' (SW1:313; GS1:146). Here, as if tying the form of the open secret to his attempted manipulation of the novel's reception, Goethe suggests that the novel itself contains an 'open secret', though this statement contains a striking and recursive ambiguity: it remains unclear whether 'open secret' refers to the 'many things' embedded

Such projections are legible as part of a well-rehearsed interpretive principle: Goethe's aphorism recalls nothing so much as the 'tautological hermeneutics' of the interpretive tradition whereby the only readers able to understand the meaning of a biblical parable already have access to the knowledge it gives.<sup>23</sup> Precisely when it is claimed that a text and its interpretation are interacting naturally in an organic, co-constitutive relation of interpretive reciprocity, the authority of the theorist is asserted all the more forcefully and all the more continually. As the contemporaneous text 'Toward the Critique of Violence' suggests, to maintain the natural appearance of interpretive order, that order has to be not only violently posited but also violently preserved.<sup>24</sup> Benjamin recognizes this explicitly in the preface to the first edition of Goethe's *Theory of Colours*, whose insistence that 'it is nature alone who speaks' incorporates everything 'from the fiercest cry of passion to the gentlest word of reason', and thus (like the philosophies of vital force that Kant saw as illegitimately accounting for the genesis of reason itself) prohibits reason from reflecting on nature (cited in SW1:315; GS1:148).<sup>25</sup> Later in the *Theory of Colours*, Goethe confirms Benjamin's intuition, insofar as he posits the circularity of phenomena in order to imagine his chromatic project as an incomplete task for the future: 'To encompass and enclose the appearances of colour in this series, in this circle, in this wreath of phenomena: that was the goal of our undertaking. What we have failed to do, others will complete' (WA II.1:298 [§744]). In every case, the person implicated in this circle, always 'begins to' experience anew its recursive effect, their internalization of its power encapsulating the guilt complex that, Benjamin claims, is 'bequeathed through life [*die Schuld, die am Leben sich forterbt*]' (SW1:307; GS1:138).<sup>26</sup>

As discussed above, Benjamin suggests that this ambiguity arises on account of a failure of Goethe's: his inability to recognize the 'paradoxical' solution to the relation between phenomena and intuition, which dictates that nature's essence is best represented in non-natural

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in the work, or whether it refers more obliquely to the very fact that the work contains secrets, in which case the 'open secret' would be the fact that the work contains open secrets.

<sup>23</sup> François, *Open Secrets*, p. 2. François points to Frank Kermode's work, which notes that, according to this tradition, those unable to grasp the latent meaning of a text can 'see but not perceive'. This visual language, which draws on the text of Mark 4, is notably close to Benjamin's. Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 29.

<sup>24</sup> I draw here on Benjamin's 'Toward the Critique of Violence' and its influential reading in Werner Hamacher, 'Afformative, Strike', trans. by Dana Hollander, *Cardozo Law Review*, 13.4 (December 1991), 1133-57.

<sup>25</sup> As Deuber-Mankowsky has proposed, Benjamin's identification of Goethe's 'confusion' (*Verwechslung*) of phenomena and intuitable images evidences the influence of Kant and Hermann Cohen, and demonstrates an awareness of Goethe's 'indifference to critique' that is entangled with this confusion. See Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky, 'Bezugnahmen', p. 243. Despite the rigour of Deuber-Mankowsky's argument, it assumes that Benjamin is unambiguously dismissive of Goethe's 'indifference to criticism', insofar as it is an expression of mythic entanglement. In my reading, on the other hand, Benjamin is less certain about both myth and what he seeks to think through as 'uncriticizability'.

<sup>26</sup> See also Werner Hamacher, 'Guilt History: Benjamin's Sketch "Capitalism as Religion"', *diacritics* 32 (2002), 81-106.

products, that is, in works of art. This critique of Goethean myth, however, appears to conceal a deeper and less readily identifiable problem. Anyone familiar with the contours of eighteenth-century aesthetic theory might, after all, object that Benjamin's insight is neither novel nor paradoxical: philosophers have long suggested that art is uniquely placed to re-present nature's power. It may follow, then, that Benjamin is not only seeking to highlight Goethe's inability to recognize the significance of 'art', as it was conceptualized in this period. More pointedly, he seems to intimate that the notion of art which Goethe constructs, but neglects, has a less recognizable resonance, one that foreshadows Benjamin's own notion of 'origin' (*Ursprung*), as that which rhythmically pulses in 'becoming and disappearance [*Werden und Vergehen*]' (GS1:226). Ur-phenomena, Benjamin insists, 'do not exist before art; they subsist within it [*sie stehen in ihr*]' (SW1:315; GS1:148).<sup>27</sup> In this way, the paradoxical force of art—as that which would render the ur-phenomenon intuitable—consists in the fact that, like the 'readiness for withdrawal and disappearance' (*Bereitschaft zum Entfernen und Verschwinden*) that characterises the protagonists and the language of 'The Curious Neighbours' Children', it appears *only* in its capacity for non-appearance. As argued at the beginning of this chapter, Benjamin's attentiveness to the question of disappearance, epitomized by his self-conscious adoption of a 'rhetorical question', dramatizes an exploration of the extent to which critical interpretation can ever achieve a totalizing viewpoint on a work of art.

The 'yearning' (*Sehnsucht*) of the aphorism, in this case, would not simply be an expression of a repressed experience, which is unable to perceive nature without anthropomorphizing it, nor would it be the index of the repressive action of the theorist, who, in claiming art to be the 'worthiest interpreter' of nature, imposes a quasi-natural interpretive circle on two distinct realms.<sup>28</sup> Rather, the experience of the aphorism's subject might be of a less consequential but easily overlooked 'non-emphatic' kind, which has resonances for Benjamin's diagnosis of Goethean ambiguity.<sup>29</sup> The aphorism allows for the possibility that nature interprets

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<sup>27</sup> Steiner argues that the ur-phenomenon's role as a doctrine of both art and nature serves as a 'kind of guiding thread' (*eine Art Leitfaden*) for Benjamin. Steiner, 'Das Höchste wäre', p. 268. I am inclined to agree with Eva Geulen's attentive disagreement with Steiner, which argues that Benjamin's later critique of the concept of nature has to be rooted and continually problematized with reference to earlier texts. For Geulen, however, this also marks a decisive limit point for understanding the potential significance of Benjamin's relation to Goethe's writing; her significant body of work on morphology, in turn, has turned to other twentieth-century writers she considers to be more interested in articulating the simultaneity of interruption and continuity. In my next chapter, I seek to engage with these criticisms in more detail.

<sup>28</sup> Cornelia Zumbusch's recent work makes a similar argument to the one I am pursuing here, in suggesting that the classicist strategy of prophylactic 'immunization' does not simply conceal or deflect a truth that critique could uncover. Zumbusch advocates, for example, treating scenes of preserved mortification, such as Otilie's grave in *Elective Affinities*, not as the 'obscured flip side' but as the 'ostentatiously exhibited core of the classical attempt at immunization'. Cornelia Zumbusch, *Immunität*, p. 366.

<sup>29</sup> François, *Open Secrets*, p. xvi.

itself *and* that art also interprets nature, in much the same way that criticism can occur at the deepest level of the work, without fundamentally transforming it. Benjamin argues that in the phenomenal world, the ur-phenomena would be ambiguously ‘present but hidden’, the conjunction indicating a lack in the mundane, phenomenal mode of appearance that structures the way humans experience things. What is hinted at, but not made explicit in this diagnosis, however, is that the ‘artistic’ ur-phenomena are *not* theoretically extractable from the phenomenal world that hides their appearance.<sup>30</sup> It is—according to Benjamin’s proposed correction of the Goethean project—‘only in art’ that the ur-phenomena can come to light but, as Goethe’s own aphorisms make clear, natural hiddenness and artistic presence are not two discreet, mutually exclusive modes of being of the ur-phenomenon. If the ur-phenomena ‘subsist’ or simply ‘stand’ (*stehen*) in art, as Benjamin proposes, art is less a determinate realm of human productivity than an indicator of a kind of relation that, like the language of ‘The Curious Neighbours’ Children’, comes to light only in its ‘readiness for withdrawal and disappearance’.<sup>31</sup>

Benjamin had considered such a connection between appearance, relation and secrecy in a fragment composed in 1919, the year he began to work on ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’. ‘The nature of a relationship is enigmatic [*Das Wesen der Verwandtschaft ist rätselhaft*],’ he states in ‘Analogy and Relationship’ (*Analogie und Verwandtschaft*): ‘the relationship refers undivided to the whole being, without the need for any particular expression of it’ (SW1:207; GS6:43).<sup>32</sup> The ‘expressionlessness of relationships’ (*Ausdruckloses der Verwandtschaft*), as Benjamin names this condition, does not mean that relationships do not *appear*—that they are, on the one hand, noumenal essences or, on the other, categorical forms (which allow objects to come to light while remaining themselves merely conceptual). Rather, he maintains that the ‘appearance’ of relationships is prior to any ‘particular expression’ thereof, a claim from which it is possible to propose, firstly, that particular expressions have as their condition of possibility this antecedent mere ‘appearance’, and secondly (as suggested above) that a ‘minimal acceptance’ of this

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<sup>30</sup> On this point, Geulen notes the ‘uncanny’ similarity of Benjamin’s afterword with Simmel’s article ‘Kant and Goethe’, which argues that in Goethe’s concept of nature art has been ‘uplifted’ (*erhoben*). ‘Nachlese’, pp. 210–11. Again, in contrast to accounts that merely repeat Benjamin’s claims, Wetters’ argument about the *lack* of hierarchy between natural phenomena and intuited forms is significant here: see *Demonic History*, p. 127.

<sup>31</sup> Among the notes written toward Benjamin’s essay on Karl Kraus, which shares a remarkable number of affinities with ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’, one can read the following parenthetical remark: ‘My Kraus essay marks the place where I stand and don’t take part [*Mein Krausaufsatz bezeichnet den Ort, wo ich stehe und nicht mitmache*]’ (GS2:1093). This note, on my reading, indicates an intriguing identification with the hidden ‘standing’ of art, against the demands to make a theoretical intervention.

<sup>32</sup> Although Benjamin’s fragment goes on to mention *Wahlverwandtschaften*, in a nod to Goethe’s novel, ‘relationship’ rather than ‘affinity’ seems like the best translation for the word in the fragment’s title, given the context and scope of Benjamin’s remarks.

appearance is akin to what is expressed in Goethe's aphorism and Benjamin's otherwise 'dissatisfied' diagnosis of Goethean ambiguity.<sup>33</sup> It might seem capricious, nonetheless, that Benjamin ever employs, let alone foregrounds, the term 'relationship' (*Verwandtschaft*), if what he has in mind is 'appearance', since the former term would normally imply the alliance of at least two things. This difficulty, however, all the better registers the major insight of Benjamin's note, whose 'lack of clarity' does not escape its author: relationships are 'enigmatic' because they constitute 'appearance' as a still-to-be-determined, preconceptual connection that is prior to the 'causal nexus' (*Causalzusammenhang*) that normally governs relationships, prior indeed to any attempt to grasp a relationship in the discursive, legal language of concepts. A relationship, that is to say, remains undetermined even by the relational concept we form of it.<sup>34</sup>

'Relationship' therefore refers to a condition that precedes the 'causal nexus' by which two pre-determined relata are related to one another.<sup>35</sup> In 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', Benjamin considers this other, non-causal nexus through the image of a linguistic seal that binds 'truth content' (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) and 'material content' (*Sachgehalt*):

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<sup>33</sup> I derive the notion of a 'minimal acceptance' of the phenomenal world from Rei Terada's *Looking Away*, p. 28, p. 98. Terada proposes that such a 'minimal acceptance' of appearance grounds a different notion of 'dissatisfaction' than the one which can be gleaned from Kant's first *Critique*, pp. 74-75. For Terada's reading of Goethe's *Theory of Colours*, see p. 76. Terada's acknowledgement that 'what counts as "acceptance" varies [...] from bare registration to emphatic affirmation' (p. 5) seems to indicate a structural similarity between the acceptance of the facts of the given world and the Goethean criticism of artworks.

<sup>34</sup> Variations of this argument have animated recent theoretical interventions on relation, where the notion of 'minimality' is again paramount. As Rodolphe Gasché has suggested in a history of the idea, relations—insofar as they are 'minimal beings', the very embodiment of the ontological fact of relation between things, and hence, contrary to their general dismissal in medieval and Scholastic philosophy, 'the philosophical "thing"'—themselves 'hold toward the nonrelational'. Rodolphe Gasché, *Of Minimal Things: Studies on the Notion of Relation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 6 (my emphasis). This non-conceptual, even non-philosophical relation not only renders the conceptual form of relation possible, but also—insofar as it is itself radically other and non-conceptual—possesses an errancy that might never result in any identifiable form and hence constitutes a condition of impossibility. In a response that seeks to show the inextricability of this problem from language, Werner Hamacher proposes that this 'other' relation is not pre-linguistic, but rather effects the necessary possibility, in language, of language never coming to pass: it 'withholds itself with speech, does not speak and, not speaking, holds a "not" against speech'. Hamacher, 'The Relation', trans. by Roland Végső, *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 8.3 (Winter 2008), 29-69 (p. 31). The fact that the relation withholds itself *with* speech leads Hamacher to jettison the term *Relation* in favour of *Verhältnis*, since the latter, like the related terms *Enthaltung* (abstention) and *Verhaltung* (retention), captures the sense in which the relation that withholds or preserves language is also a 'mis-relation'. Finally, in a text to which I will briefly refer later, Jacques Derrida considers the irreducibility of 'relation' to comprise the 'texture of a text', which phenomenology tasks itself—though the task is impossible—with undoing: 'what is woven as language is that the discursive warp cannot be construed as warp and takes the place of a woof which has not truly preceded it'. Derrida, 'Form and Meaning: A Note on the Phenomenology of Language', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, pp. 155-173 (p. 160).

<sup>35</sup> This analysis draws on Peter Fenves's essay, 'Kant in Benjamin's *Wahlverwandtschaften*-Essay', trans. by Clemens Ackermann, Hühn, Urbich and Steiner (eds.), *Benjamin's Wahlverwandtschaften*, pp. 221-37.

Just as the form of a seal cannot be deduced from the material of the wax or from the purpose of the fastening or even from the signet (in which one finds concave what in the seal is convex), and just as it can be grasped only by someone who has had the experience of sealing and becomes evident only to the person who knows the name that the initials merely indicate, so the content of the matter cannot be deduced by means of insight into its constitution or through an exploration of its intended use or even from a premonition of its content; rather, it is graspable only in the philosophical experience of its divine imprint [*Prägung*], evident only to the blissful vision [*seligen Anschauung*] of the divine name. (SW1:299-300; GS1:128)

Since Leibniz, ‘relation’ had characterized a notion of truth that was bound to language, without being arbitrary: ‘truths don’t consist in what is arbitrary in the characters, but in what is invariant [*perpetuus*] in them, namely, in the relation they have to things’.<sup>36</sup> In language that invokes Kant’s delineation of aesthetic judgement, Benjamin shows that the seal is guided neither by purpose (‘intended use’) nor by formal ‘constitution’, or even by ‘a premonition of its content’. Rather, it marks only the relationship’s *absence* of determination, a condition that Benjamin understands to be linguistic and associates above all with the freedom of the name. The most forceful articulation of this idea before Benjamin is perhaps to be found in Hamann’s *Aesthetica in nuce*: ‘Every impression of nature in man is not only a memorial but also a warrant of fundamental truth: Who is the LORD. Every reaction of man unto created things is an epistle and seal [*Brief und Siegel*] that we partake of the divine nature, and that we are his offspring.’<sup>37</sup>

These statements of the relation’s linguistic objectivity seem to chime with the critique of subjective feeling that underlies Benjamin’s analysis of myth in *Elective Affinities*: here, feeling is linked to the ambiguous falling-silent (*schweigen*) of the protagonists Eduard and Otilie as they proceed through the mythical natural world of the novel: ‘Feeling, but deaf, seeing, but mute, they go their way’ (SW1:304; GS1:134). In failing to confront the mythic order of the world or to be receptive to the voice of God, feeling registers that the protagonists merely yield to nature’s mythical underpinnings. The muteness of feeling likewise determines a major dimension of the essay’s characterization of beauty. Goethe’s statement that ‘beauty can never become lucid about itself’ (cited in SW1:353; GS1:197)—crystallized in Benjamin’s formula that ‘the beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil’ (SW1:351; GS1:195)—

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<sup>36</sup> Leibniz, ‘Dialogue’, in *Philosophical Essays*, pp.268-72 (p. 272.)

<sup>37</sup> Johann Georg Hamann, ‘Aesthetica in Nuce’, in *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, ed. and trans. by Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 69-95 (p. 79). As the editorial notes to this English edition suggest, Hamann appears to adopt the notion of the divine seal from Francis Bacon.

implies that the feeling of the beautiful, which also establishes a link between art and nature, can remain intact only insofar as it is immune from linguistic ‘decision’ and philosophical claims to truth.<sup>38</sup> The beautiful rests, according to critics who have sought to consolidate the opposition between the novel’s beauty and the novella’s ‘sublime’ language, upon an ambiguous distance from linguistic truth. This truth, however, cuts through the mythical ‘web’ of the novel’s beauty at its ‘sublime’ moments of caesura.<sup>39</sup> We simply don’t decide on our feelings: according to such interpretations, this is the source of the power of aesthetic judgement—its ability to extricate itself from the domain of interested, hypothetical judgements—but also of its equivocalness and immunity from linguistic objectivity. Despite the force of these claims, which ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’ often seems to encourage, ‘Analogy and Relationship’ maintains that relationships ‘can be directly perceived only in feeling [*Gefühl*]’ (SW1: 208; GS6: 45).

#### 4. *Wahlverwandtschaften* and Virtuality

‘Analogy and Relationship’ contains a subtle but significant reference to Goethe’s novel. In a sentence that runs the risk of rendering its own point tautologous, even invisible, Benjamin writes: ‘The nature of relationship is enigmatic: it is whatever is common to married couples and parents and children (freely chosen relationships [*Wahlverwandtschaft*] and blood relationships [*Blutverwandtschaft*])’ (SW1:207-208; GS6:43-44). In its potential tautology—or simple strangeness—the remark is akin to a citation Benjamin makes in the same fragment: ‘Appearance is against the historian’. The example that Nietzsche offers under this aphoristic rubric is odd indeed: ‘It is a well proven fact that human beings emerge from the body of their mother: nonetheless, when grown-up children stand beside their mother, they make the hypothesis seem very absurd; it has appearance against it’.<sup>40</sup> Yet by citing a remark that could hardly be more rooted in the mundane strangeness of phenomenal appearance (and in the gendered and social dimensions thereof), Benjamin’s citation displays a remarkable economy, which also structures his comment about *Wahlverwandtschaft* and *Blutverwandtschaft*. This seemingly throwaway remark captures the encounter between relationship and appearance that informs not only the fragment but a pervasive dimension of Benjamin’s wider body of thought: ‘relationship’ is a word—it is

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<sup>38</sup> For an evaluation of how this argument contributes to ‘immunization against criticism’, see Deuber-Mankowsky, ‘Bezugnahmen’, p. 243.

<sup>39</sup> See especially Menninghaus, ‘Imagelessness’, Weigel, ‘The Artwork as Breach’, and Gasché, ‘Saturnine Vision and the Question of Difference: Reflections on Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Language’, *Studies in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literature*, 11.1 (1986), 69-90.

<sup>40</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 164 (aphorism 340).



literally common to the two terms he addresses—but, as a word, its appearance is also entirely without causal determination. The appearance of language, as an indeterminate ‘relationship’, is simply that which happens to be ‘common’ to all determinate relationships, whether they are relationships determined by choice (‘elective affinities’), or relationships determined by blood (a substance whose significance, as will be shown below, is subtly decentred through the classical illusions in ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’). To this extent, Benjamin seems to grasp what (as was argued in Chapter 3) seems to be at stake in Charlotte’s remark that the term ‘elective affinities’ indicate an affinity of spirit, rather than of blood.

What is common to linguistic ‘appearances’ that elide causal relations, Benjamin’s remark suggests, is nothing other than their minimal state of appearing, that which is apparent in their status as words. In the essay on *Elective Affinities*, however, the prominence of myth seems to eradicate any perspective on this lack of determination, even the one afforded in the fragment. Here, Benjamin comments upon the mythical confusion said to be encapsulated in the novel’s title, by opposing the ‘mere word’ (*bloße Wort*) *Verwandtschaft* to the word ‘choice’ (*Wahl*) (SW1:346; GS1:188-189)—and thus to the title *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*. Whereas previously ‘mere’ denoted the minimal, value-less linguistic state of appearance (itself a relation, hence neatly denoted by the word *Verwandtschaft*) common to *all* words, here—in light of the mythically overdetermined landscape of Goethe’s novel—Benjamin sees it as a quality or value that is ascribed to some words or substances but not others, because it registers only the extent to which some words are free of mythical overdetermination. This difference thus registers a potentially intractable problem concerning how we read Benjamin’s text and Goethe’s novel: is it possible to deploy a method of philosophical differentiation according to which some language (the novel) is mythical and some (the novella) is redemptive, or does the possibility of a redemptive language also entail an impossibility: namely, the impossibility that any reader is capable of attaining the ‘infinitely distant perspective’ such a language would demand?

Looking more closely at Benjamin’s argument allows us to trace the contours and significance of this question. Whereas *Verwandtschaft* establishes ‘loyalty’ through a transcendent ‘decision’, thus overcoming the word’s metaphorical character, *Wahl* comes under scrutiny for its ambiguity (*Doppelsinn*), which issues from the fact that ‘choice’ can always refer to both the general act of choosing and the specific thing chosen in any such act.<sup>41</sup> This seems like an

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<sup>41</sup> As is the case with many such oppositions, readers of Benjamin’s essay have regularly contrasted choice and decision, but have largely neglected the extent to which Benjamin is more subtly reflecting upon each term’s relation to language and metaphor. For a discussion that opposes choice and decision, see N.K. Leacock, ‘Character, Silence, and the Novel’. Vivian Liska, in a similar way, links decision to the possibility of happiness and messianism: ‘Even as Benjamin resists extant readings of Goethe, he puts forward a concept of happiness through a decision that risks everything on a messianic solution.’ Liska, ‘Die Mortifikation der Kritik’, p. 249.

innocent insight, but its implications are severe. They owe to the fact that the word, which ‘does not cease to signify’ both possibilities, threatens to parody one of the major problems that animates ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’, first addressed in a sketch that would be incorporated into the third part of the essay. In the first sentence of ‘The Theory of Criticism’, Benjamin writes: ‘The unity of philosophy—its system—is, as an answer, of a higher order than the infinite number of finite questions that can be posed’ (SW1:217; GS1:833). To ask after the unity of philosophy would be, if we were to imagine it as a question, no different from the ‘infinite number of finite questions’ that constitute its ‘totality’. However, this potential—or virtual—unity is only considered from the beginning ‘as an answer’, rather than as a question. As an answer, moreover, its nature differs from the kind of answers we might imagine meeting such empirical questions, since those answers have a ‘tendency’ to prompt more questions, *ad infinitum*. Since it is not determined by any one question but only by the ‘ideal’ unity of the infinite number of empirical questions, this answer is instead of a ‘higher order’ than the infinite numerical series that constitutes the realm of questions.<sup>42</sup> It thus allows Benjamin to discard the notion of philosophy as an ‘infinite task’ that ceaselessly answers questions, only to encounter new ones. No philosophical questions, after all, correspond to this higher order, only a ‘virtual question’ whose answer is ‘the system of philosophy itself’.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, there are ‘constructs that bear the deepest affinity to philosophy, or rather to the ideal form of its problem’ (SW1:217; GS1:833), namely works of art.

In light of the virtuality that the artwork, like the system of philosophy, affords, it is easy to see why Benjamin thinks that ‘choice’ has to be banished. To employ the language of set theory that drives Benjamin’s reflections, *Wahl* is—insofar as it is a spatio-temporal mark, a word chosen from an infinite number of other possibilities—a member of a set, but it is also—insofar as it designates the act of choosing—the governing principle that gives potential meaning to all possible members of such a set. In other words, users of language continually make choices about words, and one such choice is the word ‘choice’. Whereas the ideal unity of philosophy, however, points toward the higher experience that is grasped in the ‘seal’ of the name, in an objective realm of language that precedes the distinction of subjects and objects, ‘choice’ ambiguously and ceaselessly flits between two registers, with the effect that the arbitrary relationship between words and referents constantly threatens to turn the lower domain of

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<sup>42</sup> On the set-theoretical background against which Benjamin developed these claims, see Julia Ng, ‘Kant’s Theory of Experience at the End of the War: Scholem and Benjamin Read Cohen. A Commentary’, in *Modern Language Notes*, 127.3 (April 2012), 462-484, and Fenves, ‘Kant in Benjamin’s *Wahlverwandtschaften*-Essay’, especially pp. 230-33.

<sup>43</sup> For readings that engage with ‘The Theory of Criticism’ and the opening of the third section of ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’, see Paul North, ‘Apparent Critique’ and David S. Ferris, ‘Benjamin’s Affinity’.

semiotic differentiation into the principle of a higher domain. If words are the very site of a pre-conceptual ‘relationship’, then the possibility that they can become the objects of ‘choice, metaphorically carried over from one context to the next, threatens to completely undermine their power.

In light of this danger, which Benjamin’s essay seeks to improbably avert by holding *Wahl* and *Verwandtschaft* apart, his apparently trivial and almost illegible remark in the more ‘enigmatic’ fragment—that *Wahlverwandtschaften* are *Verwandtschaften*—comes to be soaked with significance, absorbing the possibility, eliminated in ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’, that the murky choices—linguistic, metaphorical, sexual, social—which propel and disrupt the narrative of Goethe’s novel at the level of both textuality and plot (and, in so doing, irrevocably intertwine the two) are not only signs of an equivocal lack of linguistic or moral ‘decision’. If these choices can also be ‘relationships’, then, they constitute the material of an experience that is always-already linguistic. The incorporation of Goethe’s title into the more fragmentary ‘Analogy and Relationship’ therefore suggests a latent tension in the later essay. The primary surface effect of this tension, however, is its insistent repression, as the essay repeatedly insists that ‘choices’ are hazarded blindly, in the absence of any recognition of the mythic forces that govern the novel. Yet, insofar as it is a genuinely linguistic tension, the latent undecidability between choice and decision ultimately works to undo their opposition. Moreover, it contributes to the essay’s gradual undoing of the very distinction between surface and depth. By casting the artwork as a ‘sealed’ (*verschlossen*) surface, which can (like the ‘stranger’) only be asked about rather than mined for deeper content, Benjamin indicates a significant link between myth, surface and ‘semblance’: like myth, semblance lacks substance and depth, and so cannot be cast away in the search for truth. Truth content, rather, is nothing other than the inseparability of truth content from material content.<sup>44</sup>

## 5. ‘Phantom-like’: The Demonic, Myth, and Metaphor

In ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’ the idea of the ‘demonic’ (*das Dämonische*) exemplifies Benjamin’s diagnosis of art’s relation to the ‘unity of philosophy’ This idea enters linguistic circulation, according to the famous passages cited from the twentieth book of *From My Life: Poetry and Truth*, as Goethe remembers his failed attempts to ‘approach the metaphysical by various paths’, that is, in Benjamin’s terminology, by virtue of specific ‘questions’ (for Goethe these are questions of

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<sup>44</sup> McLaughlin, ‘The Coming of Paper’, p. 979.

natural philosophy, religion, self-abnegation, even ‘universal faith’).<sup>45</sup> At issue are the limits of categorization: Goethe recounts that he found the demonic ‘in the spaces between these areas’ yet the thought of the demonic also entails the kind of renunciation of thinking for which Benjamin scolds Goethe in the afterword to his dissertation: Goethe remembers that ‘he encountered some things that seemed to fit into none of these categories, and became increasingly convinced that it was better to divert his thoughts from vast and incomprehensible subjects’. As that which escapes all causal explanations, and which seems ‘only to accept the impossible and scornfully reject the possible’, Goethe’s theory of the demonic typifies the retreat from linguistic decision that Benjamin perceives to be characteristic of the figures in *Elective Affinities* (or the grounds of their failure to attain ‘character’ in the first instance).<sup>46</sup>

Such an understanding of ‘demonic ambiguity’—varieties of this term appear in ‘Toward the Critique of Violence’ and ‘Capitalism as Religion’ but not in ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’—has structured many responses to Benjamin’s essay. Yet, as Benjamin would be aware from his readings across a wide variety of subjects, from Greek myth to contemporary thought on and from China, the demonic itself presents a problem for anyone who seeks to define it, that is, to identify a set of features by which it could be recognized or predicted.<sup>47</sup> The word’s irreducibility to identifiable features thus redoubles its demonic character: Goethe himself only designates the demonic by what it is not, as a ‘something’ that ‘manifested itself in contradictions and therefore could not be captured under any concept, much less in a word’.<sup>48</sup> Attempting to clarify the concept by a traditional process of abstraction, whereby particulars are narrowed down to a generic feature, runs up against the same problems encountered by literary-critical attempts to define ‘ambiguity (a problem whose recognition and intensification in the second half of the twentieth century generated the insight that the process by which reading generates meaning was not only beyond the control of the writer, but of the reader too).<sup>49</sup> Insofar as it constitutes a linguistic problem, the word surpasses all attempts to use it consistently, including Benjamin’s.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Goethe, *Collected Works*, V, *From My Life: Poetry and Truth*, trans. by Robert R. Heitner, p. 597.

<sup>46</sup> *From My Life*, p. 597.

<sup>47</sup> Peter Fenves, ‘Benjamin, Studying, China: Toward a Universal “Universism”’, *positions*, 26.1 (2018), 35-57 (pp. 40-42); Wetters, *Demonic History*, especially pp. 111-34.

<sup>48</sup> Goethe, *From My Life*, p. 597.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, the second sentence of the second edition of William Empson’s famous work on the subject: *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1953): ‘In the first edition I made it “adds some nuance to the direct statement of prose.” This, as was pointed out, begs a philosophical question and stretches the term “ambiguity” so far that it becomes almost meaningless. The new phrase is not meant to be decisive but to avoid confusing the reader; naturally the question of what would be the best definition of “ambiguity” (whether the example in hand should be called ambiguous) crops up all through the book’ (p. vii).

<sup>50</sup> As Peter Fenves has noted, writing of the ‘anxiety of influence’ that determined the nineteenth century reception of Goethe, here in regard to Kierkegaard: ‘as soon as one defines “the demonic,” the word immediately comes to define the speaker and correspondingly negates what is being said’. Fenves, ‘Kierkegaard

The linguistic problem announced by the demonic inflects all dimensions of Benjamin's text, including his attempts to recognize and quarantine myth. Just as the demonic lurks between all recognizable realities, the essay reframes its critique of the mythic idolatry of nature through a comment upon the intrusion of spectrality into Goethe's 'poetic composition', a claim that reinforces the sense of Goethe's incapacity to control his own poetic talent: 'he stands before the deep ground of his poetic gift [*Dichtergab*] like Odysseus with his naked sword before the ditch full of blood, and like him fends off the thirsty shades [*durstigen Schatten*], in order to suffer only those whose brief report he seeks' (SW1:339; GS1:179). Goethe's claim that nature's voice can be made audible to the correctly-attuned observer proves, on Benjamin's identification of this 'aura of Hades', as ill-fated as the attempt made by Odysseus to make the dead speak, an endeavor encouraged by Circe who, as 'the goddess who can speak in human tongues', also personifies the disorderly transgression of linguistic thresholds.<sup>51</sup> More precisely, Benjamin finds in Goethe's lack of 'freedom with respect to his own things'—which Humboldt argued turned Goethe 'silent at the slightest reproach' (SW1:314; GS1:146)—an echo of Odysseus's failure to make *particular* members of the community of the dead speak.<sup>52</sup> As he seeks counsel, Odysseus is greeted by a cacophony of voices belonging to the dead: 'Teenagers, girls and boys, the old who suffered/for many years, and fresh young brides whom labor/destroyed in youth; and many men cut down/in battle'.<sup>53</sup> The implication in Benjamin's simile is that an equally chaotic, ungovernable 'Nature' emerges when the heterogeneity of the natural world seeks to be controlled or, more precisely yet, when an attempt is made to limit the natural world by imposing upon it the legal framework that governs communicative discourse between legally-defined individuals, that is, by supposing to grant it the capacity, in the form of a 'right', to speak about itself.<sup>54</sup>

This evocation of Homer, however, disrupts any simple opposition between Benjamin's essay and Goethe's novel, between rationality and myth, or between the 'bare woods' (*kahlen Wald*) left in the wake of Kantian critique and the ornate gardens cultivated by Goethean

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and the Definition of the Demonic', in *Das Dämonische. Schicksale einer Kategorie der Zweideutigkeit nach Goethe*, ed. by Lars Friedrich, Eva Geulen and Kirk Wetters (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2014), pp. 193-200 (p. 193).

<sup>51</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. by Emily Wilson (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018), p. 279 (book 11).

<sup>52</sup> In a passage of *One-Way Street* composed under the heading 'Costume Wardrobe', Benjamin emphasizes the bathos of this problem by proposing that 'feeling' corresponds with the immensity of death: 'A bearer of news of death appears to himself as very important. His feeling—even against all reason—makes him a messenger from the realm of the dead. For the community of all the dead is so immense that even he who only reports death is aware of it. *Ad plures ire* [to go the way of the dying] was the Latins' expression for dying' (SW1:483-84; GS4:142-43).

<sup>53</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, p. 280.

<sup>54</sup> In 'Toward the Critique of Violence', Benjamin also associates spectrality with a mythic entanglement of orders by noting how an 'institution of the modern state', the police, embodies both law-making and law-preserving violence in a 'spectral mixture' (SW1: 242; GS2: 189).

classicism (SW1:298; GS1:126). Above all, the analogy between ‘the dead’ and chaotic nature appears difficult to uphold. The Homeric passages alluded to draw attention to the insusceptibility of the dead to be classified, hierarchized and instrumentalized according to the rationalizations of the living, a lesson that inheres and morphs in Benjamin’s late claim that ‘even the dead’ are subject to the representational revisionism that accompanies fascist and capitalist triumph (SW4:391; GS1:695); likewise, the problem with chaotic nature is that it is deliberately constructed, remaining at the level of mythic positing and thus erasing the heterogeneity of nature at the very moment it seeks to capture its errant vitality. Life, like death, the comparison implies, is uncapturable by intentional language. This seems to be Benjamin’s more explicit point. Yet ‘the dead’—the shocking, apparently irreducible multiplicity of departed souls—is an equally mythic construction of Homer’s, intentionally employed to advance a no less mythical claim. Myth, in short, is called upon to prove a point about the dangers of myth.<sup>55</sup> Mythic positing—making nature speak, asking the dead for council—begets on every occasion an equally mythic chaos; but Benjamin cannot, at least in a framework that promises to oppose myth to philosophical rationality, make this point *without* reference to myth. Even as he calls upon an apparently irreducible image of the dead, Benjamin seems to mark his text with a silent reminder that this remains an image (a myth) and that, whatever the follies of Goethe’s endeavours, critical readers no more have access to the true totality of living or of dead beings than Goethe or Odysseus.

The demonic impossibility of quarantining myth may, however, encourage previously under-recognized aspects of Benjamin’s essay to come to light. Benjamin’s depiction of Otilie’s determination by semblance is well known: ‘Not purity but its semblance spreads itself out with such innocence over her form’ (SW1:335-36; GS1:175). The essay proceeds right away, however, to suggest that there can be degrees of semblance: although Otilie is *entirely* characterized by semblance, ‘the same sort of semblance-like nature is also hinted at in Charlotte’s being’, Benjamin claims. Yet, just as immediately, he appears to equivocate about the feasibility of such a comparison. In comparison to Otilie, Charlotte ‘only appears to be completely pure and irreproachable’.

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<sup>55</sup> This point is crucial to Gil Anidjar’s reading of Homer’s lines: ‘In these passages, blood is first and foremost blood magic, though it cannot be fully understood apart from the “bloody rationality” of its crucial correlate, namely, sacrifice’. Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. 165-66. Though blood usually serves an ideology of racial categorization, Anidjar suggests that Genesis 9.4 offers an account in which blood does not work to differentiate between human lives, but rather indicates ‘life’ stripped of all differentiating factors. See Anidjar, ‘We Have Never Been Jewish’, p. 50.

Even in her appearance as mother and housewife, in which passivity befits her very little, she strikes one as phantom-like [*mutet sie schemenhaft an*]. Yet nobility presents itself in her only at the price of this indefiniteness. Hence, at the deepest level, she is not unlike Otilie, who among the phantoms is the sole semblance [*Otilien, welche unter Schemen der einzige Schein ist, ist sie demnach im tiefsten nicht unähnlich*]. (SW1:336; GS1:175)

At the ‘deepest level’, Benjamin implies, Charlotte is ‘not unlike Otilie’. The hesitancy apparent in these words alone is multiplied throughout this brief passage, to the extent that any strong meaning Benjamin seeks to express is lost, for it is repeatedly remarked that Otilie is radically unlike any other character—she is the only one whose semblance entirely ‘spreads itself’ over and so she is the ‘sole semblance’—and yet she is nonetheless like them. The impossibility of quarantining semblance, concisely encapsulated in this passage, suggests that the problems of myth and the demonic come to inflect Benjamin’s own capacity to hold his terms apart and to deploy them at will. The only solution to this is a recalibration of what we usually understand by these terms themselves. The ‘deepest level’, so understood, would not be the entirely incommensurable point at which semblance is pure (and thus dialectically redeemable); rather, the deepest point is the phantom-like surface, at which similarities occur. Rather than leading Benjamin toward a dialectical point of inversion, myth turns in on his own text, rendering it nonetheless capable—even negatively—of providing social insights about the novel precisely at the level of its own language.

## 6. Living Form and Mere Life: Gundolf and Benjamin

Beyond simply deploying a pre-existing critical language to facilitate the interpretation of particular scenes, then, Benjamin’s readings draw attention to their own conditions of possibility and impossibility, and highlight the processes by which links between literary language and critical claims are legitimated or delegitimated. This is especially the case when Benjamin’s analyses frame themselves with reference to existing interpretations of the novel, most pertinently Friedrich Gundolf’s *Goethe*, of which Benjamin had written a hostile review upon its publication in 1916. In his introduction, Gundolf questions the general possibility of critical writing about Goethe, by opposing his own book—the self-described work of an *Aesthetiker*—to the torrent of Goethe biographies that had appeared the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries.<sup>56</sup> Gundolf argues that an adequate book on Goethe demands ‘the presentation of Goethe’s entire form’ (*die Darstellung von Goethes gesamter Gestalt*), that is, a presentation of the identity of Goethe’s work and life, neither of which takes precedence over the other, but which are simply ‘different attributes of one and the same substance’.<sup>57</sup> Whereas for biographers, works are only ‘testimonies’ of a life or ‘means to its knowledge’, the works, according to Gundolf, ‘have their own forms, their own laws; they have no representable development’. This determines the possibility or impossibility of criticism, since the question arises of the kind of critic able to recognize art in the required manner: as an ‘original state of humanity’ rather than as an ‘individual, arbitrary activity’. Gundolf argues that the ‘unartistic human being’ (*nichtkünstlerische Mensch*) is fundamentally incapable of understanding the life and aesthetic expressions (which Gundolf considers one and the same) of the artist: the ‘philistine’ (*Banause*), as Gundolf portrays the average critic and biographer, is capable only of finding, or ‘refinding’ (*wiederzufinden*), what they already know—namely, their own reality (*Wirklichkeit*)—even as they claim to be overcome by works of genius.<sup>58</sup> For Gundolf, this necessitates a rejection of the ‘theory of art as imitation or, as more recently put, empathy [*Einfühlung*]’: in contrast, Gundolf sees art as a ‘primary form of life’ (*primäre Form des Lebens*), which receives its only law as that of ‘art for art’s sake’.

Surprisingly, given the ferocity of his critique of this view, Benjamin appears at points to share Gundolf’s elitism, drawing a distinction between the ‘object-centred conception of the reader’ (*gegenständlichen Auffassung des Lesers*) and a more discerning sensibility able to detect the symbolism of death in the novel’s well-documented repetition of tropes: ‘In its most hidden features, the entire work is woven through by that symbolism. Yet only a feeling that is intimately familiar with this symbolism can effortlessly take in its language, where only exquisite beauties are proffered to the naïve understanding of the reader [*Ihre Sprache aber nimmt allein das Gefühl, dem sie vertraut ist, mühelos in sich auf, wo der gegenständlichen Auffassung des Lesers nur erlesene Schönheiten sich bieten*]’ (SW1:305; GS1:135-36; translation modified).<sup>59</sup> In attempting to distinguish

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<sup>56</sup> Tantillo notes that at least twelve biographies were published between 1895 and 1916, with four appearing in 1895 alone. Tantillo, *Elective Affinities and the Critics*, p. 66.

<sup>57</sup> Gundolf, *Goethe*, p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> Gundolf, *Goethe*, pp. 1-2. In the 1931 ‘Antitheses’ sketch, Benjamin places the Goethean term *musisch* (‘artistic’ or more literally ‘muse-inspired’) under the heading ‘uncriticizable’; across from it under the same heading is the word *banaisch* (‘philistine’), suggesting (according to the logic of the table discussed in my introduction) that the latter is the underside of the former (SW2:409; GS6:169). It remains unclear, however, whether Benjamin is here deploying the term ‘philistine’ in a Gundolfian (and perhaps Goethean) way, or as an implicit critique of Gundolf.

<sup>59</sup> On the symmetry and repetition in *Elective Affinities*, see Albert E. Gurganus, ‘Typologies of Repetition, Reflection, and Recurrence: Interpreting the Novella in Goethe’s *Wahlverwandtschaften*’, *Goethe Yearbook*, 15 (2008), 99-114; Jonathan Blower, ‘Monuments as Memento Mori in Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*’, *Future Anterior*, 8.2 (Winter 2011), 36-48.



his own critique from the supposedly unreflective acts of ‘readers’—a trope evident in the passage, cited at the outset of this chapter, in which the ‘gaze of the reader’ is countered by an infinite yet impossible perspective on the novella’s disappearance—Benjamin seems to reinforce the elitist tautology affirmed by Gundolf: with its ‘hidden features’, the novel’s deeper symbolism is evident to those who are already versed in the language of symbolism.

Benjamin’s decision to occupy this position seems significant, not only insofar as it suggests a potentially troublesome, yet heretofore uninterrogated, similarity with Gundolf, but also because it seems to uncannily reflect the claim made *about* this symbolism itself: namely, that it sets up an overbearing relationship to death and so overdetermines the lives of the novel’s characters. The way that Benjamin seeks to assuage the threat of this entanglement seems significant in two particular ways. On the one hand, Benjamin explicitly associates a prefigurative relation to death with Gundolf’s interpretation, by proposing that the category of the ‘works’, which is said to subsume all other distinctions in Gundolf’s book, casts an overbearing, mythic identity on ‘life’ and ‘fate’, giving ‘a distinct stamp to the two of them [*nur die beiden ausprägft*]’. This stamp takes the name ‘living form’ (*lebende Gestalt*), a term with Schillerian provenance, but apparently borrowed directly from Gundolf (SW1:322; GS1:157): the first page of *Goethe* posits that ‘only the human itself, the human form [*menschliche Gestalt*], is graspable for us at the same time as becoming and as being, as embossed form [*geprägte Form*] and as living development’.<sup>60</sup> In Benjamin’s analysis, the implications of this identification of fate and life are evident insofar as the ‘canonical form’ of this ‘stamp’ is said to be the ‘hero’, in whose figure ‘the symbolic form and with it the symbolic content of human life are rendered intelligible in the same manner’ (SW1: 322; GS1:157). This leads Benjamin to conclude that both the ontogenetic ‘individual dimension’ and the phylogenetic ‘human dimension’ of human life (which together are associated with the ‘symbolic content’ rather than symbolic form) are obliterated by the dominance of the heroic ‘superhuman’ (*Übermensch*).<sup>61</sup> This contention revisits an argument made in the 1916 review, which argues that the major irony of Gundolf’s text—which results in Gundolf’s image of Goethe being a ‘mere semblance’—is that Gundolf’s ‘object’, namely Goethe himself, ‘has been formally emptied and converted into the emptiest schema of its mere presentability [*leersten Schema der bloßen Darstellbarkeit*], something that an individual can never be’

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<sup>60</sup> Gundolf, *Goethe*, p. 1.

<sup>61</sup> Gundolf considers the term *Übermensch* in German (‘in a tone akin to that of Nietzsche’) to have first emerged during Goethe’s time in Strasbourg and Weztlar, and to have coincided with other momentous transitions: ‘At that time, the heroically great individual was introduced to German poetry as a self-sufficient value [...] At that time, under the genuine and overwhelming impulse of Goethe, the ambiguous word “genius” began to attain its optimistic value; at that time, the theoretical cult of the great personality established itself par excellence, without consideration of moral or social value [...]’. *Goethe*, p. 107.

(SW1: 98; GS1: 827; translation modified). When any individual is so canonized in the search for a ‘presentation’ of their essence, Benjamin seems to suggest, what makes them a human—either at the individual or species level—is erased, to be replaced by by a figure who, by imposing a form on the material content of life, walks on everyone’s behalf, a heroic ‘representative [*Vertreter*] of mankind’.<sup>62</sup>

Secondly, by showing the language of the formative ‘stamp’, or *Ausprägung*, to be so fundamental to Gundolf’s eradication of the human individual, Benjamin also subtly undermines the idea of criticism that was just as furtively advanced in his own doctoral dissertation. In ‘On the Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism’, as I argued in Chapter 2, Benjamin showed how the term ‘symbolic form’, which is critically deployed here with regard to Gundolf, ‘points in two directions’: to the ‘imprint [*Ausprägung*] of the pure poetic absolute’—the poetic force of naming itself—and to the particular contents that would always misname it (as mythology, religion, or ethics for instance). In a similar way, the term *Ausprägung* (which functions both as ‘imprint’ and ‘office’) demonstrates, in the dissertation, the paradox that grounds ‘criticizability’, whereby the possibility for criticism is only founded on a singular act of criticism, whose own singular, critical character is therein transformed. The term thus marked a tension compounded in Benjamin’s title between the singular act of criticism and its conceptualization, derailing the dissertation’s analysis of ‘the concept of criticism’, not only in German Romanticism but *in toto*. ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’, as the above remarks indicate, inherits both ‘symbolic form’ and *Ausprägung* and subjects them to a rigorous deconstruction, in the name of a ‘life’—and its contents—unrestricted by the imposition of a metaphysical form, even that formative or ‘embossing’ (*prägende*) form, with which the dissertation tarries.<sup>63</sup> In relation to the ‘content of human life’, symbolic form’s constitution as a ‘living form’ only serves to turn it into a *representative* form, which denies humans the capacity to live without being subject to a

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<sup>62</sup> Benjamin’s analysis is in this way somewhat akin to a slightly earlier critique of the Goethe cult, Richard Dehmel’s 1908 ‘Der Olympier Goethe: Ein Protest’. For a reading which unpacks how this text diagnoses the ‘miniaturization’ of Goethe that occurs precisely when he is monumentalized, see Michael Saman, ‘Constructions of Goethe versus Constructions of Kant in German Intellectual Culture, 1900-1925’, *Goethe Yearbook*, 21 (2014), 157-189 (pp. 158-59).

<sup>63</sup> As the language I have employed here suggests, I consider Benjamin’s extremely subtle argument to foreshadow Jacques Derrida’s identification of ‘conceptual *Ausprägung*’ as the moment at which Husserl ‘uncritically’ closes phenomenology (though the extent to which Benjamin might be referring to the relevant section of Husserl’s *Ideas*, §124, in the passages in question will be tackled in future research). For Derrida, this corresponds to the imposition of a form that defines ‘critique’: ‘The concept of form could serve as a thread to be followed in phenomenology’s elaboration of a purifying critique’ (‘Form and Meaning’, p. 157). Drawing on Derrida, Thomas Khurana has recently argued that the notion of ‘force’ is constitutively in excess of the ‘forms’ to which eighteenth-century theories of life gave rise (in, for example, Blumenbach’s notion of a formative drive). Derrida, Khurana argues, prioritizes neither form nor force, but rather shows how ‘force’ is in excess of all attempts to reify it, and so survives only as a multiplicity of forms. See Thomas Khurana, ‘Force and Form: An Essay on the Dialectics of the Living’, *Constellations*, 18.1 (March 2011), 21-34.

representational order which erases its singularity (at either the ‘human’ or ‘individual’ level). This threat is subtly registered in the later ‘Antitheses’ fragment, where, under the heading ‘uncriticizable’, Benjamin writes the phrase ‘presentation (minimum of criticism)’ and, across from it, ‘moderation’, implying that the latter is the bathetic underside of the former (SW2:409; GS6:169). The table thus confirms what is left implicit in these earlier texts: that the ‘minimum of criticism’—the idea that criticism can be reduced to its merest ‘schema of presentability’—is liable to become a moderating standard. In so questioning his own terms, in what is at surface a critique of Gundolf’s preeminent reading, Benjamin proposes that human life exceeds even the minimal linguistic power of criticism. With this in mind, Benjamin’s own apparent elitism takes on a different hue: it concerns not a superior grasping (*Auffassung*) of symbolism but rather, as a close reading of the text suggests, the possibility of a ‘feeling’ (*Gefühl*) that is intimate enough with this symbolism that it is able to ‘take in’ its *language* in an ‘effortless’ or ‘trouble-free’ (*mübelos*) way, that is without directing any effort toward this specific task.

If Benjamin secretly ironizes the interpretive novelty of his own claims about *Elective Affinities*, showing how they reinforce a particular vision of death (and thus attest to a problem with the Romantic notion of criticism), one of the essay’s relatively few explicit considerations of the nature of fiction casts further doubt on the possibility that a novel could ever achieve a positive relation to human life.<sup>64</sup> Questioning the representability of human life beyond ‘the emptiest schema of its mere presentability’ that arises in Gundolf, however, leads to a renewed consideration of fiction:

Human beings must themselves manifest the violence of nature [*Naturgewalt*], for at no point have they outgrown it. With respect to these characters, this fact constitutes the particular foundation of that more general understanding according to which the characters in a fiction can never be subject to ethical judgment. And to be sure, not because such judgment, like that passed on human beings, would surpass all human

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<sup>64</sup> As Claudia Brodsky has argued, Benjamin’s argument should itself be understood as a ‘language-based critique’ of the tendency that subordinates the historical literary or aesthetic text to either a mythic (ahistorical) or historicist understanding. The reduction of the literary text that perceives it primarily as a bearer of myth, in short, itself enacts a mythologizing operation (*In the Place*, p. 75, n. 14). Brodsky considers her own project—of entangling the linguistic and the architectural—in opposition to this tendency, which she sees as, in fact, reinforcing a conceptual, totalizing idea of life: ‘As opposed to the naturalization and conceptualization of the “referent,” which is to say, its destruction *as* referent—whether by way of a supposed rejection or full embrace of language as identical with world, or through a wished-for suspension of all building by endless nomadic movement in space, and so of historical life by “life” that, neither historical nor natural, is never arrested at any moment in time, that comprehends no particular life, no particular death, speaks no language and leaves no trace—this book instead studies language together with the architectural’ (p. 26).

discernment. Rather, the grounds of such judgment already forbid, incontrovertibly, its application to fictional characters. It remains for moral philosophy to prove in rigorous fashion that the fictional character is always too poor and too rich to come under ethical judgment. Such a judgment can only be executed upon real human beings. Characters in a novel are distinguished from them by being entirely rooted [*verhaftet*] in nature. And what is crucial in the case of fictional characters is not to make ethical findings but rather to understand morally what happens. (SW1:303-04; GS1:133)

The grounds of ‘ethical judgement’, this dense passage suggests, are such that they forbid its application to fictional characters and have relevance only for real human beings. Yet, unsurprisingly, Benjamin does not offer these ‘grounds’, which are available only to a non-human judgement and hence have a functional rather than substantial reality for any theoretical enquiry. Benjamin writes as if such grounds were already determined, and as if, therefore, it were already possible to prove their applicability to fiction. Yet it is more feasible that, rather than constituting a specific sphere about which such claims can be made, ‘fiction’ is the site of a particular mode of appearance whose own meagreness sheds light on a species of being whose meagreness cannot be adequately represented: namely, ‘human beings’. In contrast to humans, who are both natural and (noumenally) ‘supernatural’, characters in a novel are, counterintuitively, ‘entirely rooted’ or ‘arrested’ (*verhaftet*) in nature. Fiction is uniquely capable, then, of artificing figures who are able to occupy the paradoxical but philosophically crucial position of being more ‘natural’ than nature: both ‘too poor’ to win redemption and ‘too rich’ to be merely human, fictional characters are, rather, independent of all values.

Again, the contrast with Gundolf’s text is palpable: one of the major criticisms of Benjamin’s 1916 review is that Gundolf attributes ‘value’ to the distinction between speech and writing, whereas a rigorously historical text should at most attribute ‘significance’ (SW1:97; GS1:826). The emptiness of fictional beings, however, allows them all the better to register that sphere of existence, ‘mere life’ (*bloße Leben*), whose recalcitrance, according to the contemporaneous ‘Toward the Critique of Violence’, functions as an obstinate critique of the main activity of legal violence, the creation of values, but which—in its merelessness—withdraws itself from all positive forms of theoretical speculation.<sup>65</sup> In being *unable* to embody ‘mere life’, in

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<sup>65</sup> Heinrich Rickert, whose classes on the philosophy of life Benjamin attended along with Heidegger, framed his philosophical system around the opposition between a ‘mere life’ indifferent to values, and a ‘completed life’, in which all regions of value had been fulfilled; so rigorous was this opposition that it constituted the limit of Benjamin’s thinking about life. Whereas Rickert denigrated philosophies of life since Nietzsche for nihilistically affirming ‘mere life’, Benjamin—insofar as he rejected the creation of values as the main activity of the violent sphere of law—came to recognize ‘mere life’ as the only domain that could be considered critical

a word, fictional characters are its negative index: the constitutively flawed link between fiction and criticism generates the ability of both fiction and criticism to touch on human life.<sup>66</sup>

## 7. Marriage, Sexuality, and Biological Experience

If fiction is uniquely capable of generating insight, however partial or provisional, into the ‘contents’ of human life, then this suggests once again that the novel cannot simply be dismissed as mythic. Nonetheless, Benjamin’s reading of the novel generates an engagement with ‘mere life’ by unfolding the mythical basis of enlightenment theories of property rights, as articulated especially in Kant’s *Doctrine of Right*, and, by attending to what escapes that mythic structure, or what it excessively generates.<sup>67</sup> Particularly pertinent here is the section of Kant’s text explicitly addressed in ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’, namely the discussion of sexuality and marriage that occurs under the heading ‘On Rights to Persons Akin to Rights to Things’. Cited in the opening pages of Benjamin’s text, Kant’s notorious definition of marriage involves ‘the union of two persons of different sexes for the purpose of lifelong mutual possession of their sexual organs’ (GS1:127; SW1:299) and arises on the basis of his claim that other forms of sexual activity involve a person making a part of themselves into a thing-like object to be used for the purposes of pursuing enjoyment: ‘one gives itself up to the other. In this act a human being makes himself into a thing, which conflicts with the right of humanity in his own person’.<sup>68</sup> Because every

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of such violence; indeed, Benjamin’s 1916 polemic against Gundolf is more than anything else a sober claim for the conceptual clarity of scientific limits against any method that imposes ‘value’. Yet, as the fragmentary character of ‘Toward the Critique of Violence’ bears out, ‘mere life’ remains inaccessible to theoretical speculation—the point at which Benjamin’s ‘critical’, though equally self-effacing, essay on *Elective Affinities* becomes important. For a comprehensive account of Benjamin and Heidegger’s divergent modes of inheriting ‘mere life’, see Peter Fenves, ‘Entanglement—Of Benjamin with Heidegger’, in *Sparks Will Fly: Benjamin and Heidegger*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin and Dimitris Vardoulakis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), pp. 3-26. See also Kevin McLaughlin, ‘Biophilology: Walter Benjamin’s Literary Critical Legacy’, *MLN*, 133.3 (April 2018), 562-584. On the fragmentary character of ‘Toward the Critique of Violence’, see Julia Ng, ‘The Politics of Geometry: Outline of a Foundational Critique of Violence, 1637–1795–1913’, *Discussions*, 5 (2010) <[https://www.perspectivia.net/receive/ploneimport\\_mods\\_00000492](https://www.perspectivia.net/receive/ploneimport_mods_00000492)> [accessed 30 January 2019], especially paragraphs 22 and 23.

<sup>66</sup> I read Benjamin’s binding of the natural and supernatural elements of human life as not simply a *rejection* of ‘mere life’, but as a means, however precarious, to recognize and maintain its mereness as a resistance to the sphere of values. In this sense, my reading diverges from commentators who see ‘mere life’ as inevitably bound by myth: see for instance Weigel, ‘The Artwork as Breach’, p. 203. The essay’s scene of being ‘alone before God’, then, does not oppose a positive notion of the religious salvation to mythology. Rather, ‘religion’ (like fiction, as I argue) prises open a space in which mythology is absent. In Peter Fenves’s helpful gloss, ‘the critique of “epistemo-mythology” requires the integration of the “domain of religion” into the “sphere of knowledge” because *religion* means nothing other than: “the absence of mythology.”’ *Messianic Reduction*, pp. 174-175.

<sup>67</sup> See Fenves, *Messianic Reduction*, pp. 187-226.

<sup>68</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 62-63.

‘person’ is, by definition, a totality, it is not possible, Kant argues, to choose to treat a part of one’s being as a mere thing, without doing harm to our very personhood. Marriage overcomes this impasse: insofar as both partners in a marriage agree to own one another’s organs, a sexual relationship can emerge which does not make those persons into things, since each person is acquired and acquires the other: ‘acquiring a member of a human being is at the same time acquiring the whole person, since a person is an absolute unity’.<sup>69</sup> Marriage is necessary (‘they *must* necessarily marry’, Kant stresses) if a sexual relationship is to be pursued, because it means that a person is capable of continuing to be a person, that is, a rational being who continues to ‘have’ their faculties.

For Benjamin, however, this understanding of marriage ultimately exceeds the ‘juridical reality’ (SW1:299; GS1:130) of defined personhood, which forms the context for Kant’s remarks, and which finds expression in the novel through the ‘muddy, deceptive juridical instincts’ (*trüben, trügerischen Rechtsinstincken*) of Mittler. Rather than being a mere legal formality between two pre-existing subjects, ‘marriage’ is for Benjamin a linguistic bind, a ‘stamp of content’ of the kind to which other thinkers of the Enlightenment were blind. In refusing to accommodate either the legal framework that interpellates individuals as subjects with ‘rights’ or the assumption of mutual feeling usually associated with marital bonds—the ‘sentimental ratiocination’ (*gefühlvolles Vernünfteln*) of Enlightenment theory, in Benjamin’s gloss (SW1: 299; GS1:130)—marriage is an instance of the objectivity of language, which the essay associates with the ‘divine imprint’ of the name and so with ‘higher experience’. Yet Kant’s text is so significant for Benjamin’s essay, because its insistence on the transactional economy of sexual exchange is argued to be inseparable from the linguistic objectivity of the word ‘marriage’. This suggests again that the content of ‘higher experience’ (its *Gehalt*, a word which could refer until the late eighteenth century to a coin’s precious metal content)<sup>70</sup> cannot entail an abstraction from the material content of human life, here sexuality. Instead, such an experience emerges only in matter’s presentation as a linguistic seal:

From the objective nature of marriage, one could obviously deduce only its depravity [*Vervorfenheit*]<sup>70</sup>—and in Kant’s case this is what it willy-nilly amounts to. That, however, is precisely what is decisive [*das Entscheidende*]: its content [*Gehalt*] can never be deducible from the related [*verbält*] real matter [*Sache*] but must instead be grasped as the seal [*Siegel*] which presents this matter. (SW1:299; GS1:127-128; translation modified)

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<sup>69</sup> Kant, *Metaphysics*, p. 63.

<sup>70</sup> McLaughlin, ‘Coming of Paper’, p. 974.

As ‘one of the most rigorous and objective impressions of the content of human life [*einer der strengsten und sachlichsten Ausprägungen menschlichen Lebensgehalt*]’, marriage stands apart from the formal impressions (*Ausprägungen*) that, as suggested above, Benjamin associates with a ‘heroic’ concept of criticism, divested of the contents of human life. Marriage, on the other hand, is both rigorous and irreducibly objective or thingly (*sachlichsten*): it is impossible to separate the linguistic impression from the ‘depravity’ of human life.

With this insight, Benjamin’s reading of the novel takes up his underdeveloped claims about alternatives to the poverty of experience offered by Kant’s work. ‘On the Program of the Coming Philosophy’ raises ‘the question of those scientific types of experience [*wissenschaftlichen Erfahrungsarten*] (the biological ones) which Kant did not treat on the ground of the transcendental logic’ and proposes an enquiry, never undertaken, into ‘why he did not do so’ (SW1:107; GS2:167).<sup>71</sup> In a fragment written around the same time, entitled ‘On the Lost Conclusion to the Note on Symbolism in Knowledge’, Benjamin seeks to recall the contents of a text that had explicated the difference between idea and ideal, which ultimately turns on the argument that biology is different in kind from the sciences of physics and chemistry, precisely because the kind of experience at stake is, like the ‘truth content’ in relation to ‘material content’, indeducible:

In it, Goethe’s natural science was conceived as a representative of the genuine theoretical knowledge carried out in symbols. It was not in poetic analogies that Goethe opened up the symbols in which nature is knowable, but in visual insights. The ur-phenomenon is a systematic-symbolic concept. It is as an ideal symbol.

It was also referred to, in that lost conclusion, as an idea as well. But in what sense? In the purely theoretical sense in which the idea is derived from the concept. In the sense of the idea as a task. – The ideal, on the other hand, represents the relation to art, or rather to speech, to perception.

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<sup>71</sup> For a consideration of Benjamin’s literary critical project in relation to a notion of ‘science’ that emerges from his Nietzsche-inspired engagements with university life, see McLaughlin, ‘Biophilology’. My reading differs notably from that of Matthew Charles, who argues that Benjamin’s reference to biology in ‘On the Program of the Coming Philosophy’ raises the ‘troubling possibility of speculative intuition’. Whilst Charles argues that this possibility is raised too quickly, he maintains that Benjamin advocates a ‘Romantic philosophy of science’ which seeks to overcome Kantian limits. Yet, as I seek to show here and elsewhere throughout the thesis, neither the Romantics, Goethe, nor Benjamin held such a determinate relation to Kantian ‘limits’. See Charles, *Speculative Experience*, pp. 25-30.

Perception [*Wahrnehmung*] is constitutive in the descriptive natural sciences. That is to say, in physics and chemistry, perception can be abstracted in the theoretical domain from intuitability [*Anschaubarkeit*], but this is not the case in the biological sciences. Where it is a question of life, it is about intuitability [*Anschaubarkeit*], about perception [*Wahrnehmung*]. There is a moment of irreducible perception [*Wahrnehmung*] in life, as opposed to physical and chemical phenomena. (GS6:38)

In biology, perception and intuitability cannot be abstracted from one another, the fragment suggests. The significance of this insight for the train of thought undertaken with regard to Kant and Goethe is confirmed in a claim made in Benjamin's gloss on marriage in 'Goethe's Elective Affinities': material content 'yields only to philosophical perception [*Anschauung*]—or more precisely, to philosophical experience [*Erfahrung*]' (SW1: 299; GS1: 127). If biological perception is a sibling of 'philosophical' or 'higher' experience, it is because biology, rather than constituting a specific domain of knowledge, extracts itself from the realm of science in which everything can be deduced from something else and through which a model of a scientific infinite task is thus perpetually reinforced. For biology, Benjamin implies, the ur-phenomenon could never be a simple 'model' but instead pertains to an irreducible and ungeneralizable experience outlined here.

As the note suggests, the 'ideal'—the name for that which is not delimited in advance by the infinite task of the idea—relates to 'art' or 'speech' (but not, notably, to 'poetic analogies', which remain merely subjective). It is only, perhaps, the kind of 'effortless' (*mübelos*) reading discussed in the previous section—an intimate 'feeling' for language that remains open to the possibility that the ur-phenomena can never appear as such—that is able to 'take in' this experience.

## 8. Representation, Visibility, Experience

As Benjamin's critiques of the notion of *Erlebnis* consistently maintain, life is never simply given as an object of lived experience, but pertains to *Erfahrung*. This is not only a question of a theoretical distinction, however, but an irreducible tension generative of a recursive ambiguity that inflects all reading. Like the concept of criticism, the conceptualization of experience threatens to erase or modify the character of the thing it conceptualizes, a consequence that is particularly pointed when it comes to biological experience. To conceptualize *Erfahrung*, as Peter Fenves (who has tracked the relation between experience and the concept of experience most



convincingly) suggests, is to turn it into *Erlebnis*, a term whose basis in life (*Leben*) allowed it to serve as a putative guarantor of the link between biology and philosophy but which (unlike genuinely scientific concepts), fails on Benjamin's account to even provide a methodological constant to access knowledge within a defined field.<sup>72</sup> In 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', this tension is particularly prominent since, in the texts that it scrutinizes, life becomes the object of representative discourses that transform its character. Kant's *Doctrine of Right*, for example, sees its argument about a *commercium sexuale* almost immediately overcoded by prevailing cultural hierarchies, not only between 'natural' heterosexuality and 'unnatural' homosexuality (or bestiality), but, within the former, between sexuality 'in accordance with mere animal nature (*vaga libido, venus vulgivaga, fornicatio*)' and sexuality 'in accordance with law'.<sup>73</sup> Rather than addressing such transformations, directly, Benjamin's essay incorporates them into its own texture, such that his opposition to them emerges only obliquely. Citing Bettina von Arnim, for example, Benjamin deploys the dual origin myth of Aphrodite, to which Kant's parentheses are referring, to suggest that Goethe's representation of sexuality is just as partial and susceptible to over-determination. In *Goethe's Correspondence with a Child*, a text that itself weaves truth and fiction, von Arnim references Hesiod's version of the emergence of Aphrodite Urania to accuse Goethe of engendering an unreal love-object that ambiguously and destructively recedes from view: "That Venus surged out of the foaming sea of your passion, and after sowing a harvest of pearly tears, she vanishes back into it with supernatural radiance" (qtd. in SW1:342; GS1:183).<sup>74</sup>

No less than those of Kant and Goethe, however, do Benjamin's own writings appear to avoid an explicit, affirmative encounter with human sexuality as a 'material content'. Indeed, recalling the myth of Aphrodite, a distinction between 'spirit' and 'sexuality'—'the two basic

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<sup>72</sup> 'But—and this is crucial—this is no fault of the philosophers, least of all a fault that can be ascribed to Kant, for the experience in question cannot be ascribed to anyone. As soon as someone holds onto a "singularly temporal" experience, it is recast as *Erlebnis*.' Fenves, *Messianic Reduction*, p. 167.

<sup>73</sup> Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 62. See also Lara Denis, 'Kant on the Wrongness of "Unnatural" Sex', *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 16.2 (April 1999), 225–48.

<sup>74</sup> Two origin stories of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love (historically synchronized with the Roman goddess Venus) determined sexuality as either vulgar or spiritual. In the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite, Aphrodite Pandemos ('of all the folk') is borne of a sexual encounter between Zeus and Dione; in Hesiod's *Theogony*, on the other hand, Aphrodite Urania is born from the foam produced by Uranus's genitals. In Plato's *Symposium*, these origin stories were already famous enough to warrant Pausanias to ask the rhetorical question 'And am I not right in asserting that there are two goddesses?' before reminding the other speakers of the opposing 'vulgar' and 'spiritual' stories of Aphrodite. In Plato, Hesiod's account, in which Aphrodite emerges only from male sexuality, is recounted to stress the superiority of homosexual relationships. Kant's text probably has a simpler aim: the exclusion of extramarital sex (*fornicatio*) from the reciprocal binding of *commercium sexuale*, but the reference to this myth places his text squarely in a complex of late eighteenth-century debates about sexuality, influenced by the reception of the *Symposium*. For an important account of this history, and of hermaphroditism in German literature and aesthetics, see Catriona MacLeod, *Embodying Ambiguity: Androgyny and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Keller* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998).

polar forces of human “nature”—is at the basis of almost all of the fragments that approach this problem, as well as ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’ itself (SW1:395; GS6:81). In the essay, ‘spirit’ is adjudged to be tied to the ‘natural innocence of life’, rather than sexuality.

To be sure, like natural guilt [*natürliche Schuld*], there is also a natural innocence of life [*natürliche Unschuld des Lebens*]. The latter, however, is tied not to sexuality—not even in the mode of denial—but rather solely to its antipode, the spirit (which is equally natural). Just as the sexual life of man can become the expression of natural guilt, his spiritual life, based on the variously constituted unity of his individuality, can become the expression of natural innocence. This unity of individual spiritual life is ‘character.’ (SW1:335; GS1:174)

Benjamin opposes this ‘unequivocalness’ of character to ‘the demonism of all purely sexual phenomena’ apparently reinscribing the dichotomy between spiritual character and demonic sexuality through the denigrating characterization of sexuality as a ‘mere life-drive’ (*bloßen Lebenstrieb*) (SW1:335; GS1:174), associated above all with Otilie. Whereas ‘character’ depends on the ability to arrive at a ‘decision’, drives are ‘speechless’ and decisionless (SW1:337; GS1:177), thus the critical reference to the ‘death drive’ (*Todestriebe*) to which Otilie is said to submit in the absence of any vocalized decision about her own life or death (SW1:336; GS1:176).<sup>75</sup>

This amounts, however, to a reflection upon the diagnostic language of ‘drives’ as much as anything else. In attempting to capture an ‘eternal’ quality of human life, the term ‘drive’ betrays a subscription to a pre-formed, monumentalized idea of death that Benjamin finds to reign throughout the novel. The structure of the ‘drive’, Benjamin suggests, is always oriented toward death: precisely insofar as it is named a ‘drive’, an aspect of human sexuality becomes subject to another mythological order that sees life solely in terms of death. In a fragment entitled ‘On Marriage’, the conception of ‘bare’ sexuality is, similarly, associated with a preordained image of death. ‘The sexual in itself [*Das Geschlechtliche an sich selbst*], Benjamin writes, ‘flees its own death as well as its own life, and blindly evokes foreign death like a foreign life on this flight. It goes to nothing, that misery where life is just a non-death and death just a non-life’ (GS6:68). Blind to its own susceptibility to mythic incorporation, sexuality ‘in itself’

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<sup>75</sup> On Benjamin’s reference to Otilie’s ‘drive’, see Amir Ahmadi, ‘Benjamin’s Niobe’, in *Towards the Critique of Violence: Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben*, ed. by Brendan Moran and Carlo Salzani (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 57-72 (p. 64), and, in the same volume, Brendan Moran, ‘Nature, Decision and Muteness’, pp. 73-90 (pp. 81-82).

lingers on only by foregoing any significant relation to either life or death. Sexuality thus registers the sepulchral meagreness of ‘immortality’ in Goethe’s text, which is considered as an ‘incapacity to die’ (*Nicht-Sterben-Können*)—the hyphenated compound noun differs from other ‘inabilities’ in Benjamin’s corpus—that is at the same time a ‘fear of life’ (*Lebensangst*) (SW1: 317-318; GS1: 151-152).<sup>76</sup> As suggested, however, the representational denouement of biological experience is not simply a discrete discursive violence imposed on that experience from outside: from Kant to Freud, Benjamin implies the inevitability of experience’s withering into concepts. As Benjamin’s references to Freudian terminology suggest, the putative speechlessness of drives arguably says less about biological or psychic functions than about the theoretical conditions that inescapably govern their appearance, conditions which validate certain forms of language and expression, while rendering others inaudible.<sup>77</sup>

## 9. Linguistic Life and Broken Pieces

For Benjamin, the concept of experience remains constitutively inaccessible and outstanding: like the concepts of life and criticism, the conceptualization of experience transforms its nature. At the conclusion of ‘On the Program of the Coming Philosophy’, however, Benjamin describes experience, or ‘existence’ (*Dasein*), as a ‘concrete totality’, a phrase with two valences. On the one hand, ‘experience’—like concrete—pours itself into and around every experience to such an extent that there are no discernible points that might allow one experience to be recognized and differentiated from any other. Yet, on the other, the concreteness of experience also means that (from the perspective of the singular experience as opposed to the outstanding ‘concept of experience’), every experience is—singularly—concrete.<sup>78</sup> Experience is measureless, since there is no alternative to it, but it is also concrete, of this world, and experienced only in relation to particular, ‘concrete’ things.

In the ‘Outline of the Psycho-Physical Problem’, in a claim forwarded under the heading ‘Spirit and Sexuality/Nature and Körper’, this notion is taken up to advance an alternative

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<sup>76</sup> As Elaine P. Miller has shown, inorganic matter’s ‘incapacity to die’ becomes a categorical point of distinction in Hegel’s mature philosophy of nature. Miller, *The Vegetative Soul*, p. 136.

<sup>77</sup> For a convincing reading of Goethe’s novel whose contention that ‘vocalities’ are necessarily plural arguably constitutes a silent rebuttal to Benjamin, see Mary Helen Dupree, ‘Otilie’s Echo: Vocality in Goethe’s *Wahlverwandtschaften*’, *The German Quarterly*, 87.1 (Winter 2014), 67-85. Dupree draws on the work of Adriana Cavarero to interpret the novel’s relation to the proliferation of ‘declamatory concerns’ in the late eighteenth century.

<sup>78</sup> ‘Translated into the language of experience, this means: every experience is experience pure and simple—which reproduces, in a sense, Kant’s dictum that “there is only one experience” but makes it possible for this “one” of experience to be dense enough, as it were, to be “there” in a systematically and historically diverse complex of so-called experiences.’ Fenves, *Messianic Reduction*, p. 182.

account of sexuality from the one offered above, one that is relevant for understanding Benjamin's interpretation of Goethe's novel:

Nature is not something that belongs especially to every individual body. It is, rather, in its relation (*Verhältnis*) to the singularity of the body, comparable to the relation (*Verhältnis*) of the currents in the sea to each drop of water. Countless such drops are carried along by the same current. In like fashion, nature is the same, not indeed in all human beings, but in a great many of them. (SW1:395; GS6:81; translation modified)

There is not one nature, but many, and any human life is as a drop of water: now flowing with this current, now with that. With the thought of the 'individual body', the concrete totality that expressed the reconciliation of continuous and discontinuous experience is cracked open, and shown to conceal—or, more accurately, shown to be the one and the same as—a life that flows beneath the surface. This life, however, is manifested in every 'relation' (*Verhältnis*) of the singular body to 'nature', pointing to the linguistic and discontinuous nature of the experience in question. Although the passage preceding this one refers to spirit and sexuality as 'the two basic polar forces of human "nature"', Benjamin here reveals 'spirit' to be a negative principle, a means of minimally indicating a realm of possible experience. This is what is at stake in the claim that 'total vitality has its reconciliatory effect only in art'; other expressions of nature's totality are bound to be fatally destructive.

One such experience is legible in 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', though it is concealed under the hardened surface of a more substantial claim about myth. Benjamin cites a lengthy passage from Julius Walter's 1893 book *The History of Aesthetics in Antiquity* (*Die Geschichte der Ästhetik im Altertum*) in order to link the ambiguity of Goethe's theory of nature to the ambiguity of water (both 'black, dark, unfathomable' and 'reflecting, clear, and clarifying') and, via the dual mythic origin of Aphrodite, to sexuality (SW1:341; GS1:183). According to the first section of Walter's text, 'Aesthetic Judgement in Greek Poetry', the goddess Aphrodite is 'praised at flowing rivers and fountains [*strömenden Flüssen und Quellen*]; one of the Oceanides is named Schönfließ'. The explicit function of the citation is to reinforce water's indispensability to myth and with it 'the mythic origin of the novel's image of beautiful life': *Schönfließ* is readable as 'beautiful flow'. Yet the quotation also harbours a secret identification of Benjamin's, insofar as *Schönfließ* is a homonym of Schönflies, Benjamin's mother's maiden name and his own middle name. This identification is not with an island of stable meaning in the 'world of harmonic-chaotic wave motion' that Benjamin sees the novel to 'point back' to, but rather with the

transformability of water—and the fluidity in the *name* Schönflies—against all concretions of meaning, including the concrete identification of myth. In the context of the essay, the name appears as an open secret, bearing within it an idea of linguistic life at the same time as it signifies mythic origin of the novel. Just when water’s ambiguity is emphasized, Benjamin tacitly positions water as a natural element as undetermined as the human name.<sup>79</sup> Though water, like sexuality in Goethe’s novel, may be criticized on account of this lack of determination, Benjamin’s attentiveness to an entrenched sound’s ability to mean more than one thing implies an important recognition of the inseparability of language’s natural ‘innocence’ and its referential equivalency; with this comes a concomitant absolution of water’s entanglement in a mythical guilt-complex. Benjamin again associates the possibility of accessing this not with the critical exposure of myth but with the ‘deeper feeling’ (*tieferes Gefühl*) he associates with von Arnim’s epistolary quasi-fictions, which are explicitly contrasted to misogynistic interpretations of the mythological motif of water.

Though at one level they link sexuality and death, Benjamin’s fragments on marriage and sexuality also confirm this notion of a linguistic, liquid life that flows between islands of myth: in life, Benjamin surmises, ‘the boat of love must pass between the Scylla of death and the Charybdis of misery, and never do so unless God, at this point in its journey, made it indestructible in its mutability [*verwandelnd unzerstörbar*]’ (GS6:68). Even if sexuality, according to the same fragment, is considered to be a ‘monstrous danger’ (reminiscent of the ‘monstrous right of the present’ in the novel’s double infidelity scene), its irreducibility to such dangers lies in the fact that it ‘nevertheless belongs to life’, meaning that it is indestructible—or continuous—precisely insofar as it is ceaselessly mutable. The boat manages to navigate between islands, we might say, because it is itself as undetermined by form as water. This image forces consideration of the visibility of the boat itself, and the visibility of a linguistic word that escapes conceptuality: how could it differ from the water, whose existence is necessary for islands to be what they are? How, then, do the water and the islands—‘sexuality’ and its mythical concretions, a word and its semantic contexts—condition and rely on one another? In registering the problem of experience *in nuce*, Benjamin’s reflections on sexuality elude existent forms of conceptualization and temporalization. The continuance of love in marriage, Benjamin argues, does not neutralize an eternal conflict between two sexes, an idea that he continually rejects; rather, sexuality and love are indestructible only insofar as they remain as fundamentally mutable and durational as the life they flow through, ‘completely alien to the utterly eternal’. In this remark, written between 1918

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<sup>79</sup> For a reading of this passage, which identifies the significant omissions in Benjamin’s citation of Walter, see Thomas Schestag, *Asphalt. Walter Benjamin* (Grafrath: Boer, 2015), pp. 20-22.

and 1920, Benjamin may be offering a furtive rejoinder to a text first delivered to the Vienna Psychoanalytical Society on 12 December 1917 and published the following year as part of a volume entitled *Contributions to the Psychology of Love*. In ‘The Taboo of Virginity’, Freud relates the eponymous concept to the ambiguous nature of possession, particularly to the problem of ‘first possession’ that was so integral to Kant’s *Doctrine of Right*. To possess a person as a good in the form of taking their virginity, Freud suggests, is to expose oneself to the possibility of being possessed by them, a threat for which he borrows the term ‘bondage’ from Richard von Krafft-Ebing. If Benjamin ever encountered Freud’s essay, his problem with it might have been that Freud appears to insist on the transhistorical nature of the ‘dread’ thus invoked in one sex toward another: ‘the practice of the taboos we have described testifies to the existence of a force which opposes love by rejecting women as strange and hostile’.<sup>80</sup> Freud argues that the apparent universality of this taboo gives us ‘every reason to doubt the reputed sexual freedom of savages’; that the taboo is a transcultural ‘force’ renders such distinctions negligible. Benjamin’s repeated insistence that the crisis of sexuality is a ‘western’ or ‘European’ problem—albeit one that is not driven by a transhistorical ‘force’—thus suspends Freud’s argument, without arriving at a determinate reversal of it. The temporality of sexuality, for Benjamin, is not eternal but rather that of an ‘earthly duration’ which is differentiated by the finitude of life and death, and allows Benjamin to point not to Goethe’s life but its ‘duration’ or *Lebensdauer* (SW1:329; GS1:167): ‘Only then does the reality of sexual difference [*Geschlechtes*] enter into love’.<sup>81</sup> Like linguistic truth, sexuality escapes death or nothingness only if it is utterly transformable.

These texts raise pertinent questions regarding the distinction between nature and art, on the one hand, and art and criticism, on the other. Benjamin’s claim that it is ‘only in art’ that ‘total vitality has its conciliatory effect’ echoes the passage of ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’, interrogated early in this chapter, where he claims that the ur-phenomenon, as an *Urbild* of nature’s structural wholeness and living vitality, could become visible ‘only in art’. Whereas, in the latter claim, ‘art’ was opposed to the phenomenal existence of visible nature, discussions of sexuality in ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities’ and related fragments show art to be, at bottom, a differentiating ‘principle’ at work in all forms of appearance and representation. Benjamin’s revision of this Goethean idea also helps illuminate the relation of art and criticism, turning the problem away from the question of their substantial difference and toward the question of how

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<sup>80</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘The Taboo of Virginity’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), XI (1957), pp. 191-208 (p. 199).

<sup>81</sup> According to Freud, however, the introduction of a certain duration or seriality into the equation can work to lessen the ‘inhibitions’ that arise in marriage: ‘second marriages so often turn out better than the first’. See ‘The Taboo of Virginity’, p. 191.

their *similarity* is to be identified. For Goethe, criticism gains its power not from its fundamental difference to the work—which would, as in early Romanticism, imply that the former is able to transform and so complete the latter, pointing away from the work’s natural unity and toward the unity offered by the idea of ‘art’—but instead from its affirmation of the work: Goethe, Benjamin suggests, was ‘able to abide unapproachably, not above, to be sure, but in his work [*durfte Goethe unnabbar, zwar nicht über, jedoch in seinem Werke verharren*]’ (SW1:314; GS1:146). This unapproachable inhabitation of the work itself, however, as Benjamin’s own arguments demonstrate, runs the risk of being legible only as a preservation or conservation of the uncriticizable work, as an obsequious reading-off of its immanent standard.

As I have attempted to show throughout this chapter, however, by attending to a self-recessive ‘readiness for withdrawal and disappearance’ that traverses Benjamin’s reading, criticism of this kind does occur, whether or not we are attentive to it *as* criticism. Indeed, Benjamin’s own essay can be read as one such example of an attempt to inhabit works, or to inhabit words, without supposing the possibility of exiling criticism and interpretation.<sup>82</sup> For Benjamin, the peril faced by criticism is in this way structurally similar to that of experience, and of biological experience in particular. Criticism takes place as much as ‘living’ takes place, but like living, it gives itself to no concept and yields no program. Whereas this Goethean notion of criticism shares with Benjamin’s reading of Romantic criticism an irreducibility to conceptualization—the ‘concept’ of Romantic criticism is as much a result of a mischaracterization as is the ‘concept’ of biological experience—it differs insofar as it is not related solely to the singular, formative force of naming, but rather, as Benjamin’s comments on human life and sexuality make clear time and again, to the linguistic ‘relation’ between material contents and their truths that lives in every name. As the linguistic seals that comprise the experience we have of things in the world, including the experience of our own bodies, names are ineluctably multiple.

In a fragment which echoes the account of experience offered above, Benjamin emphasizes this plurality as a plurality of artworks:

Works of art are the proper site of truths. There are as many ultimate truths as there are authentic works of art. These ultimate truths are not elements but genuine parts, pieces,

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<sup>82</sup> For the notion that the name occurs *in* the word, yet is uninterested in the possibility of dismissing interpretations (which arise inevitably) see Schestag, *Asphalt*, especially pp. 9-13. My reading thus differs from accounts that see Benjamin’s essay as a first step toward the ‘development and realization’ of a determinate critical program. For an example of this view, see Hühn and Urbich (eds.), ‘Einleitung’, in *Benjamins Wahlverwandtschaften*, pp. 9-33 (p. 15).

or broken pieces of the truth [*nicht Elemente sondern echte Teile, Stücke oder Bruchstücke der Wahrheit*]; in themselves, however, they offer no possibility of interconnection and are not to be completed through one another. (SW1:278; GS6:46; translation modified)

Goethe's theory of art—'the unity of art is found ever again in the plurality of works'—is also, these sentences suggest, Benjamin's theory of truth. Like the unity of art, truth is not to be found in the projected 'interconnection' of truths, as the Romantic fragment (*Fragment*) suggests, but solely in the fact that there are *truths*, a claim which demands a different, non-synthetic and non-dialectical mode of reading, which resists the lure of turning 'truths' into something else, elements of a larger whole, or manifestations of a confused and mythic provisionality. Truths, artworks, are (like Charlotte's 'piecework' creation discussed in the previous chapter) pieces (*Stücke*) of a linguistic 'truth' that has no reality apart from its scattering as 'broken pieces' (*Bruchstücke*). The problem of 'uncriticizability' leaves it to us to decide whether and how we could ever find 'life', linguistic life, in these broken pieces.



## Conclusion

### ‘The Loneliness of Poetry’: Uncriticizability, Philology, and the Politics of Literary Time

#### 1. ‘Perfection instead of completion’: Uncriticizability and Philology

‘I can assure you’, Benjamin writes to Scholem on 14 February 1921, ‘that the necessity of finding an approach to this matter other than the “romantic” one is clear to me’. This decisive, if still anticipative, repudiation of Romanticism is prompted by a letter from Scholem, now lost, on the relation between historical chronicles and philology: ‘I have given some thought to philology (even back when I was in Switzerland). I was always aware of its seductive side.’ Benjamin goes on to describe philology’s procedure as that of ‘perfection instead of completion’ (*Vollkommenheit statt Vollendung*) a remark that concisely encapsulates many of the major problems addressed in this thesis (C:176; B:257; translation modified). As Chapter 4 showed, Benjamin inherits an idea of ‘completion’ (*Vollendung*) from Rickert’s value philosophy, which sees ‘life’ to be oriented toward the fulfilment of a sphere of values.<sup>1</sup> Perfection, on the other hand, registers the unremitting relevance of a pre-Kantian notion of life. As is evident from Benjamin’s earliest writings onward, however, this notion of perfection is inseparable from the finite material of life, hence the remark in ‘The Life of Students’ that an ‘immanent state of perfection’ (*immanenten Zustand der Vollkommenheit*) accompanies even the most degraded, ‘endangered, excoriated and ridiculed’ products of the present (SW1:37; GS2:75).

As Chapter 3 argued with respect to *Elective Affinities*, and as Chapter 4 demonstrated through a close reading of Benjamin’s essay on the novel, literary works and their critiques offer a unique lens onto the way that such transitory and ‘finite’ ‘products’ are both necessary and ruinous for philosophical ideas of the universe’s perfection. In Goethe’s novel, which sometimes seems to celebrate relationality as the foremost expression of nature’s wholeness, and in Benjamin’s essay, which maligns such idolatry as mythic, the thetic force of the arguments are undermined by a far less determinant notion of ‘relationship’, one that arises only on singular occasions and which appears anterior to the categories that would establish relationality as a fundamental tenet of natural philosophy. In the novel, assertions about natural law and its attendant mythologies of right and sacrifice are exposed to a textual and social unweaving voiced

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<sup>1</sup> As Peter Fenves shows, *Vollendung* is undoubtedly Rickert’s ‘primary term’, though in 1913 Benjamin describes Rickert’s work as a ‘Philosophie der Vollkommenheit’, suggesting (according to Fenves) that Rickert may still have been in the process of working out his terminology. See Fenves, ‘Entanglement’, p. 25, n.11.

by Charlotte, which occasionally impinges on the narrative voice. In Benjamin's essay, the linguistic problem of the demonic undermines the oppositions that hold up the essay's dialectical framework, and show Benjamin's explicit statements about sexuality to conceal a far less static viewpoint, which only finds positive expression in unfinished texts. In both the novel and the essay, the notion of 'uncriticizability' is closely related to such discrete, often barely visible movements. In the novel, the feeling of a work's uncriticizability (as experienced by Charlotte) does little to hinder its erasure, but this incommensurability of the work with its discursive appropriations sheds light on its particular mode of survival, closely connected to Goethe's practice of criticism. In seeking to inhabit a text at its deepest linguistic level, to be entirely in step with a work's language, Goethe's critical writing trips over itself, rendering itself invisible (or, at least, his theoretical statements do their best to draw attention to the possibility of such a trip, although the question obviously remains of the extent to which the theoretically retroactive dimension of Goethe's writing inevitably produces an unfaithful image of what actually happens in criticism). 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', despite explicitly claiming that Goethe's notion of uncriticizability arises on account of the totalizing idea of the ur-phenomenon, which inspires only indifference to criticism, couches a subtle destabilization of its own argument, insofar as the essay recognizes—as a 'paradox'—a temporal complexity whereby ur-phenomena simply inhere in art, rather than constituting empirically-discoverable objects, on the one hand, or infinitely regressing models, on the other.

'Perfection instead of completion' also encapsulates the limits of 'criticizability'. As the *concept* of criticism, criticizability renders works theoretically completable by proleptically referring them to their unification in a philosophical idea of art. This conceptual outcome, achieved in Benjamin's dissertation, however, occurs only by sidelining the linguistic practice of criticism that was tentatively outlined in a 1916 letter to Belmore, in which a 'positive' criticism is described as the task—perhaps paradoxical, given the frayed question of intentionality—of transposing crisis into language. To look back to Chapter 1, finally, 'perfection instead of completion' indicates Benjamin's unique comportment with regard to Kant's critical project, showing how the latter is always entangled with life in such a way, that neither can be said to have a determinate origin, or to be striving toward a particular end.

Can uncriticizability, however, give rise to any positive and detectable outcome? Does it have a method? As this thesis has sought to demonstrate time and again, a work's uncriticizability does not only guarantee its canonicity (as Goethe sometimes considered, in thinking about classical works) or cultic reverence (as typified the early twentieth-century

reception of Goethe himself). In Goethe and Benjamin, uncriticizability has a peculiar fate: it registers itself in acts of criticism that seem to make no difference, in linguistic inhabitations that ‘withdraw and disappear’, or appear only as mythic, degraded material. Benjamin’s turns to philology arise in the absence of a *positive* account of uncriticizability, then. Philology’s procedure is that of perfection instead of completion: it perfects works *as* singular truths, as constitutively ‘broken pieces’, rather than as fragments that are always already in a determinate relation to one other. As the context in which Benjamin articulates this idea intimates (he and Scholem appear to be discussing historical chronicles), there is an indubitable temporal aspect to philology’s notion of perfection. The perfection of works, however, does not lie in the filling in of a gap, such as might exist in a historical chronicle, nor does it involve identifying and isolating previous misguided attempts at doing so, two practices traditionally associated with the pre-eminent philological work of ‘interpolation’.<sup>2</sup> Perfection, rather, lies only in recognizing what Benjamin calls the ‘most puzzling concept of time and very puzzling phenomena’ (*höchst rätselhaften Zeitbegriff und sehr rätselhaften Phänomenen*) that inhere in the material contents of works (C:176; B1:257).

The concept of time is puzzling because material content does not simply take place in history, but rather generates it: ‘The chronicle is fundamentally interpolated history. Philological interpolation in chronicles simply reveals in its form the intention of the content, since its content interpolates history.’ Philology—defined ‘not as the science or history of language but as the *history of terminology* at its deepest level’—recognizes ‘history’ not as the conceptual underpinning according to which terminology develops, but instead as coterminous with language. It follows that the historical ‘form’ of interpolation (which seeks to fill in the gaps in a chronicle) still has a function, but a less fundamental one: it ‘simply reveals’ the intentional and puzzling nature of the ‘content’, which *already* interpolates history. Every form is also the revelation of a content, and so—because that content is ceaselessly interpolating—remains open to further interpolations. ‘Perfection’, then, is the uncovering of this unceasing linguistic life in every phenomenon.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Schestag, ‘Interpolationen. Benjamins Philologie’, in *philo:xenia*, ed. by Thomas Schestag (Basel: Urs Engeler, 2009), pp. 33-99 (pp. 83-85); Fenves, *Messianic Reduction*, p. 236.

## 2. 'See whether you can forget': The Economy of Literary Time in 'The New Melusine'

Philology is not determined by its horizon of potential completability, in other words. What does this fact mean for our considerations of criticizability and uncriticizability, for how we consider their temporal dimensions, and for how we might understand their political implications? What does it mean, for that matter, for the possibility or impossibility of a 'we' in relation to works of art?

A literary text can provide some orientation around these questions. In the same letter, Benjamin tells Scholem that Goethe's story 'The New Melusine', written around the same time as *Elective Affinities* but embedded within his last novel, *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years* (1821, 1829), 'moved me most deeply and inspired me to interpolation' (C176; B1:257). Little is given away about why the story holds so much power over Benjamin, but the answer might revolve around the enigmatic economy that the story brings to life, and its significance for considering the relationship between philological reading, Romantic criticizability, and uncriticizability.<sup>3</sup> 'The New Melusine' appears, at one level, to be a tale about potentiality and virtue. At its heart is a secret: the tale's roguish narrator is entrusted by the 'angelic beauty' he meets on one of his journeys with a casket (*Kästchen*) under the condition it be secured with a special lock and kept away from him in a separate room to that in which he sleeps. There is a parodic counterpart to this secret, however: while the little case is locked away as ordered, the unnamed woman also hands over a purse of money, which the narrator, after a comically short period of restraint, unceremoniously gambles and drinks away. Yet the purse appears to hold a special power, replenishing itself after the narrator has emptied it. At one point in the tale, as might be expected, this magical capacity ceases: 'now it required no great powers of observation to become aware that the purse was truly dwindling, as if by my accursed counting I had robbed it of its virtue of being uncountable [*als wenn ich ihm durch mein verwünschtes Zählen die Tugend unzählbar zu sein entwendet hätte*]'.<sup>4</sup> Explicitly linking the purse's 'uncountable' quality to its 'virtue' (*Tugend*, a term that translates the Greek *arête*), this realization amounts, it appears, to a harsh lesson in

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<sup>3</sup> Benjamin notes his desire to write about 'The New Melusine' on numerous occasions, but his plans never came to fruition. For readings of Goethe's story in light of Benjamin's repeated references to it, see Fenves, *Messianic Reduction*, pp. 234-45 and Schestag, 'Interpolationen', pp. 57-93; the latter's emphasis on questions of economy and credit, which are shown to inflect the story at its deepest levels of textual detail, is important for my own reading. A recent interpretation of Goethe's story in relation to other Melusine myths can be found in Renata Schellenberg, 'Goethe and *Die neue Melusine*: A Critical Reinterpretation', in *Melusine's Footprint: Tracing the Legacy of a Medieval Myth*, ed. by Misty Urban, Deva F. Kemmis and Melissa Ridley Elmes (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2017), pp. 303-23.

<sup>4</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Collected Works*, X, *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years, or, The Renunciants*, trans. by Krishna Winston, p. 346; WA I.25(1).138-39.

potentiality and use, such as might be associated with Giorgio Agamben's claims, alluded to in the introduction to this thesis, about the need for potentiality to incorporate impotentiality. Agamben's argument, voiced across a range of texts, is that impotentiality—the capacity *not* to do something—is at the heart of potentiality, sustaining it, virtually, *as* potentiality, rather than as the simple prelude to its empirical actualizations.<sup>5</sup> With its magic, infinite potential, the purse, the story seems to suggest, cannot be subject to profane acts of 'accursed counting' lest it lose its uncountability. If the purse's uncountability can be regarded as a cipher for art's uncriticizability, on this reading, then the latter would continue to be determined by its relation to criticizability. Just as the potentiality, capacity or 'virtue' of the purse—the money's *countability*—is maintained only so long as the purse is 'uncountable' (a quality the narrator robs it of), an artwork's uncriticizability, according to this analogy, would serve the work's criticizability. Uncriticizability would name the irreducibility of art's potential—its criticizability—to its actualizations.

If this is a lesson, however, it is one that lasts only as long as its articulation: soon enough, in an almost arbitrary and inconsequential way, the purse begins to inflate and the narrator resumes his profligate spending. The potential of the purse, this development suggests, is not something to be kept intact: the apparently end-oriented 'use' of the purse, to employ a term significant to Agamben's project, does not exhaust its functions. Nor does the text make a case for a catastrophic *reversal* of use, the kind of 'inoperative' use of one's own body—the development of a 'form of life'—that Agamben argues to be the only option human beings have for transforming their biopolitical reduction to 'mere life' under the economic regimes that immiserate the majority of the world's population today.<sup>6</sup> Rather, as Thomas Schestag has argued, the text enacts not only a suspension of subjective 'will', which Agamben sees as 'the apparatus that allows one to attribute the ownership of actions and techniques to a subject',<sup>7</sup> but, far less determinately, a 'suspension of the will-to-catastrophe': a suspension, that is, of the will to *make use* of this suspension of will, a suspension of the desire to make use of catastrophe, which still reigns over Agamben's project.<sup>8</sup> Indifferent to questions of use, the purse simply persists in the dialogue between the lovers: its nonemphatic 'ongoing life' is different, then, from that which characterizes Romantic criticizability.<sup>9</sup> Benjamin might have recognized this persistence as an instance—however banal, perhaps even appropriately banal—of the

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<sup>5</sup> For the most sustained rehearsal of this argument, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> *Use of Bodies*, p. 104.

<sup>7</sup> *Use of Bodies*, p. 62.

<sup>8</sup> Schestag, 'Interpolationen', p. 69. For highly critical readings of Agamben from this perspective, see Brodsky, *In the Name of Language*, pp. 17-23, and Catherine Mills, 'Agamben's Messianic Politics: Biopolitics, Abandonment, and Happy Life', *Contretemps*, 5 (2004), 52-62.

<sup>9</sup> I borrow the term 'nonemphatic' from François, *Open Secrets*, p. xvi.

‘nonviolent resolution of conflict’ that ‘Toward the Critique of Violence’ suggests to be perceptible in everyday ‘relationships among private persons’ (SW1:244; GS2:191):

As long as there was still something in the purse, I had continued to pay: when my money ran out, I let her know: ‘That is easily helped,’ she said, pointing to a pair of small pockets attached high up to the side of the coach, which I had noticed earlier but had never used [*die ich früher wohl bemerkt, aber nicht gebraucht hatte*]. She reached into one and drew out some gold pieces, likewise from the other some silver coins, and thus showed me the possibility of maintaining any degree of luxury [*Aufwand*] we chose.<sup>10</sup>

By pointing to the pockets that the narrator ‘certainly had noticed before, but had not used’, the woman absolves his destructive greed of its absolute character (and hence of the Agambenian possibility of its absolute inversion): his awareness of the pockets seems to be unconscious or at any case disconnected from his instrumental decisions. As an image of a lesson about ‘virtue’ and potentiality, the purse is something of a red herring, then: like the material contents of philology, it only yields a cycle of inflations and diminutions. The ‘possibility’ that the pockets entail is simply that of limitless, cyclical ‘expenditure’, a theme that would undoubtedly take on significance for Benjamin as hyper-inflation unfolded in the Weimar Republic over the next years.

It is exactly because of this lack of consequence, however, that the motif of the purse sheds light on the other ‘secret’ of the tale. The story’s ‘new Melusine’ is, it transpires, part of a society of dwarfs, and she is charged with the task of mating with a ‘knight’ in order to prevent her kin from growing ever smaller. The motif of the purse, as argued above, asks the tale’s readers to accept that its cycle of inflations and deflations, despite appearing to be the key to the narrator’s character, is practically unimportant. The question of whether he will gallantly save the money or wastefully spend it becomes inconsequential, to the extent that even the purse’s capacity for renewal reaches an anticlimactic and narratively uncelebrated ending: in the final paragraph of the story, the narrator notes with casual weariness that the money ‘seemed to have run out’, though in its place he finds a key for a ‘coffer’, which proves a ‘passable substitute’.<sup>11</sup> The woman’s challenge to the narrator—and to the reader—is not a demand for purification, therefore. It is, rather, the challenge of considering her own ‘open secret’ as something to be simply accepted, rather than interpreted. Such a challenge cannot simply be met however by an

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<sup>10</sup> Goethe, *Journeyman Years*, pp. 347-48; WA1.25(1).141

<sup>11</sup> *Journeyman Years*, p. 358; WA1.25(1).168.

exertion of subjective will, for what is demanded is ultimately impossible: 'Examine your heart' she says when the narrator discovers her secret, 'to see whether this discovery has not impaired your love, whether you can forget that I am with you in two different forms, whether the diminution of my being will not also reduce your affection'.<sup>12</sup> In asking that the narrator assume an impossible position, whereby he would be able to recognize that he has forgotten her dual life, this 'new Melusine' dramatizes the temporal paradoxes of forgetting, and shows at the same time that these paradoxes are always at work in the relationship between material content and truth content. Like the narrator, the story's readers are thus asked not to judge the characters on moral grounds, nor even to uncover the story's secrets; rather, they are invited simply to share in what Benjamin might have considered, in the context of philology, its 'puzzling concept of time'.

See whether you can forget—thus might run the interpolating claim 'The New Melusine' makes on Benjamin—everything which prevents you from accepting that there is nothing more to this tale than a series of interpolations. Benjamin's scattered writings on philology and 'The New Melusine', neither of which resulted in a fully-fledged publication, constitute his attempt to articulate a response to this impossible demand. His almost unarticulated answer to the story, however, also suggests that the difficulty of articulating philology as a particular kind of working (*Arbeiten*) evidences the impossibility of a positive and theoretically sustainable alternative to Romantic criticizability (C:176; B1:257). Benjamin's scattered and tentative attempts to write about philology thus register what is at stake in the problem of uncriticizability. Goethe's theory of art, though defined by Benjamin as arising out of an ambiguous recourse to art's indifference to criticism, in fact constitutes a furtive rejoinder to the Romantic concept of criticizability, which would incorporate uncriticizability merely as the dimension of inaction that a potentiality needs in order not to exhaust itself. Rather, like the economy of 'The New Melusine', uncriticizability registers critical reading's escape from this regime. When it is imagined as philology, criticism is ceaselessly practiced, entering every time into an economy of phenomena whose intentions are so far removed from those of anyone who might wish to maintain a hold over their activity, that their contra-temporal operations dwindle to a point where they lack practically all visibility. Philology, as the positive 'side' of uncriticizability—as the word, we might say, on the other side of criticizability-uncriticizability antitheses with which this thesis began—brings into effect what was discussed in the previous chapter as the 'readiness for withdrawal and disappearance', which Benjamin recognizes in 'The New Melusine' and which, according to his rhetorical question, arrives at a 'bliss in small things'.

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<sup>12</sup> *Journeyman Years*, p. 349; WA1.25(1).144-45.

If ‘The New Melusine’ makes a claim on Benjamin, it is one that, as suggested by Benjamin’s failure to write about Goethe’s story at length, remains unanswered. The unforced adjuration that the new Melusine makes on the narrator—to see whether he can forget—is never fully acknowledged. He lives with the request uneasily, ambiguously, and never becomes fully at home in the world of the dwarfs; at every point, we imagine, the narrator is just as likely to pack up and leave. The story also asks readers, however, to make peace with this outcome, to accept that the lack of resolution, common to both narrator and narrative, is an appropriately amenable response to Melusine’s motion. True to its suspension of the logic of potentiality and impotentiality, ‘The New Melusine’ never reaches a point of inversion, such as Agamben’s ‘form of life’ demands; if potentiality—whether of money or of desire—is raised as a problem in the text, it is never transformed and preserved as impotentiality. Rather, the story’s temporal politics can be gleaned from its ongoing appeal for Benjamin. The ‘puzzling concept of time’ associated with philological reading and with uncriticizability renders a language of inversion irrelevant.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. ‘It does not conflict with any theory’: Morphology

‘Methodical Types of History’, a fragment written in 1918, when Benjamin was still immersed in work on his doctoral dissertation, pre-emptly this ‘puzzling concept of time’. After a discussion of ‘pragmatic history’, which ‘runs chronologically, in struggles’, and ‘phenomenon-history’, which ‘concerns the course of phenomenological (not chronological) premises of phenomena’, the third and final ‘type of history’ counted by Benjamin is named ‘philology’, and is said to correspond to:

that course which is neither essentially chronological nor simply manifesting of essentially discrete phenomena: the terminological. Philology is transformation-history [*Verwandlungsgeschichte*]; its continuity [*Einsinnigkeit*] is based on the fact that terminology is not the precondition [*Voraussetzung*], but rather the material [*Stoff*] of a new, and so on.<sup>14</sup>  
(GS6:93-94)

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<sup>13</sup> Schestag recognizes this point in the significance of the word *revenir* in Benjamin’s letter to Gretel Adorno of 17 January 1940: (C:627; B2:844).

<sup>14</sup> I have left the term *Verwandlungsgeschichte* untranslated for at least two reasons. One is that, as a compound noun, it captures the sense of Benjamin’s argument—as a word, it *is* Benjamin’s argument—in a way that a genitive construction in English (the ‘history of transformation’ for example) cannot do. Another is that there does not seem to be an adequate English rendering of *Verwandlung*. Though I occasionally refer to ‘transformation-history’, the word ‘transformation’ of course implies the pre-eminence of ‘form’, which is here in question. *Verwandlung*, on the other hand, implies a changing or even wandering—a *wandeln*, itself derived from *wenden*, to turn—that is seen over only by the notoriously unsystematic prefix *ver*.



Philology, as Benjamin's February 1921 letter to Scholem proposed, is the 'history of terminology', a history that does not rely on the 'precondition' of a concept of history, but rather sees history as emerging only with the linguistic time of terminology. The stability of a concept such as 'history', therefore, is not the precondition or premise for historical experience or historical transformation; rather, the transformability of a word such as history, indexed in the word *Verwandlungsgeschichte*, takes place in the generation of something potentially unexpected, in what Benjamin enigmatically terms the very 'material of a new *and so on*'. In the fragment, perhaps the most obvious word to undergo such change, under the regime of *Verwandlungsgeschichte*, is *einsinniger* itself. 'Generally', the fragment begins, 'history is a one-way course [*Allgemein ist Geschichte ein einsinniger Verlauf*].'<sup>9</sup> In philology, however, which eludes the general, the 'constancy' (*Einsinnigkeit*) of a historical course is 'particularly modified', because it 'inclines in the last end to the cyclical'. This cyclical nature, which the letter to Scholem frames as the uncanny, always-already interpolating character of historical contents, and which 'The New Melusine' presents as a cycle of enlargements and diminutions indifferent to the epistemological economy of expenditure, means that 'in philology, the object has the highest continuity [*die höchste Kontinuität*]'.<sup>10</sup> It is a continuity that lies not in the one-directional orientation of its course, nor in the mono-sensical nature of its concept—two potential meanings of *Einsinnigkeit*—but instead in its cyclical transformations, according to which every form is only the confirmation of the intentional but asubjective character of content, and which is in turn recast as a content to be interpolated. Philology attends to a continuity of change.

Just as 'The New Melusine', however, poses an abyssal question to its narrator and its readers, asking them to bear in mind what they are bound to forget, this fragment suggests that philology might be unrecognizable and unworkable unless it is entangled with other types of history. Benjamin goes on to show how the 'auxiliary disciplines of history' that result from these entanglements are suppressed by the idea of historical truth they are supposed to serve. Yet despite the fact that such disciplines are said to be 'methodically subordinate', they also hold 'completely self-standing value', according to the fragment's ending. Just as this fragment begins with an assertion about the course that history generally follows, before subtly shifting the meaning of the *Einsinnigkeit* of that course, it ends, like 'The New Melusine', by showing that subordination from the perspective of prevailing concepts of history is irrelevant from the perspective of philology. At both beginning and end, which run into one another in this way—in a cyclical fashion, it could be said—Benjamin's critique of the premises that govern European

ideas of history is identifiable less by a fundamental rupture than by an attentiveness to language and its potential waywardness, which history's prevailing methods can never fully excise.

With these indirect reflections, Benjamin troubles the evaluative norms that elevate some disciplines and some truths above others. Perhaps no discipline is more aware of its own subordinate status, however, than one that Benjamin mentions parenthetically in the fragment: 'In relation to nature', Benjamin writes, the 'doctrine of phenomena' that accompanies philology 'is called morphology'. The list of books that Benjamin kept to record his reading activity indicates that, during the period in which he composed this fragment, he had read Goethe's *Attempt to Explain the Metamorphosis of Plants* (*Versuch die Metamorphose der Pflanzen zu erklären*), first published in 1790 (GS7:442). *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, as it is more commonly known, made a startling contribution to the science of botany in the late eighteenth century, which had been dominated by the classificatory system developed by Linnaeus, of which Goethe himself had been at times an enthusiastic advocate.<sup>15</sup> Goethe's text, which proceeds as a series of short interconnected paragraphs, proposes a developmental model of plant life that, rejecting the possibility of any part of a plant being understandable apart from its organic totality, sees the dynamic growth patterns of plant leaves to be indicative of the processual, self-organizing and differential unity of every plant.<sup>16</sup> As Benjamin puts it in an article on Goethe, written for the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, 'all the organs of plants, from the roots to the stamen, are nothing but leaves in a modified form' (SW2:172; GS2:719). 'All is leaf' is Goethe's even more succinct formulation. In an article that takes this provocation as its title, Thomas Pfau argues that Goethe's text encapsulates a fundamental change undergone by the concept of difference in the late eighteenth century, in which it attains a 'temporal, dynamic quality that no longer posits the external world as a mere inventory of static and dissimilar objects or appearances'.<sup>17</sup> In so recasting the philosophical notion of substance, Goethe is thus considered a 'preparator' for

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<sup>15</sup> Theresa M. Kelley traces shifts from early texts such as 'On the Cotyledons', in which Goethe deploys Linnaeus's claim of an analogy between human birth and plant life, to *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, which dispenses with anthropomorphic language. See Kelley, 'Restless Romantic Plants: Goethe Meets Hegel', *European Romantic Review*, 20.2 (2009), 187-195 (pp. 188-189). For further similarities and differences between Goethe and Linnaeus, see also Chad Wellmon, 'Goethe's Morphology of Knowledge, or the Overgrowth of Nomenclature', *Goethe Yearbook*, 17 (2010), 153-177.

<sup>16</sup> As Eva Geulen argues of Goethe: 'In contrast to classification systems, he develops, in *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, the thought that for both the different stages of development of an individual plant and for the multiplicity of all variations and forms of plants, one unifying constructive law is obeyed.' Geulen, *Aus dem Leben der Form. Goethes Morphologie und die Nager* (Köln: August Verlag, 2016), p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Pfau, "'All is Leaf': Difference, Metamorphosis, and Goethe's Phenomenology of Knowledge', *Studies in Romanticism*, 49.1 (Spring 2010), 3-41 (p.5).

Hegel's relational account of identity and difference, a view that has proven integral to the renewed appreciation of Goethe as a significant post-Kantian thinker.<sup>18</sup>

Benjamin's entry notes, however, that alongside the *Metamorphosis of Plants* he had read 'much else from *Morphologie P.* The monumental 144-volume *Weimarer Sophien-Ausgabe* of Goethe's work, with which Benjamin was most familiar, contains fourteen volumes under the heading 'Scientific Writings', three of which were dedicated to morphology. The bibliographic reference is probably, therefore, to the first of these ('Morphologie I'). Yet as recent scholarship has shown, the original forms of publication of Goethe's writings on morphology hardly lent his ideas to such a sustained presentation. Indeed, most of the texts collated in the critical edition were initially published in what Eva Geulen calls a 'disturbingly heterogeneous periodical', often referred to as the *Hefte zur Morphologie* (*Notebooks on Morphology*), which appeared between 1817 and 1824 (and in the first volume of which the 1790 essay was republished).<sup>19</sup> There is an irony here, insofar as the 'philological' rigour of the Weimar critical edition, for which Benjamin expressed respect, perhaps necessarily misrepresents the heterogeneous form of the notebooks.<sup>20</sup> Goethe's writing on morphology demonstrates an acute awareness of this decidedly non-unified form: 'let what I often dreamt of as a book when I was filled with the high hopes of youth now appear as an outline, as a fragmentary collection', he writes with equal resignation and anticipation in 'The Enterprise Justified'.<sup>21</sup> Foreshadowing Benjamin's analysis of philology's relegation to an auxiliary discipline, Goethe reveals himself as equally aware of morphology's equivocal disciplinary status. In a text entitled 'Observation on Morphology in General', morphology is said to amount to a novel science 'not because of its subject matter, which is already well known, but because of its intention and method'.<sup>22</sup> Morphology is distinguished from other disciplines, Goethe suggests, not on account of its positive features, but solely because it does not seek determinate knowledge about a particular, pre-established field. If anything, Goethe stresses morphology's *inability* to yield conclusive theses about the phenomena it observes. It amounts, rather like the transformed 'method' Benjamin would come to associate with his work on Parisian arcades, to mere showing, since its 'intention is to portray rather than explain'.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The major contribution to this renewal is Eckart Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy: A Systematic Reconstruction*, trans. Brady Bowman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). As Theresa Kelley argues, Hegel considered Goethe as inaugurating 'the beginning of a rational conception of the nature of plant life' (cited in Kelley, 'Restless Romantic Plants', p. 188).

<sup>19</sup> Eva Geulen, 'Serialization', p. 53.

<sup>20</sup> Amanda Jo Goldstein offers more context about the form of the journal. See *Sweet Science*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>21</sup> Goethe, *Collected Works*, XII, *Scientific Studies*, ed. and trans. by Douglas Miller, p. 62.

<sup>22</sup> *Scientific Studies*, p. 57.

<sup>23</sup> *Scientific Studies*, p. 57.

These modest ambitions of morphology, however, have ambiguous consequences. On the one hand, they allow morphology to be presented as an auxiliary science that serves the search after biological truth. ‘Without exception’, Goethe writes, ‘it considers itself the handmaiden of biology, working together with other subsidiary sciences’.<sup>24</sup> At face value, morphology is simply an auxiliary discipline like any other, subordinated in the search for a greater truth. On the other hand, and more compellingly, Goethe suggests that morphology’s significance is not determined by its position within a hierarchical order of disciplines, but rather that—rather like philology—it is morphology’s *indifference* to its ‘subsidiary’ disciplinary status that lends it theoretical power:

It must prove its legitimacy as an independent science by choosing a subject other sciences deal with only in passing, by drawing together what lies scattered among them and establishing a new standpoint from which the things of nature may be readily observed. The advantages of morphology are that it is made up of widely recognized elements, it does not conflict with any theory, it does not need to displace something else to make room for itself, and it deals with extremely significant phenomena. Its arrangement of phenomena calls upon activities of the human mind so in harmony with nature, and so pleasant, that even its failures may prove both useful and charming.<sup>25</sup>

By emphasizing morphology’s inability or reluctance to theoretically contribute to the supposedly fundamental debates that continued to dominate nineteenth-century life sciences, Goethe emphasizes, all the more, the potentially imperceptible contribution that it does make.<sup>26</sup> Insofar as it ‘does not need to displace something else to make room for itself’, morphology, much like Benjamin’s fragment on philology, intimates a shift in how ‘value’ is accorded, leaving room for its failures to be, in an unforeseen way, ‘useful and charming’. In this way, Goethe, who as late as 1830 penned a report on a debate that epitomized the shape that the conflict over ‘life’ would come to take, namely that between Georges Cuvier and Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire,<sup>27</sup> foreshadows what Benjamin would recognize, by means of citation (a citation of a remark about an author’s own citational practice, no less), as the indifference of literature, even

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<sup>24</sup> *Scientific Studies*, p. 57.

<sup>25</sup> Goethe, *Scientific Studies*, pp. 59-60 (‘Observation on Morphology in General’).

<sup>26</sup> Wellmon notes that morphology ‘organizes itself as a particular science not by creating new objects of study but by operating at the borders and re-organizing the limits of already existing sciences’. ‘Overgrowth’, p. 166.

<sup>27</sup> For an account of this debate, see Toby A. Appel, *The Cuvier-Geoffroy Debate: French Biology in the Decades before Darwin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

literary realism, to the oppositional contours such debates take: ‘Balzac...quotes as authorities...Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire and Cuvier’, writes Charles Brun, as quoted by Benjamin.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4. ‘A substance uncounted and uncountable’

What has been suggested about morphology thus far might allow it to be considered, as some commentators have argued, a ‘science of science’, insofar as its primary function is to constitute a reflection upon, and organization of, the accumulation of knowledge that modern forms of scientific production otherwise ceaselessly accrue.<sup>29</sup> Morphology’s unproductivity, therefore, would ultimately be in the service of scientific progress. Yet Goethe sees the insights, or failures, of morphology not only as ‘useful’ but as equally ‘burdensome’. In ‘The Enterprise Justified’, Goethe expands on this question of morphology’s value. He considers the desire to dominate nature as an immature stage of humanity (‘a tremendous compulsion to bring what he finds there under his control’), though this impulse also inflects modern forms of inquiry:

Unfortunately, however, even those devoted to cognition and knowledge rarely display the degree of interest we would hope to find. Anything arising from an idea and leading back to it is viewed as something of an encumbrance by the man of a practical mind who notes details, observes precisely, and draws distinctions. In his own way he feels at home in his labyrinth and has no interest in a thread that might more quickly lead him through it; a substance uncounted and uncountable seems a burdensome possession to such a person [*und solchem scheint ein Metall, das nicht ausgemünzt ist, nicht aufgezählt werden kann, ein lästiger Besitz*]. On the other hand, one who has a higher vantage point is quick to disdain detail and create a lethal generality by lumping together things which live only in separation.<sup>30</sup>

According to this defence, the morphologist occupies a marginal position, neither taking comfort in the bad infinity of individual details, like the first figure outlined here, nor twisting particular entities to make them fit arbitrary categories, like the second. Rather, morphology involves a relation between phenomenon and idea that suspends the demands of productive transformation: at its heart, morphology concerns something which ‘arises from an idea and leads back to it’. Here, in just one of a number of monetary metaphors scattered throughout the

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<sup>28</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 758 (d7,6). The convolute is entitled ‘Literary History, Hugo’.

<sup>29</sup> Wellmon, ‘Overgrowth’ p. 167.

<sup>30</sup> *Scientific Studies*, p. 61; WA II.6.6.

notebooks, which foreshadow the peculiar literary economy of ‘The New Melusine’, Goethe compares such an idea to a metal that has never been minted and which remains uncountable, a heavy but completely value-less substance. Whereas such a material would be considered a ‘burdensome possession’ for the ‘practical mind’, its uselessness proves, paradoxically, to be a ‘short-cut’ for the morphologist, who is concerned less with arriving at a conclusion or effecting a transition from phenomena to concept, than in tracking a movement of change, even if that change concerns an ‘idea’ which—contrary to the movement of the concept in Hegel, who would take inspiration from morphology’s dynamism—ceaselessly leads back to itself.

The cyclical path of the idea that morphology tracks—like that of philological ‘contents’ for Benjamin—demands a particular mode of observation, one whose manifestation also seems to rely on an economic metaphor. Goethe describes it as ‘an intense and selfless effort which neither demands its reward at week’s end like a labourer, nor lies under any obligation to produce some useful result for mankind after a year, a decade, or even a century.’<sup>31</sup> In the same way that Goethe’s morphological writings intimate the impossibility of eliminating this ‘burdensome’ movement, Benjamin’s fragment on philology also registers its apparent unproductivity. For Benjamin, terminology is not the precondition, but rather ‘the material of a new, and so on [*Stoff einer neuen usf.*]’. The text’s fragmentary nature is unlikely to fend off impatient questions about the subject of this newness: the material of a new *what*, readers are surely bound to ask. Yet the abbreviation, rather than merely trailing off, captures the fact that, in the absence of a precondition which limits words to concepts, the only thing that is ceaselessly ‘produced’, ever anew, is change, which—as a linguistic ‘material’ (*Stoff*)—collapses the distinction between act, ability and inability—between the material of terminology, terminology’s changeability, and its inability to be anything but change. As was argued above with reference to ‘The New Melusine’, Benjamin is not interested in a method that prioritizes impotentiality in order to maintain potentiality, but rather sees interpolating movements as the prerogative of linguistic material itself, which is wholly indifferent to such forms.

Both Goethe and Benjamin, then, concern themselves with liminal methods that are potentially unproductive, and which emphasize transformation before and beyond the conceptual grounds that are normally required in order for such changes to take place and achieve recognition. Yet, whereas Benjamin’s writings on philology show him to be interested above all in the ‘content’ or ‘material’ of language, Goethe’s morphology is—as its name suggests—still indebted to an idea of form. In a well-known passage, Goethe proposes a division in the notion of form that still governed contemporaneous understandings of life:

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<sup>31</sup> Goethe, *Scientific Studies*, p. 56 (‘Toward a General Comparative Theory’).

The German has for the complex of existence of an effective being, the word *Gestalt*. With this expression, he excludes what is changeable and assumes that an interrelated whole is identified, defined, and fixed in character. [...] But if we look at all these *Gestalten*, especially the organic ones, we will discover that nothing in them is permanent, nothing is at rest or defined—everything is in a flux of continual motion. This is why the German frequently and fittingly makes use of the word *Bildung* to describe the end product and what is in the process of production as well.<sup>32</sup>

The problem Goethe identifies with organic form (*Gestalt*) is that it sees the organism as a fixed being. A closer look at forms—‘especially’ but not only organic ones—shows, on the contrary, an underlying transformation. In a way that recalls Spinoza’s argument—revived in the late eighteenth-century—for the existence of both *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, Goethe’s reference to *Bildung* suggests that forms are never simply ‘end products’ but also processes of formation. This claim proves so important, because, unlike the concept of an ‘end product’, a process of formation is—if it is not simply and tautologically pre-determined as the process that leads to an end—necessarily contingent: open to chance, accident, malformation, and every feature of the ‘flux of continual motion’. ‘Thus’, Goethe writes, ‘in setting forth a morphology we should not speak of *Gestalt*, or if we use the term we should at least do so only in reference to the idea, the concept, or to an experience [*Erfahrung*] held fast for a mere moment of time [*nur für den Augenblick Festgehaltenes denken*].’<sup>33</sup> What we hold at one moment, the morphologist recognizes, is gone in the blink of an eye.

Readers of Goethe’s morphology writings have sought to understand this dynamism, captured succinctly in the sentence which immediately follows the above: ‘When something has acquired a form it metamorphoses immediately to a new one’.<sup>34</sup> In light of various attempts to

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<sup>32</sup> Goethe, *Scientific Studies*, p. 63 (‘The Purpose Set Forth’).

<sup>33</sup> Goethe, *Scientific Studies*, p. 64; ; WA II.6.9-10; translation modified. As Chad Wellmon has noted, the English translation here, which uses ‘empirical element’ for *Erfahrung*, misses the important role played by experience (‘Overgrowth’, p. 169). The original sentence is: ‘Wollen wir also eine Morphologie einleiten, so dürfen wir nicht von Gestalt sprechen; sondern, wenn wir das Wort brauchen, uns allenfalls dabei nur die Idee, den Begriff oder ein in der Erfahrung nur für den Augenblick Festgehaltenes denken.’

<sup>34</sup> *Scientific Studies*, p. 64. Three recent readings of morphology’s ‘form’ seem especially pertinent. For the argument that ‘[f]orm is conceived as a process of self-formation or self-explication within a field of interplay defined by both invariance and variation’, see David E. Wellbery, ‘Romanticism and Modernity: Epistemological Continuities and Discontinuities’, *European Romantic Review*, 21.3 (June 2010), 275-89 (p. 276). For the notion that ‘morphology’s massive transformation in the notion of form’ occurs at a textual level of the notebooks’ ‘cobbled’ (*zusammengestoppelten*) literary construction, see Eva Geulen, ‘Serialization’, p. 54-56. As Geulen shows, the relation between form and ‘life’ was not bound to one particular manifestation, but remained mobile: in contrast to Kant, Geulen argues, ‘Goethe’s definition of a multifariously-formed life avoids the dialectic of parts and wholes as much as it avoids every teleological direction, in favour of a mere

direct attention to the fundamental transformation undergone by the notion of form in Goethe's morphology, we may turn back and ask how morphology stands in relation to the idea of 'uncriticizability', which, as this thesis has shown, solicits a thinking about literature that is uniquely attentive to the way that form, even in its most minimal manifestations, can become 'representative' and so ultimately reductive of life in its linguistic and material heterogeneity. Even as he recognizes the novelty of Goethe's morphological writings, Benjamin later adjudges them, alongside Kant's third *Critique*, as 'advanced' positions in a scientific outlook that remains 'bourgeois'. In an article about Goethe that was initially written to appear in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, Benjamin notes that the second part of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* was the main source of Goethe's engagement with Kantian philosophy:

For in that work Kant repudiates the teleological explanation of nature which had been one of the chief supports of enlightened philosophy and of deism. Goethe had to agree with him on this point, particularly since his own anatomical and botanical researches represented very advanced positions in the campaign of bourgeois science against the teleological outlook. Kant's definition of the organic as a purposiveness whose intent lay inside and not outside the purposive being was in harmony with Goethe's own concepts. The unity of the beautiful—natural beauty included—is always independent of purpose. In this, Goethe and Kant are of one mind. (SW1:174; GS2:721)

As much as Benjamin here credits Goethe and Kant with advancing the idea of inner purposiveness over that of outer or relative purposiveness, the 'idea' that is here advanced is shown to facilitate the return of the ur-phenomenon as a *form*, that is as a mere model; as Chapter 4 argued, this was the conception explicitly criticized in Benjamin's essay on *Elective Affinities* (and to which he had subtly counterposed an idea of the ur-phenomena as *inhering* in

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accumulation and heterogenous activity with an unknown goal, and correspondingly unthought possibilities of unfolding' (*Leben der Form*, p. 18). Whereas Eckart Förster's work recognizes that there is no real aspect of transition from one experiment to the next in Goethe, and sets out to show *how* such potential connections could occur, Geulen maintains that a lack of transition between experiments is precisely the point, insofar as, by staving off connections rather than seeking to make them, Goethe (in an 'ultra-Kantian' manner) evades the 'self-interest' that is still said to characterize the seventy-sixth and seventy-seventh sections of the third *Critique* ('Serialization', p. 64). For Amanda Jo Goldstein, similarly, the ubiquity of Kantian 'organicism' occurs at the expense of a serious recognition of the influence of Lucretius on Goethe's scientific outlook. By shifting the focus away from the purposiveness that makes the organism (or our judgement of it) incommensurable, and toward the relational principle of composition that pertains to all beings, organic and inorganic, living and dying, Goethe's atomism, according to Goldstein, also stakes an epistemological claim: we do not need to look beyond the forms that things offer to us, because, as Goldstein puts it, citing Goethe: 'morphology's basic conviction is that each thing "must also indicate and show itself"' (*Sweet Science*, p. 104).



art).<sup>35</sup> Writing for a prospective Soviet audience, Benjamin draws connections between this idea and Goethe's political vision, which was like Napoleon's, 'the social emancipation of the bourgeoisie within the framework of political despotism' (SW2:177; GS2:726). Benjamin says of Goethe that 'the older he became, the more his life assumed the shape of this political idea, consciously acquiring the form of the incommensurable and the inadequate, and turning itself into a miniature model of the political idea'. The unavoidable implication in the encyclopedia article is that, however radical Goethe's morphology project was in the context of science at the turn of the nineteenth century, its fundamental revision of what 'form' can mean cannot dissociate it from the political formalism that Benjamin saw, in numerous guises—from Romanticism to Gundolf—as determining the link between politics and poetry, and restricting the material and temporal strangeness of language. If even the most fundamental transformation of form is not mobile enough to meet Benjamin's idea of 'linguistic life', in which form is only an effect of the singular stamping of material content and truth content, where might he have turned to find a manifestation of the 'strange concept of time' heralded by philology and uncriticizability?

## 5. Weimar: 'The Loneliness of Poetry'

In a piece entitled 'Weimar', published in the October 1928 edition of the *Neue schweizer Rundschau*, Benjamin's considerations of the time's fragility, and its ability to elude the subjective will, initially revolve around a description of an experience in the 'small German town' of its title: 'Nothing can vanish as irretrievably as a morning' ends its first part (SW2:148; GS4:353). In the second part of the text, Benjamin turns his attention to the Goethe and Schiller Archive located in the city. The archive's conservational sterility is compared at first to that of a hospital: 'In the Goethe and Schiller Archive the stairs, rooms, display cases, and bookshelves are all white. There isn't a single square inch where the eye might rest. The manuscripts lie propped up like patients in hospital beds' (SW2:149; GS4:353). This simile captures the unique spatial atmosphere of the location: the archive's space is almost presented as a pure form of intuition, in Kant's sense, but one in which no intuition is actually possible, since its whiteness renders it impossible to form

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<sup>35</sup> Wellbery points out the apparent inadequacy of the afterword to Benjamin's dissertation, insofar as it is adjudged to oppose a Romantic theory of form to a Goethean concern with archetypal content. For Wellbery, Goethe's morphology is nothing other than a 'science of form and of formal transformations' ('Romanticism', p. 275). While this is clearly correct at one level, it also misses something specific about Benjamin's gesture of referencing Goethe, to which the decidedly non-formalist notes on philology attest: there is a limitation to the form of both early Romanticism *and* of Goethe's 'morphology'. In both cases, as this thesis has sought to demonstrate, Benjamin pursues a subtle illustration of the limitations of the notion of form.

representations, and to orient oneself in its monochrome uniformity. 'Weimar' is thus a kind of parodic opposite of Moscow, where according to Benjamin, an 'increasingly practical approach' suffuses life with a level of bureaucratic energy such that neither 'time' nor 'space' for 'private life' remain (SW2:30; GS4:327). Whatever its spatial validity, however, the simile's introduction prompts Benjamin's recognition of and reflection upon the insufficiency of its *temporal* logic. Normally, the hospital might be figured as a place of convalescence and of transition from one state to another, to either health or death. Benjamin suggests, however, that it can be considered as a place where time comes to a standstill for those inside, where the possibility of such transitions is suspended:

But the longer you expose yourself to this harsh light, the more you imagine you can discern an unconscious rationality [*unbewußte Vernunft*] in the organization of these collections. Whereas a lengthy period of confinement to a sickbed makes people's faces seem spacious and still, and turns them into the mirror of impulses that a healthy body would express in decisions, in a thousand different actions—in short, whereas a sickbed causes a human being to regress to an imitation of himself, these sheets of paper [*Blätter*] do not lie around aimlessly in their repositories like patients. The fact that everything which we know today as Goethe's *Works*, and which confronts us consciously and sturdily in countless published volumes, once existed in this unique, fragile handwritten form, and the fact that what emanated from it can only be the austere, purifying atmosphere which surrounds patients who are dying or recovering and which is perceptible to the few who are close to them—this is something we do not care to dwell on [*wir denken nicht gerne daran*]. But didn't these manuscript sheets likewise find themselves in a crisis? Didn't a shudder [*Schauer*] run through them, and no one knew whether it was from the proximity of annihilation or that of posthumous fame? And don't they embody the loneliness of poetry [*die Einsamkeit der Dichtung*]? And the place where it took stock of itself [*Und das Lager, auf dem sie Einkehr hielt*]? And don't its pages include many whose unnameable text [*unnennbarer Text*] rises as a glance or a breath of air from their silent, ravaged features? (SW2:149; GS4:353-54; translation modified)

The implication of Benjamin's argument, forwarded in a series of increasingly breathless rhetorical questions, sheds light on why it is not possible to capture the temporality of literary works, or of 'linguistic life', through attention to formal differentiation, whether internal or relative. A genuine recognition of the state of literary works, rather, requires an encounter with

‘something we do not care to dwell on’, namely the ‘crisis’ of their materiality. This crisis of poetry, however, is different from that which befalls an ill human being, who seems a mere ‘imitation’ of a prior existence. For Benjamin’s claim is that poetry has no determinate precedent or successor—thus its ‘loneliness’—and so it does not ‘regress’, or progress, to anything. Insofar as they are absolutely lonely and absolutely contingent, equally vulnerable to ‘annihilation’ and to ‘posthumous fame’, Goethe’s manuscripts can be defined neither by progress nor by decline, but only by the ‘shudder’ (*Schauer*) that runs through them, time felt as a directionless vibration. This shudder—a state of physiological torpor and loneliness—is manifested in the rhyming conclusion of the final sentence, which considers Goethe’s poetry as of little more substance than a ‘glance or breath of air’ that rises from the ‘silent, ravaged features’ of the manuscripts (*Blick oder Hauch aus den stummen, erschütterten Zügen*). Whereas Kant’s third *Critique* considered aesthetic ideas as the genius’s addition of ‘much that is unnameable’ to the matter of poetry, Benjamin’s designation of poetry’s ‘unnameable text’ undoes the putative distinction between poetry’s materiality and its unnameable spirit, so little is it interested in questions of succession, genre or influence.

The archive is the place where poetry’s simultaneously material and temporal loneliness, its incompatibility with any existing temporal logic, even the conservational logic of the archive, comes to light. Yet in suggesting that it is the place where poetry takes stock of itself—or where it comes to rest, to gather itself—Benjamin also raises a question that haunts both uncriticizability, as it has been considered throughout this thesis, and philology, which seems to be the only mode of reading liable to take up its mantle: whether any individual would ever be able to take stock of poetry in this way. For even the claim that the emanation of purification from the dying is only ‘perceptible to the few who are close to them’ suggests an analogy prohibitive of any generalizable outlook. In the next and final section of ‘Weimar’, which ponders Goethe’s workplace and the temporal complexity of his aged physiology, Benjamin notes the lack of any existing methodical perspective that could adequately take stock of the relation of life and work: ‘We still await a philology that could open before us this pending and most determining environment—the true antiquity of the poet’ (SW2:149-50; GS4:354-55; translation modified). Benjamin’s framing of this methodological inadequacy in terms of the temporal completability associated with Romantic criticism—as if such a philology were possible—is clearly ironic, at odds with the ‘determining’ and ‘pending’ (*nächste*) function of the poet’s ‘true antiquity’. The absolute, material loneliness of poetry functions, in this sense, as a limit: no method can square its time with the ‘we’ who await a way of reading it. We are left, in the meantime, with ‘uncriticizability’.

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