Demonic History
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Goethe’s “Urworte Orphisch” is a cycle of five stanzas—stanzas in the strict sense of “octave” or “ottava rime”—written in September and October 1817. In addition to the main title, each stanza has a subtitle corresponding to a different “primal word.” The occasion for this work was Goethe’s encounter with speculative works of ancient philology by Johann Gottfried Jakob Hermann, Georg Friedrich Creuzer, and Georg Zoëga. Zoëga is Goethe’s proximate source for the primal words, but the original source is Macrobius (fifth century A.D.), who uses four Greek words to name Egyptian divinities—Δαιμων (Daemon), Τυχη (Tyche), Ερως (Eros), and Αναγκη (Ananke)—that preside over birth (UO 84). The fifth Urwort, Ελπις (Elpis), also comes from Macrobius, but he does not name her with the other four. For this reason, Benjamin will see Elpis as supplemental in relation to the other Urworte and as a transformative intervention with respect to them.

The first 1820 publication of the “Urworte” in Goethe’s morphological writings only gives Greek titles, but in the second 1820 publication he added German translations: Dämon is rendered Individualität, Charakter (individuality, character); Tyche is Zufälliges, das Zufällige (chance, the accidental); Eros is Liebe, Leidenschaft (love, passion); Ananke is Beschränkung, Pflicht, Nöthigung (limitation, duty, necessity, duress); and Elpis is Hoffnung (hope) (UO 27; see also Schmidt, Goethes Altersgedicht, 6–9). This series means to essentialize—“quintessentialize”—“diffuse antiquity.” It simultaneously clarifies and modernizes the core ideas of Greek thought. According to a letter to Sulpiz Boisserée from July 16, 1818, the “Urworte” represent an effort of interpretive cryogenics, which seeks to revive “dead idioms” (abgestorbene Redensarten) through the rejuvenating force of “one’s own living experience” (aus eigener Erfahrungs-Lebendigkeit) (UO 72). Goethe’s implicit claim, contained in the word “Orphic,” is that these five words represent the earliest and most essential idea of Greek mythology and religion, abstracted to reveal its modern relevance while providing a timeless formula for (human) existence in general.

This effort of resuscitation represents an explicit engagement with the scholarly discourses that posed the question of the status of the Greek origin,
its purity and endurance. In pretending to extrapolate and intuit this origin, Goethe’s stanzas stage the possibility of gaining access to ancient mysteries in a way that would not be merely historical but immediately valid and relevant in the modern world. In order to understand the specific form of the Orphic “Urworte” and the means by which they establish the basis of a continuity spanning the depths of antiquity and the furthest horizons of the present age, it is helpful to know what an Urwort is. According to Grimm’s dictionary, the word Urwort can be understood as a “primal word,” in the sense of an “ancient, sacred, primary, creative word” (ein uraltes, altheiliges, erstes, schöpferisches Wort). These meanings are obviously relevant, but the additional qualification “Orphic” makes them redundant: an Orphic primal word is the same as an Orphic word. The word Urwort may, however, be read in a second sense (also recorded in Grimm) as “a word in an ancient language.” For example, the Greek word logos is an Urwort with respect to the words ratio, reason, and Grund. Urworte in this sense are not “primal” but rather “originary” with respect to a later conceptual history. This definition is reflected in the construction of Goethe’s Orphic “Urworte”: the “poem” is in the first instance a series of five Greek words, which are progressively and repeatedly translated: first into German equivalents, then into stanzas, and finally into Goethe’s commentary. Goethe’s work thus appears to be less a “poem” than the performance of a conceptual unfolding—first into German, then into verse and finally into prose.

Given this structure, it is clear that Goethe does not literally seek to go back to the Greek origin. Nor does he try to present the “original meanings” of the five Urworte. They are only “defined” in a foreign language as a reflex of their progressive unfolding; they are the imaginary origins of an ongoing process of translation and re-actualization. This conception contrasts starkly with both Hermann and Creuzer, whose debate inspired Goethe’s conception. For Creuzer, the proto-Greek origin, prior to written records, can be deduced but not positively known. He believes that this origin must have taken the form of a religious doxa, which would have preceded and delimited the more “literary” myths that came later. For Hermann, this relation is reversed: the assertion of a religious-institutional-cultic origin-before-the-origin can only be entirely speculative, and even if such an Ur-dogma and Ur-religion did exist, it would have necessarily been founded upon the interpretation of an even earlier myth. Hermann thus privileged the “literary” aspect of myth over its religious or institutional codification. The orthodoxies of doctrine must be derivative, because they necessarily depend on a preceding totality of myth—as overarching tradition, institution, or symbol—capable of supporting various institutions and practices over long periods of time.

Goethe preferred Hermann to Creuzer, but his approach is distinct from both. In the “Urworte” themselves and in the 1818 letter to Sulpiz Boisserée (UO 72), Goethe is not primarily concerned about what the Urworte meant for the Greeks. Instead, he wants to know what they can be made to mean
for us. The academic dispute challenged Goethe to deduce the basic conceptual forms at the origins of Greek religion—but not as a uniquely Greek episteme. Instead he expands the five originary concepts in an implicit history of their translation and transformation, in order to bring their wisdom into the modern world. They are dense conceptual sketches, works of speculative philosophy, which use verse as a means of clarifying and articulating a foreign and essentially ineffable subject matter. The “Urworte” are “a series of Orphic primal words . . . clarified into stanzas” (eine Reihe orphischer Urworte . . . in Stanzen aufgeklärt), as Goethe wrote in a March 1818 letter to an unknown recipient (UO 72).

These “stanzas” were first published (perhaps strangely on the face of it, but with consequences that can hardly be overestimated) in the 1820 edition of his Zur Morphologie (On Morphology). Only a few months later, he republished them, with minor changes and accompanied by a commentary, in Über Kunst und Altertum (On Art and Antiquity). The decision to add a commentary may have been partly a result of the fact that Goethe’s stanzas, despite their “clarifying” intent, remained cryptic. The first sentences of the commentary give precisely this explanation, but I suspect that “expandability” and “applicability” are inherent to the stanzas’ design: the two 1820 publications superimpose strikingly different contexts in which the “Urworte” may be read, producing a further layering and transformation on top of the translations represented within the text itself. The aesthetic and conceptual developments that take place between the two publications may thus be read as a strategy for progressively increasing the potential complexity of the underlying “words.”

This understanding of the design of the “Urworte” and the relation of the two publications breaks with a tradition of interpretation that has read the commentary only as a “prosaic” and superfluous simplification. I believe this also explains why the commentary was never translated into English. This is not to say that there are not good reasons to view the commentary as a reductive crutch. To the reader of poetry, the commentary undermines the authority of the stanzas by supplementing them with dubious and potentially inflammatory “theoretical” claims. Theo Buck and Jochen Schmidt thus treat the commentaries as secondary, in order to focus on the interpretation of the stanzas. Schmidt argues that the commentary is less authoritative than the stanzas and that readers of the stanzas are not obliged to follow the interpretations given in Goethe’s commentary (Schmidt, Goethes Altersgedicht 14–15). This is certainly right, but the case becomes more complex if the commentary is not simply a case of a literary author trying to “explain” a difficult work. The commentary, as I read it, is a further transformation and translation of the five “primal words,” which deserves to be read carefully, not as a superficial and prosaic explanation, but as a complex text with specific qualities.

Another macro-level interpretive dilemma is whether to read the relation of the five stanzas as progressive, developmental, and linear—a narrative or
dialectical sequence—or whether they are simultaneous and conceptual in their relation. These two options can be unified in Macrobius’s conception of “astrological” divinities presiding over both birth and life—but these may be conceived either as constant presences or as a sequential unfolding of life and fate. In the latter case, the Dämon presides over birth itself; Tyche over childhood, education, and socialization; Eros over youth and awakening sexuality; Ananke over adulthood and the confining realities of middle age; and Elpis over the new perspectives of old age. In any reading, the “Urworte” can be conceived at once as narrative-sequential and as the demonstration of an analytical system that only establishes general categories of relations. On the one hand, it is a strict developmental typology; on the other, all five elements are constantly operative and interacting in all moments and events of every human life. Thus conceptual (synchronic) and developmental (diachronic) aspects are represented in the design of the “Urworte.”

A further question, leading to another distinction, pertains to the level of the generality of this paradigm. More often than not—and not always wrongly—Goethe’s Dämon-stanza has been read autobiographically as a further description of the “demonic” entity from Poetry and Truth. This connection is, however, only of limited validity. It neglects the speculative-historical and scholarly aspects (coming out of Hermann and Creuzer); it also conflicts with Goethe’s commentary, which does not rely on anecdote or subjective accounts, but instead focuses on the stanzas’ universal and objective meaning; the stanzas themselves support this, for example, in the opening astrological metaphor. The tone of universality and objectivity is a precise inversion of the presentation of the demonic in Poetry and Truth. These passages, written before the “Urworte,” only present general paradigms at the horizons of Goethe’s own experience. Both texts arguably address the same underlying problem—the basic form of human life—but the “Urworte” are more oriented toward an academic, systematic, or even dogmatic conception.

Regarding the dogmatic aspect, it is above all the formulaic intensity of the “Urworte” that distances them from the particularities of Goethe’s individual life. “Urworte” may be “religious” in the sense that the stanzas formulate admonishments, sayings and “words to live by”; fundamental questions of anthropology, sociology, and psychology are just beneath the surface. Such questions, which roughly correspond to the “nature vs. nurture” dichotomy, figure prominently in the commentary. The nature-nurture opposition, however, only loosely fits Goethe’s conception. Put in these terms, the “Urworte” are primarily about nature (figured in Dämon and Eros), whereas culture and society are figured in the secondary and often negative functions of Tyche and Ananke. Ultimately, the most important shared feature of the “Urworte” and the nature-nurture opposition is their degree of generality. Both paradigms are broad enough to theoretically include every outcome. At the limit, every actually existing and conceivable permutation must be representable as an interplay between determining elements. In comparison to nature-nurture,
Goethe’s five-part analytic system is decidedly more complex—and aggressively unconventional. The Dämon, for example, is the unique identity of the individual, but it is scandalously ambivalent about the role of “nature” in the constitution of this identity. The stanza never makes it clear whether the Dämon, which the commentary translates as “individuality,” refers to an “own nature” or to an external force that impresses itself on the individual from the outside.

The Dämon in question thus cannot be simply reduced to the “genie” that inspires the genius—or to a Socratic daimonion—or to Goethe’s own “genius.” In the “Urworte,” Dämon corresponds to the character and individuality of every individual. The astrological metaphor of the first lines spells out the uniqueness, singularity—and fatality—of the individual destiny (as the commentary reads it). The second-person singular (Du) further conveys the universality of the conception:7

Δαµων, Dämon.
Wie an dem Tag der Dich der Welt verliehen
Die Sonne stand zum Gruße der Planeten,
Bist also bald und fort und fort gediehen,
Nach dem Gesetz wonach Du angetreten.
So mußt Du sein, Dir kannst Du nicht entfliehen,
So sagten schon Sybillen, so Propheten,
Und keine Zeit und keine Macht zerstückelt
Geprägte Form die lebend sich entwickelt.

Δαµων, Demon.
As on the day you were granted to the world,
The sun stood to greet the worlds,
You likewise began to thrive, forth and forth,
Following the law that governed your accession.
You must be so, you cannot flee yourself,
Thus sibyls long ago pronounced, thus prophets,
And neither time nor any power can dismember
Characteristic form, living, self-developing.

This first stanza gives priority to the Dämon—its unity, its fatefulness, its inescapability, indelibility, and ineradicability, but it still may be possible to overstate these aspects. They are balanced by an equally intense conception of growth and development that is at odds with strict fatalism. Taken a step further, the concepts of form and development may appear to be latently contradictory. “Characteristic form, living, self-developing” (geprägte Form die lebend sich entwickelt), to the extent that it is taken literally, can easily become an oxymoron, a paradox, or a metaphor expressing the simultaneity of synchronic and diachronic moments.8 If this contradiction is to be avoided,
the Dämon must be an intrinsically diachronic and temporal aspect referring to the form of development itself. This principle of the developmental autonomy and elemental individuality of the Dämon is thereby internalized and distinguished from the merely external processes of education and socialization (Tyche).

In contrast with this purely developmental aspect, however, Goethe’s commentary identifies the Dämon with an interconnection of fate and character that allows the former to be derived from the latter: “one may . . . concede that innate energy and individuality [angeborene Kraft und Eigenheit] determine human fate much more than anything else” (UO 13). The language used to introduce this sentence (man möchte gestehen) reflects a significant distance from the stanza’s apodictic claims. The commentary immediately “concedes” the absolute and unquestioned status of the text it interprets. The result is a parody of the emphatic hermeneutic commentary: “Thus the stanza [Strophe] pronounces the invariability of the individual with repeated assurance [mit wiederholter Beteuerung]” (UO 13). The stanza is the source of unquestioned claims, to which the commentary self-consciously subordinates itself. Through the commentary’s deference, the stanza itself becomes a Dämon, a fixed yet developing form: it may be paraphrased and explained (in the sense of Auslegung), its claims rationalized, but the truth of its formulation is not to be questioned. By imagining the stanzas as genuine Orphic utterances rather than words of a modern author, the commentary employs an obvious fiction to interpret the stanza’s words without needing to doubt their claims.

The stanza, however, because it defines Dämon as purely developmental, is much less definitive than the commentary on the topic of fate and character: as the law of a future development—of uncertain duration—the Dämon is never given, never present, but always only “in development.” Its essential role or even its existence as a part of a causal chain can never be proven as long as it is the law of an unfinished unfolding. This “fate” exhausts itself in the stanza’s “repeated assurances,” which amount to a promise of the individuality described. By reading the stanza as an ancient wisdom directed at every imaginable “you,” the commentary avoids the question of whether—and how—this promise is ultimately believable. The acceptance or rejection of the stanza’s “repeated” premise—the belief in the Dämon—may even impact the self-development of the “you.” The apparent fatalism of the stanza thus subtly turns toward the possibility of freedom.

The commentary casts itself in the hermeneutic role, thereby unmasking the stanza as rhetoric and subtly undermining its claims. Once the commentator and the reader of the Dämon stanza are thematized, it becomes clear that individuality is not only intrinsic, but co-defined by acts of interpretation and articles of faith. The commentary proceeds to push this further, to the point of superstition. With only minimal basis in the poem, it asserts the indestructibility and indivisibility of the demon, claiming that it is not just the prime element
of the individual identity, but also defines the transgenerational genetic identity of peoples and nations: “That which is most decisively individual, insofar as it is finite, can certainly be destroyed, but, as long as its core remains intact [so lange sein Kern zusammenhält], it can never become fragmented or torn apart, even across generations” (UO 13). The latent contradiction between form and development is thus magnified and extended across historical time: the Dämon, which seemed to define absolute individuality within the human life span, is recast as a potentially transferable characteristic (das Charakteristische, UO 13). This “characteristic” refers to the utter singularity of the individual and at the same time introduces a more fluid space of identities that are communicated beyond the limits of an individual life.

The concept of individual character can be read as a category of singularity and autonomy, but the idea of a supra-individual “characteristic” tends toward determinism. This collectivization of the individual Dämon is troubling, but it may also be variously interpreted. On the side of the most extreme generality, the “demon” would be the lowest term of a universal anthropomorphology that supposes the possibility of absolute generalization, of an all-encompassing genetic rule capable of mediating and subsuming every single particularity that appears in all of time. Under this rule, everything would have a Dämon that defines what it is and how it develops. The demon thus mediates general and particular, delimiting the difference between form and forms. Everything has a demon as the underlying principle of its being and development; everything—both as an individual and as a species—is possessed of a “form” (a nature, concept, or essence). The demon defines the plurality of diachronic forms in their temporal orientation and organization.

In the Aristotelian lingo that underwrites the morphological discourse from Leibniz to Goethe and Spengler and beyond: the demon is entelechy. This morphological understanding, however, ruins the stanzas’ more narrowly biographical schematics of the human life span. The commentary’s morphological extension and generalization breaks the promise of the Dämon, which “repeatedly assures” the absolute—astrological—singularity of character. In view of transgenerational and genetic continuities, the stanza’s promise of a fixed and enduring individuality is dissolved into abstract formal play: Tyche rules as soon as individuality is viewed as a combinatorics of inherited elements that are not more than the sum of their parts.

In the terms of Dämon-stanza itself, the question is: where does self-development (Entwicklung) end and where do dispersion, disintegration (Zerstückelung), and entropy begin? From the standpoint of form defined in the fixed individuality of a single life, inevitable mortality contradicts the stanza’s proclaimed indestructibility of the demon. From the standpoint of disintegration, “demonic” form ensures continuity in the transmission of discrete “characteristics.” But such a limited continuity is still notably at odds with the indestructible, constantly developing individuality expressed as “imprinted form” (geprägte Form). Mortality thus limits demonic self-development, and
the inheritability of specific characteristics only (rather conventionally) compensates for it at a different level. The problem is simple: if the Dämon does not include a doctrine of the immortality of the soul (which would cross the line from empirical morphology into metaphysics), then there must be limits. But death is downplayed to the extent that it would conflict with the stanza’s pronouncement of the empirical endurance of demonically structured forms. The deliberately overstated assurance of stability and continuity thus reflects the unacceptability of the alternative. To prove the proclaimed indestructibility of the demon—despite certain evidence to the contrary—the commentary introduces this-worldly genetic continuity, which provides the demon with a means of surviving its mortal vessel. Goethe imagines the long-term survival of the demon in the bloodlines. But this turns individuality—like the snowflake that always crystallizes differently—into a mere effect of an indifferent structural determination.

If the idea of a “genetic inheritance” is meant to allay doubts about the indestructibility of the individual demon, then this effort is—perhaps intentionally—not very successful. The demon, which was supposed to be indivisible and integral, ends up tragically divided and finally dissolved in the pantheistic generality of the gene pool. The commentary’s words “as long as its core remains intact” may be a slip or a deliberate contradiction with respect to the stanza’s “neither time nor any power can dismember,” but it in any case reveals the demon as something other than the immortal and indestructible essence. If the demon were to exist in the form pronounced in the stanza, it does so only as an aspect of the faith in the words of the stanza itself; because the commentary, which apparently proselytizes on behalf of this faith, subtly undermines it.

The question of the destructibility of the Dämon is addressed again in the Tyche-stanza and its associated commentary. The remarks that introduce this Urwort proclaim its powerlessness against the perfectly resilient and autonomous demon:

Of course [freylich], even this entity [the Dämon], though fixed [fest] and tough [zäh] and developing only out of itself [dieses nur aus sich selbst zu entwickelnde Wesen], must enter into many relations that may impede the effects of its first and original character or hinder it in its affections. (UO 13)

However, despite the reemphasis of the durability of the demon, the admission that it “enters into many relations” signals the beginning of a reversal. At first these relations are only defined negatively, as mere externalities, which, though they may “impede” and “hinder,” do not decisively impact the demon’s characteristic form. Tyche is thus a more benign form of what the fourth stanza will call Ananke. As a sheer impediment, she lacks positive formative influence on the demonic development.
The *Tyche*-stanza is concerned with education and socialization, which are described as mutable and variable, ephemeral and fluid, reflecting the essential contingency of human social and institutional forms. *Tyche*’s forms are extrinsic shells, lifeless structures against and within which the demon asserts itself, while awaiting *Eros*, whose spark is anticipated in the stanza’s final line:

Τυχη, das Zufällige.
Die strenge Gränze doch umgeht gefällig
Ein Wandelndes, das mit und um uns wandelt;
Nicht einsam bleibst Du, bildest Dich gesellig,
Und handelt wohl so wie ein anderer handelt.
Im Leben ists bald hin- bald wiederfällig,
Es ist ein Tand und wird so durchgetandelt.
Schon hat sich still der Jahre Kreis geründet,
Die Lampe harrt der Flamme die entzündet.

Τυχή, the Accidental.
Yet this strict limit is gently circumscribed
By a fluctuation that flows around and with us;
You are not alone, but shape yourself socially,
And must certainly act just as another acts.
In life things are often due, overdue, redone,
It is a trinket, passed in makeshift thrift.
The circle of the years is already silently closed,
The lamp awaits the flame that will ignite it.

*Tyche* here is not “chance” or “luck” (German *Glück*), fortune or *Fortuna* (the standard Latin translation), which refer to the hazards and opportunities that appear in the course of life. In Goethe’s source, Zoëga, *Tyche* is a moon goddess akin to Isis; she is to the collective what the *Dämon* is to the individual; she is perhaps the most primal divinity, whose name and concept can contain all others (UO 83–84). Goethe’s “Urworte” clearly oppose Zoëga: *Tyche* is not a kind of *Dämon*, but subordinate and secondary. The *Tyche* stanza never calls her by a feminine pronoun, depersonifying and implicitly de-potentiating her. In the commentary, the male *Dämon* is also conceptually neutered into “the characteristic” (*das Charakteristische*), but already in the title of the stanza, female *Tyche* is translated neutrally as “the accidental” (*das Zufällige*). Unlike the demon, which, as the principle of character and identity, is the very precondition for personification, *Tyche* is amorphous and devoid of positive characteristics; in this the *Urworte* follow Zoëga, who calls *Tyche* “a word invented to confuse, not to differentiate and determine” (UO 83).¹¹ In Goethe’s stanza, she is “something that transforms” (*ein Wandelndes*), which lacks the demon’s formal law of development.
Where the *Tyche* stanza emphasizes socialization, the commentary often reads her as the contingency of historical and cultural flux. Despite her secondariness to *Dämon*, she motivates the commentary to revise its position on the demon’s transgenerational, genetic durability: “It is not accidental that one derives one’s descendence from this or that nation, tribe or family” (UO 14). Natality, nativity, and nationality are not mere accidents of birth or attributes of nature but aspects of the continuity of the demon. The commentary’s interpretation here goes against the grain of the stanza, because it re-naturalizes and nationalizes the contingency of culture by reading it as a demonic inheritance. This is confirmed in the commentary’s sentence on *Erziehung* (education, child rearing), which is governed by *Tyche* “as long as it is not public and national” (UO 14). The qualification indicates that education may be removed from the maternal private sphere and subjected to the paternal national-cultural legacy of the demon.

Various arguments are possible when it comes to assessing the real virulence of this conception, but if it is understood as a spurious racial or proto-nationalist theory, then it is unfortunate that it appeared under Goethe’s name. The commentary’s reading of the *Dämon-Tyche* relation comes close to naturalizing national identity, culture, and character by making them into a biological inheritance. The prime example of this is the endurance of the Jewish people (*die Judenschaft*) across the generations. The Jewish *Dämon* particularly stands out, according to the commentary, because the essence of Jewish national character—*Hartnäckigkeit*, stubbornness—reflects and redoubles the “tough” and “resilient” nature of the idea of *Dämon* itself. The commentary contends that not only the Jewish people but also European nationalities will retain their national characteristics even after centuries of exile, emigration, or diaspora. Such claims have almost no relation to the *Tyche* stanza, which focuses on sociability and inevitable conformity. In the commentary, *Tyche*’s “mutable rights” (*wandelbare Rechte*) come into play through miscegenation (*Vermischung und Durchkreuzung*). Such “mixing” or “crossing”—diluting—of the national “demon” is presented, not as the rule of procreation, but as an exception to the ongoing paternity of the *Dämon*. This is an undoubtedly racist conception: rather than interpreting *Tyche* as the lawless law of *Dämon*’s transgenerational permutations, the commentary implies that the originary “demon” survives best in endogamous bloodlines.

The patriarchal and patrilineal typology already observed in the ideal of “national” education stands in opposition to “maternal” *Tyche*. She is a negligent mother who leaves the education of the demon up to chance. Biological mothers are never mentioned in the commentary’s enumeration of “tychic” influences on the baby demon. Instead, maternal surrogates, such as wet nurse and nanny (*Säugamme und Wärterin*), exemplify *Tyche*. This strict gender typology only begins to dissolve when paternal figures, such as “father or guardian,” are identified as agents of *Tyche*. But this is merely because all “father figures” can only be illegitimate in comparison to the
natural paternity of the demon itself. Just as the child is said to be the father of the man, in the commentary, the demon is the ultimate Urvater, the “old Adam” (der alte Adam) and “proper nature” (die eigentliche Natur). It is absolutely resistant to Tyche’s negative and positive reinforcements. In the context of “national and public education”—combined with the demon’s supposed invincibility—the implicit point is that because the demon cannot be driven out of the child, the maternal Tyche should be replaced by public education specifically designed for the advancement of the demon.

Against the conformism (or even, at the limit, fascism) of this ideal of national education, a more promising educational model can be developed out of the very same premises. The universalization of the nonconformist premise of Dämon’s individualistic aspect could be the basis of innovative education. Though still “public and national,” such an educational system would be individually tailored to the talents and proclivities of each “demon.” Because the commentary does not differentiate between the various possibilities, it is difficult not to imagine the worst—but I would still see it as typical of the tendency of the “Urworte” to address problems only in terms of a general framework.

Prior to the Eros stanza, the commentary ceases its ambiguous reflections on education and reasserts the power of Tyche: “But Tyche does not relent . . . [Allein Tyche läßt nicht nach]” (UO 14). Up to this point, the commentary on Tyche had remained preoccupied with Dämon; but now she is reread in a way that fits better with the stanza, as a figure of inauthenticity, as the sum of the forces that can distract, mislead, divert, or seduce the demon from his proper nature. Conformism and inauthenticity would seem impossible based on the Dämon stanza and its commentary, but a decisive line of the Tyche stanza indicates otherwise: “and acts just like any other acts” (und handelt wohl so wie ein anderer handelt). The theme becomes increasingly central in the Eros and Ananke stanzas, which causes the strong initial emphasis of Dämon to become gradually eclipsed. The power of the demon is progressively overshadowed because it proves unable to stay true to itself in the unconditional way proclaimed by the first stanza. Confronted with a reality that it is not cut out for, the twilight of the demon gives lie to the proclaimed ineffectuality of Tyche. The shifting and contradictory claims of the stanzas and commentary cannot be unequivocally resolved; and no individual sentence or line is valid in isolation, but only in the context of the whole system. To the extent that the commentary’s exegesis is a constantly self-modifying disunity, none of its individual claims can be taken at face value. Even taken as a whole, its ability to represent a coherent synthesis may be questionable. It certainly cannot reflect a unified authorial standpoint, because it is self-consciously rhetorical in its mediation of the stanzas to their imagined reader. Rather than anticipating, dictating, defining, or even tracing the conceptual possibilities of the “Urworte,” the commentary is dependent and reactive in its relation to their contradictory impulses. At the same time, it drastically departs from the letter of the stanzas in order to explore speculative possibilities.
Against this equivocal backdrop, *Eros*’ entry occurs androgynously, in masculine and feminine nouns and pronouns, breaking the static opposition of *Tyche* and *Dämon*:

**Eρως, Liebe.**
Die bleibt nicht aus!—Er stürzt vom Himmel nieder,  
Wohin er sich aus alter Oede schwang,  
Er schwebt heran auf luftigem Gefieder  
Um Stirn und Brust den Frühlingstag entlang,  
Scheint jetzt zu fliehn, vom Fliehen kehrt er wieder,  
Da wird ein Wohl im Weh, so süß und bang.  
Gar manches Herz verschwebt im Allgemeinen,  
Doch widmet sich das Edelste dem Einen.

**Eros, Love.**
And there she is!—He hurtles down from the heaven,  
Where he had lifted himself out of ancient chaos,  
He soars and surges forward on airy wings  
Surrounding brow and breast across the vernal day,  
Seems now to flee, but in flight he turns about,  
Creating pleasure in the pain, so happy and forlorn.  
Many a heart drifts away in generality,  
But the noblest devotes itself to the One.

The *Eros* commentary begins: “Here the individual *Dämon* and the seducing *Tyche* join together” (UO 15). *Eros* is the spark that ignites two incompatible elements, *Dämon* and *Tyche*. Despite the initially proclaimed indestructibility of the demon, the collusion of *Tyche* and *Eros* proves that it is not infallible. To the contrary, under the spell of *Eros* it is virtually defined by errancy. Love’s intervention seals the rule of *Tyche*. Within the sphere of *Eros*, the individual only seems “to belong to himself, to allow his own desire to reign, to indulge his own instinct” (UO 15). The objects of a seemingly innate desire are relegated to the status of “coincidences” (*Zufälligkeiten*) and “foreign nature” (*Fremdartiges*). Even in the most intimate aspects of desire, *Tyche* rules: “Errancy has no limit here, because the path itself is error” (UO 15).

The pre-erotic demon had sought to actualize itself, but it can only do so in the alien and “accidental” medium of *Tyche*. *Eros* thus appears as the divinity of the demon’s renewed self-actualization and simultaneous self-forgetting. Love activates the demon by giving it a more intensive connection to the “tychic” world. But because this *self*-actualization cannot eliminate *Tyche*, it is not an event of sheerest authenticity but always co-actualizes *something other than itself*. This dynamic of externalization causes innate properties to be alienated in a foreign element. The commentary does not mince words about this problem, whereas the stanza resolves it in an idea of monogamy.
that implies the demon’s need to devote itself, to focus its *Eros* on a single coherent development instead of floating around in the generality and promiscuity of *Tyche*. The stanza’s “One” thus *not only* represents a sanctimonious sermon on morality, but also indirectly thematizes the demonic role of talent, calling, or discipline, which may transcend the repeated disappointments of *Tyche* and *Eros*.

The impasse of *Dämon* and *Tyche*, made dynamic by the intervention of *Eros*, retrospectively rereads *Tyche* as powerless, as long as she is conceived as a force of purely normative socialization. Her real power is demonically exerted through *Eros*, in each individual’s uniquely auto-affective relation to the world. *Eros* then, as is known from other contexts, is at once a normative force (constrainable within the collective legitimacy of *Ananke*) and a counter-normative force that drives individuals away from the collective law—into the “labyrinths” of the self (UO 15). Such errancy itself has normative effects: as a merely relative or apparent aberrance (under the rule of *Tyche*), every *Eros* has the potential to formalize itself into a “path” (*Weg*), which will “dissolve” “the particular and specific . . . within the realm of generality” (UO 15). *Eros*’s elective affinities are constantly producing new norms, new generalities and collectivities. *Tyche*, whose power is that of crossing and mixing, reveals herself as not only an occasional obstacle to the demon: she *always* “crosses” him, mixes up and confuses him, not by destroying him, but by diverting him, drawing on his power for her labyrinthine ends. Crossing and discontinuity are not exceptional, as they appeared to be in the *Tyche* commentary—because *Eros* cements the confusion of self and other, while, as it now appears, the demon develops only by “crossing.”

According to the commentary, “frustration” (*Verdruß*)—the negative experience of *Tyche* and *Eros*, which constantly interrupt the demon’s self-actualization—causes the demon to feel “that he is not only determined and stamped by nature” (UO 16). In other words, the individual loses faith in the claims of the first stanza: he becomes aware of his demon’s limitations, and seeks a way out of the inauthenticity of the conspiracy of *Eros* and *Tyche*. To make this point, the commentary calls on the authority of the final lines of the *Eros* stanza and asserts that they provide a clue to how *Eros* may be something other than a fatal and impulsive “grasping” (*ergreifen*). In the negative model, *Eros* generalizes and thereby destroys the particularity of whatever it grasped. The only alternative, according to the commentary, is a more free and measured “assimilation” (*aneignen*) of that which the demon encounters through *Eros*. Shifting away from the *what*—the contingency of object-choice—the commentary emphasizes the *how*. This idea of authenticity, as the possibility of escape from deterministic nature and culture, admonishes the individual to forego a possessive, proprietary and identificatory mode of appropriation in favor of a differentiated reflective process.

By the end of *Eros*, the stanzas have shifted away from an extremely negative characterization of *Tyche* and toward a more positively valued
conception of education (Bildung) that is neither merely instinctual nor forcefully imposed from the outside. This new conception instead envisions a reflective and quasi-autonomous process that the demon initiates under the auspices and inspiration of Eros. The form of this education is self-education. It is not primarily concerned with “contents” or “objects” (which are essentially contingent), but defines a specific (quasi-Kantian) perceptual form based on the awareness that all “objects” are also forms, “demons,” entities whose diachronic nature and inside-outside structure make full comprehension impossible.

Where Dämon and Tyche emphasize gender difference as a conflict between essentialized masculine and feminine principles, Eros dissolves this opposition: first, because the recognition of the other as an “other self,” an other demon, implies that this model may apply universally—not only inter-subjectively but also with respect to “inanimate” objects. The sexes are equal insofar as both are born with an innate identity or “demon.” Also homosexuality—perhaps influenced by the “Orphic” legacy and the weak gender differentiation of the Dämon paradigm, which, though figured as masculine, can be read as a birthright of all humans—would not be stigmatized, since the interaction of nature (Dämon) and object-choice (Tyche) allow for more than one “way.” The expansiveness of Goethe’s idea of nature in Eros means that anything is possible. If the idea of monogamy is granted conceptual preeminence in the end, it is as a model of how the demonically inspired individual can learn, interdemonically, to “embrace a second being like itself with eternal, indestructible affection” (UO 16). The ideal of monogamy here stands for a form of self-reflection that is the precondition for autonomy as deliberate faithfulness to oneself—as opposed to merely enforced, accidental, instinctual, or otherwise unreflected conformism.

The commentary does not stop with the “happy ending,” but interprets its more devotional form of Eros as a relation of Dämon and Tyche that sublates the latter within the former, “demonically” animating the “tyhic” neutrality of the world. This new configuration, however, recasts each individual as a mere demon among demons, giving rise to much more binding collective forms. Ananke—compulsion or necessity—begins as a natural law originating in the erotic bond between individuals and ends up in the general forms of collective necessity: positive law, society, and government. According to the commentary, “freedom is given up through free decision,” in a seemingly inevitable devil’s bargain. Here the commentary shifts again, away from the situation of the individual “demon” and toward collective, societal, and transgenerational considerations, resulting in a mini-theory of the genesis of civil society: “Family follows family, tribe follows tribe; a people has discovered itself and perceives that the individual’s decision is also proper for the whole, and it makes this verdict irrevocable in law” (UO 16). Thus monogamy, chosen by the will of the individual and seconded by law and custom, gives rise to matrimony.
Any desire to read Goethe’s text as a triumph of rationalization or progress or civilization—or as the affirmation of a categorical imperative in the style of Kant—or as an “education of mankind”—or as a blossoming of the private demon into the public good—will be disappointed by the pessimistic sentence that precedes the *Ananke* stanza: “And so that everything is resolved for all of time and eternity, neither state nor church nor tradition will permit any lack of ceremonies” (UO 16). As the stanza itself gloomily affirms, there is nothing good about the intersection of individual and collective wills:

*Anagkh*, Nöthigung.
Da ist’s denn wieder wie die Sterne wollten:
Bedingung und Gesetz und aller Wille
Ist nur ein Wollen, weil wir eben sollten,
Und vor dem Willen schweigt die Willkühr stille;
Das Liebste wird vom Herzen weggescholten,
Dem harten Muß bequemt sich Will und Grille.
So sind wir scheinfrey denn, nach manchen Jahren,
Nur enger dran als wir am Anfang waren.

*Anagkh*, Necessity.
Now all follows once again the stars’ will:
The terms and laws and the wills of all
Are but a single will, just because we have to,
And before the will all choice is silenced;
The most beloved is exiled from the heart,
Desire and fancy submit to hard compulsion.
Thus apparently then, after many years, we are
Only more tightly bound than in the beginning.

The necessity of self-discipline and ultimately of self-sacrifice—the modes of renunciation (*Entsagung*) demanded by collectively and intersubjectively instituted forms—is not given a positive face, rationalized, or purified of resentment. The individual—the vehicle of *Dämon* and *Tyche*, of will (*der Wille*) as well as arbitrary desire (*Willkühr, Grille*)—is silenced before the authoritarian and catholic rule of *Ananke*. Even *Eros*, “the most loved” (*das Liebste*, gender neutral), is banished “from the heart” and “sent away with harsh words.” The experience is self-explanatory: there is “no one who has not felt himself painfully compelled when he even so much as recalls such situations in his memory, and there are even quite a few who would want to despair, when the present moment holds him captive in this way” (UO 17).

As was also the case in the preceding stanzas, the last two lines of *Ananke* point forward, toward the last word, *Elpis*, which, according to the commentary, needs no commentary. The fateful tone of the *Dämon* stanza, which presided over the beginning, is pure freedom in comparison with the social
constraints of Ananke. She allows not even the appearance or simulation of freedom, causing the many years of growth, development, and maturation to seem futile. The only freedom that emerges from Ananke is the “freedom from illusion”—disillusionment of the illusion of freedom—producing the unerotic affects of realism, conservatism, and pessimism. This leaves “us” (first-person plural, object-case) more “tightly bound”—enger dran—than ever, but at the same time “closer,” “nearer” (enger dran) to something else. At this limit of a different beyond, the uncertain quality of Elpis is reflected in the cessation of the commentary. Confronted with unyielding Ananke, the reader is instructed to “rush to the final lines, where every gentle spirit will gladly take over the task of creating their own ethical and religious commentary” (UO 17). Elpis thus introduces a moment of hermeneutic freedom—the freedom to make one’s own commentary—which extends beyond the last word of the “Urworte” and beyond the interpretive authority of the commentary:

**ηλπις, Hoffnung.**
Doch solcher Grenze, solcher ehren Mauer
Höchst widerwärtge Pforte wird entriegelt,
Sie stehe nur mit alter Felsendauer!
Ein Wesen regt sich leicht und ungezügelt,
Aus Wolkendecke, Nebel, Regenschauer
Erhebt sie uns, mit ihr, durch sie beflügelt,
Ihr kennt sie wohl, sie schwärmt nach allen Zonen;
Ein Flügelschlag! und hinter uns Aeonen.

**ηλπις, Hope.**
But such a limit, such a steely wall,
Its most revolting portal is unlatched,
Though it may stand with a mountain’s age!
A being arises lightly, without reins,
Out of the clouds’ cover, fog and rainfall,
It lifts us up, with her, by her wings,
You know her well, she swarms toward every zone;
A wing flap! and behind us lie the eons.

Hope, characterized by liminality, ubiquity, and a subtly transgressive nature, rescues the individual from the strictures of Ananke. Theo Buck reads Elpis as a Pegasus figure (UO 60), invoking the power of the imagination—poetry and literature—to transcend the determinateness of the worldly here and now. Without being able to destroy constraints, Elpis rises above them, perhaps momentarily, but constantly, all of the time and everywhere, unfettering the fixed forms of time and fate.

The possibility of freedom at the limit of constraint is finally reflected in the relation of text and commentary. In the end, the fixed authority of the
stanzas, the “demonic” development of originary “Urworte” and the commentary’s dubious pedantic interpretations, relax to admit the possibility that each demon, every individual reader, will continue the reading in his or her own way. The “Urworte” thus come full circle in an allegory of reading opening up multiple conflicting truth-claims, which are set into relation without allowing any to dominate. At first, interpretive freedom emerges from the space between them and out of their contradictions, and in the end, this freedom is itself allegorized in Elpis. Hope can be read as a displaced return to the demon: she is the demon in a state of alterity and self-forgetting. Hope reincarnates the self in its freedom from itself, from the “eons” of its own past and present identity, which now appear as a distant landscape, the frozen remainders of unfinished diachronic beginnings. Neither synchronic nor diachronic, Elpis is achronic in her ability to leave worldly time with its “ancient mountain’s age” behind her; she is polychronic in her ability to “rise above the eons” and view them from a distance, not as a unified and accumulated tradition, but as if from above, with the subjective selectivity of hindsight.

At the beginning and at the end, the commentary characterizes the “Urworte” as a semi-religious cognitive model, akin to self-help or astrology. In between, the “Urworte” are developed in various iterations and translations, in order to represent a truth—the truth of which remains to be proven by its effectiveness. The truth of “Urworte” depends on their usefulness for life, on whether they are believed and how they are implemented. Each individual stanza and Urwort is possessed by its own Dämon—indelible imprint and demonic potential—its own Tyche—historical contingencies of understanding—its own Eros—productive and reproductive passion—its own Ananke—force and dogmatic authority—and its own Elpis—the rereading and eventual transgression of everything fixed and inescapable. This five-part rhetorical-hermeneutic model reflects a delicate balance. Within these parameters, the risk of overemphasizing any of the five moments is clear: the composite balance and dynamic five-part quintessence will revert to a static and dogmatic essentialism if any element is allowed to rule over the others. The possibilities of such reductions can be assessed as (politically and ethically) desirable or regrettable, but the composition of the “Urworte” as a text is a deliberate balancing act. It can conceive the lack of balance within its system of counterweights, but as long as none of the weights are removed, the balance is preserved.