Chapter Five

Demonic Ambivalences
Walter Benjamin’s Counter-Morphology

Demonic Unity, Demonic Ambiguity

One of the most likely places where the contemporary reader may have encountered the idea of the demonic is the work of Walter Benjamin. Other candidates would be Kierkegaard or Georg Lukács, who, though certainly aware of Goethe’s use of the term, do not so directly establish their understandings through readings of Goethe. The deliberate lack of clarity about the demonic and its conceptual origins causes it to be simultaneously exposed and hidden. This is the case in Benjamin as well, but to a lesser degree, because he more extensively and philologically articulates the connections to Goethe. The demonic, however, also appears without reference to Goethe as a part of Benjamin’s own lexicon. But neither at the systematic nor at the philological level has Benjamin’s use of the term been a frequent subject of detailed explorations. In addition to Goethe, whose work Benjamin knew well, he was certainly familiar with many important later thinkers on the demonic.

Benjamin’s polemic against Gundolf in his 1924 “Goethe’s Elective Affinities” hinges on the details of Goethe’s conceptions of the demonic in the “Urworte” and Poetry and Truth. Benjamin’s familiarity with Goethe’s morphological writings can be observed in the encyclopedia article “Goethe,” from the end of the 1920s. Benjamin’s readings from the 1910s and 1920s also reflect a focus on Goethe (GS 7:437–449). Lukács’s Theory of the Novel, which introduces the demonic in the context of a thesis on modernity, also occupied Benjamin during this period; he probably first read Lukács’s theory after its 1920 republication (GS 7:448), and his essay “The Storyteller,” from the late 1930s, still substantially engages with Lukács’s theses.

Regarding Spengler, Benjamin could hardly have missed The Decline of the West (1918 and 1922), but I find no evidence that he knew the work in detail. However, given the notoriety of Spengler’s work in the late 1910s, Benjamin must have been familiar with its main theses and its use of morphology. Unlike Adorno, for whom Spengler seems to have been a touchstone over a long period, Benjamin’s reading of The Decline of the West left almost
no traces. His distaste for Spengler’s work is mostly documented in the frequently adduced “sow-dog” (Sauhund) remark, but even lacking an extensive record, it is plausible to imagine that Benjamin would have identified Spengler, the prophet of decline, with the most dubious ideological currents of the period. For instance, Spengler’s idea of “fate”—his equation of history, nature, and destiny—is clearly an instance of what Benjamin calls “mythic” thought.

One further source that may have contributed to both Spengler’s and Benjamin’s understanding of Goethe’s idea of the demonic is ethnography. For example, Spengler’s idea of the “demonic unity” of primitive man’s reality may resonate with ethnographic understandings which were apparently able to coexist and interact with more overtly Goethean conceptions. In the 1920s, Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (originally 1912–13) could also have been a source for the idea that primitive man’s world is ruled by demons. In chapter 2, “Taboo and the Ambivalence of the Affects,” Freud cites Wilhelm Wundt on the role of demons for primitive man: “The general commandment . . . that lies behind the numerous variable and unspoken interdictions of taboo . . . is originally a single rule: Guard yourself from the wrath of the demons” (Freud, *Totem und Tabu* 73, my translation). Freud, of course, does not believe in demons except as manifestations of the human psyche. Unlike Goethe, Freud also does not present demons and the demonic in a way that might leave some doubts about what he meant by them. He explicitly places his hypothesis under the heading of “the omnipotence of thoughts” (*die Allmacht der Gedanken*, 136–37). This understanding fits with Spengler’s equation of the “demonic unity” of the life of primitive man and of the equally atavistic nature of “great men” in the modern world. Freud, however, unlike Spengler, questions whether there is an essential difference between modern and primitive man. Primitive superstitions are the analogues of modern neuroses. Freud’s “modern man” constantly recidivates to superstition, while in Spengler modern consciousness is typically unable to achieve the unconscious “unity” of primitive man or the rational transparency of full consciousness.

Such anthropological and anthropogenic considerations also seem to sometimes inform Benjamin’s idea of the demonic. According to Scholem, for example, Benjamin differentiated two ages of human prehistory, “the spectral” (*das Gespenstische*) and “the demonic” (*das Dämonische*) and understood “myth” (*Mythos*) and especially tragedy as a polemic directed at prior phases of human existence (GS 2.3:955). It is difficult, however, to entirely accept Scholem’s explanation, which seems more schematic than what one finds in Benjamin’s writings. In “Toward the Critique of Violence,” for example, he calls the police “spectral” (*gespenstisch*; GS 2:189) and argues that law is a continuation of “mythic” violence—but does not say that the demonic and the spectral refer to distinct phases of human development. This claim is misleading to the extent that Benjamin’s arguments assume a high degree of continuity between developmental epochs (however they may be called or
conceived). Nevertheless, Scholem’s clarification is helpful as long as it is not allowed to obscure the fact that the demonic in Benjamin is associated with myth and the mythic, and—even more narrowly—with “ambiguity.”

In the “Critique of Violence,” for example, the compound adjective *dämonisch-zweideutig* (“demonically ambiguous”) characterizes the concept of “equal” rights (GS 2.1:198). Without attempting an extensive interpretation, the words “demonically ambiguous” can be explained with reference to the essay’s central argument that positive law represents a continuation of “the ambiguous sphere of fate” (GS 2.1:197). Law belongs with myth (and mythic violence), which is opposed to justice (and divine violence). Benjamin conceives myth as the retrospective rationalization of a primal precedent and original infraction that gives rise to law as a future preventive. Myth and law are the system of rationalizing and ultimately of prolonging and repeating the originary violence that lies at the foundation of all legal systems. Mythic violence is always law-making and law-maintaining violence that institutes and upholds a cyclical-retributive system that can never escape from itself. When Benjamin speaks of the “demonically ambiguous” quality of the idea of equal rights, it is because legal “equality” (which he sets in quotation marks) is implicated in a system of violence maintained by and through the rule of law. The claim of “equality” is only a pretext for preserving an existing system of rights and privileges. “Equal” rights support systems of *privileges*, and the language of “equality” is thus unmasked as an aspect of the self-justificatory discourse of systems that are per se defined by inequality and solely motivated by their own continuity and self-preservation. The “mythical ambiguity of the laws that may not be broken” (GS 2.1:198) inheres in the law’s blindness to the reasons, histories, and motives that lie behind law-breaking. Benjamin illustrates this with an idea from Anatole France, who said that the law equally forbids rich and poor from sleeping under bridges. The point of the example is that human laws only play into (and reinforce) preexisting determinations (in this case: socioeconomic), which, even in the modern world, appear to the individual as something resembling fate. The law which claims to be “equal” only maintains *preexisting unequal* material conditions (in this case: poverty). In “Fate and Character,” Benjamin establishes a similar idea by way of Goethe: “You [gods] let the poor one become guilty” (*Ihr laßt den Armen schuldig werden*, GS 2.1:175).

Even with this contextualization, “demonic ambiguity” remains open to divergent readings. The demonic (or “mythic”) state may itself be characterized by ambiguity: following Wundt and Freud, the ambiguity of the demonic age would lie in the uncertainty as to whether actions will provoke the anger of demons. From the perspective of individual humans—who cannot always perceive the apparent or sufficient reasons of the orders that rule them—demons are unpredictable. If demons are conjured up to manage or rationalize unpredictability, then their function in the modern world is effectively the same as it always was. If the only difference between modern
and primitive humanity is the distance implied in the word “superstition,”
then demonic ambiguity is not only characteristic of primitive existence but
is the result of a fundamentally unchanged structure. When Benjamin calls
equal rights “demonically ambiguous,” this means that modern laws remain
ambiguous in essentially the same way as transgressions against the demons
were for primitive man.

The equality of the law that forbids everyone from sleeping under bridges
is literally zwei-deutig in that it can be interpreted (gedeutet) in one of two
ways: either it is mythic (which means that fate remains the highest category
and law is only a medium through which modern fates are expressed) or it is
rational and equitable (in which case it always acts justly in response to the
free will of individuals who decide to sleep under bridges). Benjamin clearly
favors the former interpretation, but he also indirectly addresses the seduc-
tive force of the latter’s rationalization. Law’s “ambiguity” is a problem of
appearances, conflicting perspectives, and interpretive claims. The ambiguity
of law and myth may thus refer not only to an ambiguity inherent in myth, but
to the ambiguous superimposition of the “ages” of mankind, of the mythic-
demonic (in which laws only reveal themselves after their transgression) and
the modern (in which laws are man-made but similarly prophylactic in their
function). This means, according to Benjamin, that the mythic era contin-
ues unabated or even intensified under the cover of law. Recalling Goethe’s
loom metaphor of “warp and weft” from chapter 4, this superimposition
can be further interpreted as a split between rational, positive, man-made,
transcendental—“modern”—social orders and the “demonic” cross-currents
of “superstitious” rationales that still interpret these orders in terms of fate.
It all depends on the perspective. “Demonic ambiguity” resides in the uncer-
tainty about whether humanity has fully overcome the “demonic age” and in
the fear that the transformations implied in ideas like enlightenment, secular-
ization, and democracy are a sham.

Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” thus presents a two-tiered system of
ambiguity: the first level is the “primitive” ambiguity of taboo, a mostly
arbitrary code of conduct that constantly confronts individuals with the
uncontrollable risk of transgression and “demonic” retribution. The second
level is produced by a fusion of the spheres of myth and law. As I will show
in more detail, the latter sense of demonic ambiguity is connected to a gen-
eral inability to draw conceptual distinctions and make effective decisions.
In Benjamin, however, such a lack of differentiation between spheres often
expresses itself in the ambiguity of competing interpretive claims: the mythic
thinking of the individual for whom law is only a medium of fate conflicts
with positive law’s claims to equity, equality, rationality, transparency, and
deterrence. Such a contradiction may seem acceptable in the abstract, but it
also ensures that there will never be an end to crime, because the law’s claims
will always be doubtful if I am the one who is violating it. Demonic ambigu-
ity comes into play most tellingly in modern systems, in which all actors (not
only the subjects of the law, but also police, lawyers, judges and juries, journalists and pundits) have interpretations at their disposal that derive from both spheres. There is no way to conclusively decide between them, even in a single given case, and the force of law is thus always guaranteed by the violence through which justice is done—carried out in a sentence that can never entirely shake the suspicion that it only additionally punishes those who are already “poor.” The problem of “demonic ambiguity” reveals itself, therefore, not as an eccentric or novel critique of law, but as the primary reading of law in literature, in works—to name only a few well-known examples—such as Kleist’s “The Broken Jug,” Dostoyevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov, Kafka’s The Trial, and Musil’s The Man Without Qualities.

Benjamin would see Spengler’s ideas of primal unity and organic cultural development as characteristically mythic. Spengler’s desire for “demonic unity” is only the flip side of “demonic ambiguity.” False epistemic unities, invariant in every age, are produced by the inability to draw adequate distinctions and perceive true reasons. The idea of ambiguity, however, demonic or otherwise, is common to the present era, regardless of whether it is contrasted with an idealized past. Goethe’s metaphor of the demonic as a “warp and weft” (Kette und Einschlag) captures this ambiguity in the uncertainty about the status of historical forces in a supposedly rational world. Spengler, on the other hand, though he invokes Goethe’s loom, overlooks the ambiguity of the demonic already in its prehistorical form. Benjamin’s “demonic-ambiguous,” by contrast, turns out to be a pleonasm, because Goethe’s loom metaphor already includes the idea of historical ambiguity. Benjamin improves upon the models he inherits, however, by his more decisive rejection of a fundamental difference between the demonic age and our own. The former continues unabated, redoubled in the doubt introduced by the rule of law. Our time is more demonic to the extent that law and reason are an ambiguous overlay to an already ambiguous situation. Spengler saw the difference between primitive and modern man as a difference of kind, and Benjamin sees it as a difference of degree, but history’s vector is the same in both: Spengler differentiates a simple (“demonic”) and a complex (“modern”) historical situation, whereas Benjamin reads the relation of myth and law as a movement of increasing ambiguity.

Benjamin’s Anti-Morphology

Like the “Critique of Violence,” Benjamin’s “Fate and Character” will not be analyzed extensively here. This is because, perhaps even more than in the later essay, “Fate and Character” is at the center of Benjamin’s concerns in the late 1910s and early 1920s. In support of this claim, I note that this six-paragraph essay was included in Benjamin’s Trauerspielbuch and that it is also virtually indispensable to understanding the “Critique of Violence” and
“Goethe’s Elective Affinities.” Benjamin himself noted the connection to the latter essay in a 1924 letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal, the first publisher of the Goethe essay; this letter characterizes the work as a return to problems addressed in “Fate and Character.” Benjamin calls his 1919 essay a “frontal assault,” whereas the “Elective Affinities” will be more circumspect. The context is a justification of his later essay’s general approach, which seeks to break up terminological encrustations in order to discover the “linguistic life” (*sprachliches Leben*) beneath them:

Thus I worked years ago [in 1919] to free the words fate and character from their terminological servitude [Fron], in order to newly get a hold of their original life in the spirit of the German language [im deutschen Sprachgeiste]. It is precisely this attempt that today betrays to me in the clearest possible way what unmastered difficulties remain as an obstacle to any effort of this kind. At the point where insight proves itself inadequate to the task of actually penetrating the frozen conceptual armor, it finds itself tempted—in order to avoid falling back into the barbarism of formulaic language—to try to achieve the depth of language and thought that lies in the intention of such investigations, not so much by excavation [ausschachten] as by drilling [erbohren]. The forcing of insights [die Forcierung von Einsichten]—the brute pedantry of which is admittedly preferable to the sovereign allure of their falsification (which is now the almost universally widespread practice)—absolutely pertains to the essay in question, and I beg you to take me seriously when I say that the reason for certain obscurities in my work should be taken in this sense. . . . If I were to return to the problem of this earlier essay in the same way, I would hardly dare attempt a frontal assault [Frontalangriff] anymore, but would rather, as in the presentation on “fate” in the essay on The Elective Affinities, attempt to confront such things in excurses. (GS 2.3:941–42)

Benjamin here explains and justifies his methods to his editor. Such reflections rarely appear in a comparably direct way in the works themselves, which makes this self-analysis helpful despite and because of its defensive tone.

The letter claims that “Fate and Character” represented the leading edge in Benjamin’s developing self-understanding of his intellectual project, and—though it is possible to share some of the author’s reservations about pedantry, on the one hand, and obscurantism on the other—the earlier essay’s “forced insights” make it relatively easier to establish the common problem that ties Benjamin’s work together. “Fate and Character” attempts to fundamentally reconceive the two terms of its title, a double focus which is still reflected in Benjamin’s later work, even if the terminological considerations themselves are confined to “excurses.” The letter only mentions the word “fate,” but the
essay on the *Elective Affinities* plausibly stands as a second attempt to get behind both of the two terms treated in the 1919 essay.

In the 1924 letter, Benjamin defends his approach by polemically opposing it to the conventional and widespread “barbarism of formulaic language” (*die Barbarei der Formelsprache*). Because the “Elective Affinities” contains an extended attack on Gundolf’s *Goethe*, Gundolf may be an example of the “formulaic” approach. The wording of the letter, however, also suggests that Benjamin has a much wider trend in mind, further characterized by the “falsification of its insights.” Falsification is the common practice in comparison to which Benjamin’s “forcing” of insights is the lesser evil. The idea of falsification suggests an approach that could also apply to Gundolf. Insights are “falsified” to become authoritative claims and general conceptualizations. Benjamin, on the other hand, wants the real complexity of the problems to which the terms “fate” and “character” refer to be brought into language.

Though Benjamin does not name Spengler, he would certainly be another example of the trend toward “falsification.” What makes Spengler crucial, even though he is not named, is the sheer monumentality of his work’s “falsification” of “fate and character.” In the background of Spengler, as the most authoritative source for his claims, is Goethe. Thus it is possible to imagine that Benjamin’s attack on Gundolf is also an attack on a more general trend of Goethe appropriation and an associated style of thought. Goethe’s “Urworte” themselves, as I have shown, are precisely *about* the power of “formulaic” thought, and their topic is also, at least in part, the relation between fate and character. Thus I would suggest: “formulaic” insights (such as Goethe’s) are one thing, but adopting them as authoritative support for authoritative claims is a “falsification.”

Benjamin’s attack on the language in which fate and character have often been discussed is thus not a wholesale attack on formulaic thought or on the correlated idea of morphology. In the letter, Benjamin himself uses semi-morphological metaphorics to argue against the conflation of fate and character with the developmental form of all individuals and collectivities. Leading up to the previous quotation, he writes of the

> bountiful productivity of an order whose insights powerfully strive in the direction of completely definite words, the encrusted conceptual surfaces of which dissolve magnetically upon contact [with the insights] and betray the forms of linguistic life that were locked away inside of them [the concepts]. For the writer . . . this relationship means the good fortune of language that unfolds before his eyes in a way that allows it to become the touchstone of his powers of thought. (GS 2.3:941)

It is clear from this sentence that Benjamin’s approach is not only anti-formalist and non-conceptual (in the sense of Hans Blumenberg), but actually
anti-conceptual in that it seeks to dissolve the falsified and formulaic rigidity of inherited terms. The repeated word “Einsichten” (“insights”) propounds a penetrative stylistic and linguistic ideal. The “encrusted surface of the concept” is its “formulaic language,” while “terminological socage” (terminologische Fron) is a metaphor illustrating the ease with which thought can become indentured to conceptual pre-determinations. Insight must penetrate or dissolve “the frozen conceptual armor” (der erstarrte Begriffspanzer) rather than merely perpetuate it. This passage’s metaphors of the hollow and frozen inheritances of tradition correspond to what Spengler calls “that which has already come into being” (das Gewordene). Benjamin thus denounces the fatal “barbarism” of self-reproducing and merely received concepts that rely on the authority of inherited formulae rather than “developing living forms in language.”

This argument shifts the register of morphology: instead of going with the flow of language, Benjamin uses morphological metaphorics to advocate a way of thinking and writing that would “develop” (entfalten) the “linguistic life” (sprachliches Leben) that is pent up (verschlossen) in clearly defined words (bestimmte Worte, GS 2.3:941). Such “definite terms” would include both concepts and Urworte (in the sense of keywords or aperçus), but for Benjamin it is not a question of avoiding conceptual sedimentations and conventionalized metaphors. The “encrustations” contain “linguistic life,” waiting to be released. The most intransigent formulae are the most linguistically productive. According to Benjamin’s metaphorics, the writer must side with anti-conceptual “life” against the “death” of formal ossification. In context, this means siding with the metamorphosis as expressed in the idea of “living forms.” Benjamin thus opposes Goethe’s morphological conception of form as metamorphosis to the schematism of morphology as practiced by Gundolf (or Spengler).

Instead of focusing on analogy as a system of non-identity, Spenglerian morphology uses analogies to formulaically reproduce identities within the wider architectonics of his theory. In a 1919 fragment entitled “Analogy and Affinity” (“Analogie und Verwandtschaft”), Benjamin also addresses the possibility of unifying subsumptive-conceptual and ana/morphological thought (fr. 24, GS 6:43–45). The fragment also introduces a third term, “similitude” (Ähnlichkeit); thus it is a predecessor to Benjamin’s “The Doctrine of Similitude” (“Die Lehre vom Ähnlichen”) and “The Mimetic Capacity” (“Das mimetische Vermögen”). The systematic point of the fragment is sketched in a preliminary note (Vorbemerkung), which can be easily summarized. Similarity is a substantial relation, which as such is meaningless and incidental unless superficial resemblance is the sign of a deeper (logical) relation, which might, for example, show that similar things are in fact the same. Similitude expresses a relation that is “literal” and “unmetaphorical” (im eigentlichen Sinne [unmetaphorisch]), whereas analogy represents a relation of “metaphorical similarity,” a relation of the “similarity of relations.” Analogy is abstract because it is based on a (metaphorical) third term that
expresses and interprets the relation. Of the three words under consideration, however, it is affinity (Verwandtschaft) that is the most ineffable, because affinities can exist without ever being expressed or signified. Benjamin notes the “expressionlessness of affinity” (Ausdrucksloses der Verwandtschaft, GS 6:43) and states that affinity can only be “immediately perceived” (unmittelbar vernommen) within a sphere beyond both visibility and rationality (weder in der Anschauung noch in der ratio, GS 6:45). This sphere of affinity is characterized in terms of “feeling” or “emotion” (Gefühl), which is metaphorically connected (as the verb vernehmen suggests) to audibility and music: “it is the pure feeling that has an affinity to music” (es ist das reine Gefühl, welches verwandt der Musik ist, GS 6:44).

Regardless of whether Benjamin had Spengler in mind when he wrote this fragment, the relevance to Spengler’s method of perceiving analogical “simultanities” between eras and cultures is evident. Benjamin’s harsh critique of such a method also easily applies to Spengler: “The confusion of analogy and affinity is a total perversion” (Die Verwechslung von Analogie und Verwandtschaft ist eine totale Perversion, GS 6:44). This is only a more drastic version of the common criticism that analogical correspondences are forced if they cannot be justified by deeper connections.\textsuperscript{16} In light of this common criticism, it is significant that Benjamin does not condemn analogy or affinity in general. Their irrationality is a part of their objective being, but it is only their (subjective) confusion that is “totally perverse.” Affinity, as Spengler also believes, is primarily a matter of “feeling.” According to Benjamin, such “sensed” affinities are not purely irrational: they are perceived but not yet understood; their mode of irrationality makes them the raw material of rational analysis. For example, the reasons for music’s affinity with emotion can be systematically investigated. Spengler, on the other hand, does not pursue the substantial connections that give rise to the sense of affinity, but confuses them by using affinity to found an analogical architecture (for example, in his equation of cultural-historical development with natural forms and cycles).

Benjamin’s analysis of analogy and affinity, combined with the arguments of his 1924 letter, allow the reconstruction of an anti-Spenglerian morphology: against the rigid formalism and uncontrolled analogical identifications typical of Spengler, Benjamin grants the possibility of sub-rational insights based on affinities—but he denies that such insights can be translated directly into the equally sub-rational forms of analogy and resemblance. Morphology, as the study of emergent forms and forms in transformation, thus has a right to exist, but its insights should not be mistaken for other kinds of more positive and substantial relation. Benjamin further (explicitly) claims that the concept and the forms of language are also to be read morphologically, as unfinished, transforming, and “afformative.”\textsuperscript{17} Whatever transformations may be occurring in life and history, language may not be able to name or identify them; it also cannot be presumed exempt from them. Morphology thus puts language under pressure to raise itself to the level of morphology’s
key insight (presented in chapter 2) that there are no static forms—and no fixed referents—only unnameable transformations.

The arguments at the end of Benjamin’s “analogy” fragment, even if they were not directed at Spengler, pertain directly to the problems of morphological thought. The penultimate paragraph argues that reading affinities as analogies (and ultimately as identities) serves authoritarian ends. In support of this, Benjamin refers to the goals of uniform education (*Erziehung*) and the modern idea of familial authority. The latter presupposes the intangible “affinity” (*Verwandtschaft*) of “relatives” (*Verwandten*), which gives rise to falsified authority based on similarity and analogy. “True authority,” Benjamin states, comes not from any authoritative claim that one *should be like* one’s relatives, but rather from affinity itself, which produces “an immediate relation at the level of feeling, which does not rediscover its object in the analogies of behavior, choice of profession, or obedience” (GS 6:45).

The last paragraph of the 1919 fragment speaks of “the type” (*der Typus*)—the kind of character—who confuses analogy and affinity. This person is “sentimental”; for him or her affinities only produce the recognition of already familiar patterns. He or she only sees the familiar (*das Anheimelnde*) but cannot navigate the “broad waves of analogy.” What makes this character sentimental, as Benjamin shows in an example from Schiller’s *Wallenstein*, is the refusal to accept the immediacy of affinity without the rhetorical-rational stabilization of analogy. “The flower is gone from my life,” Wallenstein declares after Max’s death. The representation of affinity through analogy overcompensates and misrepresents, leaving an arbitrary sign in place of a feeling.

In his later *Arcades Project* (*Passagenwerk*), Benjamin looks back at his work’s development and interprets it in morphological terms. After reading Simmel on Goethe’s conception of truth, it became clear to him that “my concept of origin in the *Trauerspielbuch* is a strict and compelling transposition of Goethe’s fundamental concept from the realm of nature and into that of history” (GS 5.1:577). The transposition of nature into history is the “Copernican” revolution that Spengler claimed for his morphology. Benjamin continues: “Origin—the concept of the *Urphänomen*—is imported from the heathen context of nature into the Jewish context of history.” The point of such an “importation,” in the *Passagenwerk* and in general, is not to posit a *causal connection* but rather to “allow the emergence” of the Paris arcades to proceed “in the development proper to them [*in ihrer selbsteigenen Entwicklung*]—or better put, in their inherent unwrapping [*Auswicklung*]—like the leaf from which unfolds the whole wealth of the empirical vegetable world” (GS 5.1:577). If the paradigms of Goethe’s morphology seem to be invoked here in a rather vague way, this may be contrasted with closely related reflections in which Benjamin’s distance from Spengler’s morphology is represented as an explicit break with the dualism of progress and decline. Benjamin argues for a method of “materialist” morphology, which would not turn parallels and structural analogies into ontological identities,
but which focuses on the singularity of individual moments from which the historical totality constantly emerges anew. I will not go into detail here, but the idea is familiar: it is the dialectical image, which causes far-flung historical moments to become “simultaneous” in a “flash” of insight. Unlike Spengler’s systematic architecture of simultaneity (Gleichzeitigkeit) that connects historical epochs, Benjamin’s is a free-floating and contingent illumination—a lightning strike—that does not resolve itself into a continuum of endless analogical parallels but instead discovers “the crystalline structure of the totality of events in the analysis of the smallest individual moment” (GS 5.1:575). The emphasis on the “autonomous unfolding” (selbsteigene Ent- bzw. Auswicklung) of manifold forms, each with its own integrity as a moment within a totality, moves decisively away from conceptions based on the genealogically transmitted identity of original-indelible forms (geprägte Formen). The genealogical reading of the “primal plant” (Urpflanze), “primal phenomenon” (Urphänomen), and “primal word” (Urwort) is mistaken because it makes the fatal error of interpreting the open relation of affinity (Verwandtschaft) and perpetual circumlocution as an identity produced by analogically falsified insight. In the natural world, of course, genealogical continuities may exist. But historical morphology must be conceived differently, as exempt from “natural” continuities. Manifold relations of affinity do not produce analogies but dialectical images, which, though they may give rise to formalizations, are originally expressionless. Benjamin’s morphology focuses on the emergence of the new—of the new from the old, from within and simultaneous to it—instead of on the endless reproduction of the same. His morphology thus follows Goethe in breaking with the latent Platonism of the philosophical tradition, which is simultaneously overinvested in a priori ideas and in their utopian fulfillments.

When history is interpreted by an analogical schematism like Spengler’s, Benjamin calls it “vulgar naturalism,” “heathen,” and “mythical.” This is not only due to the use of a natural analogue to define the form of human history, but because such mirroring of nature, culture, and history makes them equivalent. Benjamin makes this point emphatically in the Passagenwerk in a critique of Nietzsche’s eternal return. In comparison to Nietzsche, however, Spengler’s attempt to literally trace the “eternal return” (as a fate that endlessly repeats itself in human history) makes him even more vulnerable to Benjamin’s argument against Nietzsche: “The ‘eternal return’ is the basic form of prehistorical, mythic consciousness” (GS 5.1:177); and, even more drastically: “The essence of mythic happening is return. In it the hidden figure of futility is inscribed, which inscribes several heroes of the underworld (Tantalus, Sisyphus, or the Danaids)” (GS 5.1:178). Though the way of addressing the problem changed between 1919 and the Passagenwerk, the goal is the same: Benjamin seeks to establish a historical morphology based on Goethe’s idea of metamorphosis in order to escape the futile “mythic” repetitions that otherwise define concepts such as fate, character, and law.
“Fate and Character”

So far I hope to have shown that the problems surrounding Goethe’s ideas of the demonic and morphology are central in Benjamin’s work. This does not mean, however, that his discourse originates in morphology or in the problem of the “demonic” connection of fate and character. But morphology was at least compatible with Benjamin’s thought in a way that makes it possible to draw contrasts with Spengler’s morphology of history without presuming that Benjamin intentionally developed his thought in opposition to Spengler. The difference with Spengler, however, provides a general framework for Benjamin’s understanding of the demonic in “Fate and Character” and “Goethe’s Elective Affinities.”

The difficulty of both essays, addressed in the 1924 letter to Hofmannsthal, arguably lies more in their dense and digressive “proofs” than in their argumentation. The “forced insights” of “Fate and Character” are relatively schematic, but these insights are supported by Benjamin’s entire thinking on myth, history, and tragedy. “Goethe’s Elective Affinities” is similar in this respect, but its much greater length leads Benjamin to develop a dense fabric of motifs and “excurses.” The Goethe essay is made up of “cells,” which recursively build on material already presented. Formally, there is nothing so unusual about this, but the essay’s network of internal references is particularly dense and fine. This formal-compositional ambitiousness as well as the topical connections to “Fate and Character” and the Trauerspielbuch have led many to see the Goethe essay as a culmination of Benjamin’s early work. This does not necessarily mean that his later thinking was drastically different—only that the work of the late 1910s and early 1920s provided an intellectual platform for what came after.

The first sentence of “Fate and Character” implicitly neutralizes the “common” and “traditional” understanding of fate and character by flatly stating that they are “typically [gemeinhin] taken to be causally connected and that character is determined as a cause of fate” (GS 2.1:171). This causal relation, Benjamin observes, can also be inverted. He explains this in the second paragraph, which concludes that “if one has a character,” then it will be definitive of fate, making the latter “essentially constant” (GS 2.1:173). Benjamin introduces Stoicism as a limit case of an ethical system that seeks to minimize the variable of fate by holding character constant. The conventional or “inherited” (berkömmlich, GS 2.1:172) connection of fate and character also (roughly) defines the terrain of the demonic in Goethe’s Orphic “Urworte” and Poetry and Truth. To be sure, none of Goethe’s versions of the demonic directly claim a “causal connection,” but all of them (especially the “Urworte”) operate with inherited conceptions of the problem of fate and character and thus clearly fall within the tradition to which Benjamin refers. And the reception of the demonic in the 1910s gives an even stronger
impression of a fate-like entity that expresses itself in “demonic characters.” The Orphic “Urworte” themselves, to the extent that they suggest causation, imagine Dämon (“character”) as the primary factor; if this primacy is read as implying causality, this still would not mean that the details of causation are knowable. And this lack of demonstrable causation makes the claim of causation itself seem questionable.

Benjamin also dismisses the “inherited” causal connection between fate and character on epistemic grounds. It is terminologically unsustainable, because it can only lead to ambiguity: “It is in no case possible to show what ultimately counts as a function of character and what as a function of fate in human life” (GS 2.1:173). On the basis of this crux, Benjamin claims that the goal of his essay is not to show the interconnection or even the dialectical interrelation of fate and character, but rather to develop them as distinct concepts. This does not mean that they are necessarily unrelated, only that a two-way causal connection is incoherent and thus should not be presupposed. In the remainder of his essay, Benjamin uses the difference between tragedy and comedy to show how fate and character can be represented distinctly and still exhibit specific structural parallels. The result of this analysis is that tragedy is the genre of the representation of the transcendence of fate and comedy is the genre of the representation of the transcendence of character. In themselves, both fate and character are natural; fate is “natural guilt” and character is “natural innocence.” As natural categories, Benjamin seeks to free both from their illegitimate encroachment upon the “higher spheres” of ethics (in the case of character) and religion (in the case of fate) (GS 2.1:173).

These higher spheres are implicitly contrasted with the lower of myth and law. Tragedy transcends the “demonic” sphere of mythic fate, whose ambiguities are captured in the “paradoxical” representations of tragedy; comedy does the same for character by showing the natural constraints of character as a sphere of freedom and not of subjection. Fate and character are both “demonic” not only in that they represent an earlier, “mythic” epoch of unfreedom, but because they display parallel ambiguities: fate, as a category of law (Recht), becomes ambiguous and potentially unjust whenever it is viewed as preordained and inescapable. This ambiguity paradoxically shows that both the retribution and the transgression were fated and thus that fate’s “legal system” (Ordnung des Rechts, GS 2.1:174) is an interminable “guilt system” (Schuldzusammenhang, GS 2.1:175). If everything is fated anyway, the idea of fate cancels itself out: “At base, man is not the one who has a fate; rather, the subject of fate is indeterminate” (GS 2.1:175). If fate is a “suprapersonal” determination motivating both transgression and retribution, then the system becomes arbitrary and passes entirely beyond human ends and means. Tragedy thus represents the injustice of the gods, even if this conclusion is unspeakable (only indirectly representable):
It was not law [Recht] but tragedy in which the head of the genius first raised itself above the haze of guilt—because in tragedy the demonic fate is broken . . . Heathen man realizes that he is better than his gods, but this knowledge deprives him of language and he remains mute. (GS 2.1:174–75)

This understanding need not deny the existence of suprapersonal forces like fate or nature, but if such forces are essentially arbitrary and unjust, then they are ethically and religiously irrelevant. In contrast with Spengler, for example, who believes that “the laws of nature are the only laws” (UdA 127), Benjamin refuses to engage with the question of nature’s ultimate ends, the ambiguity of which plagues both Goethe’s and Spengler’s morphology. Spenglerian morphology perceives individuals as merely relative means to whichever ends, whereas Benjamin finds the ambiguity of unquestionable yet supposedly absolute ends to be symptomatic of a “mythic” and “demonic” system, which is by definition unable to provide individuals with justice or ethical orientation.

In the case of character, the inherited ambiguity lies in the tendency not to view it as natural (and hence morally neutral) but to express it in judgmental or ambivalent terms. Examples of such words “that appear to designate character-traits that cannot be abstracted from moral valuation” (GS 2.1:177) are “self-sacrificing,” “deceitful,” “vengeful,” and “envious” (aufopfernd, tückisch, rachsüchtig, neidisch, GS 2.1:177). To understand what character is in itself, “abstraction” from morality is “necessary”; Benjamin thus poses “smart” and “stupid” as examples of character-adjectives whose moral significance is either neutral or depends on the individual context and case. Comedies of character transform protagonists who would be called “scoundrels” (Schurken) in real life into objects of identification. Onstage, instead of seeing morally condemnable behavior, all we see is “character.” Comedy represents character as the vicarious enjoyment of one’s own nature through a protagonist who is able to live out his or her character without regard for moral norms or codes of conduct. “It is incumbent upon morality to prove that traits [Eigenschaften] can never be morally relevant [erheblich], only actions [Handlungen]” (GS 2.1:177). While tragedy presents fate as an arbitrary subjection, character analogously presents the individual’s specific “genius” (Genius) “as the answer to the individual’s mythic enslavement to character” (GS 2.1:178). Comedy transforms the inescapable demon of character from “the determinist’s puppet” into “the light under whose beam the freedom of action becomes visible” (GS 2.1:178). The Dämon that Benjamin calls Genius is character viewed from the perspective of “the natural innocence of man.” Character thus is not a form of fate but a representation of individual nature from the standpoint of freedom. This freedom characterizes all actions that transcend the sphere of moral consequence—and art “symbolizes” this transcendence.25
“Goethe’s Elective Affinities”

The double concept of fate and character figures prominently in Benjamin’s “Elective Affinities.” The earlier essay’s more schematic presentation provides an invaluable terminological foundation for the later Goethe essay, which deals much more extensively with the demonic. And “demonic ambiguities” are also ubiquitous even where they are not labeled as such. The most prominent example of this is the relation of “material content” (Sachgehalt) and “truth content” (Wahrheitsgehalt). According to Benjamin, the objective of criticism (Kritik) is to differentiate them, but all of the metaphors he employs to illustrate their relation—seal and wax, fire and logs—show them to be inseparable. Especially when Benjamin uses these terms to characterize institutions (like matrimony) and non-textual productions (like a life), they are clearly interdependent. In Benjamin’s refutation of Gundolf’s interpretation, “truth content” and “material content” are used to argue that the “mythic” subtexts of the plot are not identical with the work’s truth content (or meaning) but are only a hidden aspect of the material content. Critics, content with only uncovering a layer of mythic meaning in the novel, affirm it as the meaning of the novel. To counter this reading, Benjamin isolates an anti-mythic layer ignored by Gundolf. This layer is comprised primarily of the novella The Strange Neighbor-Children (Die wunderlichen Nachbarksinder) and the perspective of the semi-omniscient narrator who mourns the fate of the characters in an image of a “star of hope that shoots above their heads” (above their heads and out of their view, Benjamin emphasizes). The methodological differentiation of commentary and critique thus works in service of an interpretation meant to show that the uncovering of a mythic dimension may make the novel appear (partly) as a drama of fate (transgression and retribution), but that this by itself proves neither that it is completely mythic nor that it is tragic. Using the distinctions of the Trauerspielbuch, Benjamin reads the novel as a mourning play, as “sad” (traurig) rather than tragic. The latter category belongs exclusively to the Greek battle to escape the demonic age. This historically unique situation was founded on the institution of tragedy, whereas modernity is ruled by history, which is always explicitly or implicitly a history of salvation (Heilsgeschichte) whose horizon is redemption (Erlösung). History’s problem is the mythic holdover, its return to a guilt economy of myth, for example, in the Christian idea of original sin (GS 2.1:308). Ideas like “nature,” “law,” “fate,” and “character” reintroduce the demonic ambiguity of myth in doubly ambiguous forms.

The different subjects of the Goethe essay and the Trauerspielbuch, as well as the complexity of both works, make it difficult to establish whether they reflect the same conception. It is safe to say, however, that Benjamin’s “Elective Affinities” can be more easily followed if one knows the Trauerspielbuch, while, on the other hand, the Trauerspielbuch may be clarified by the Goethe essay’s concrete focus on a single work of modern literature. In the
Trauerspielbuch, Benjamin argues that modernity and Greek antiquity confront the same basic problem (the overcoming of myth), but in modernity the configuration of problem and solution are incomparably different, not only in the difference between myth and history, but in the corresponding changes in the economy of representation. The Trauerspielbuch contends that modern theater (“from Calderon to Strindberg,” GS 1.1:292) is the result of a Christological reformatting which replaced the tragic hero’s “defiance” (Trotz, GS 1.1:294) with the exemplary fate of the martyr. Where Greek tragedy was an act of ritual witnessing and purging that silently raised the question of justice at the end of fate, “the mourning play” is named after the affect of “sadness,” which is produced when the desolation of history and infinite injustice are pushed to the limit of utter hopelessness (Hoffnungsleere, GS 1.1:406). At this limit, the affect of mourning (Trauer) does not imply mythic ambiguity anymore, because it is based on a univocal and irreversible historical state, but the affect of Trauer is subject to a specific “bipolarity” (Umschwung, GS 1.1:406) in the switch from “death” to “resurrection” (Auferstehung, GS 1.1:406). This is not an eschatological telos, because history per se can only be represented “sadly,” but is, as Benjamin puts it in the Goethe essay, a “critical” force within history, whose function is to differentiate ambiguities into insights. Critical insight puts myth in its place, and history, by this definition, is not only “sad” but also an unfolding of truth content within material content. This does not occur in view of a final separation, but in flashes of insight that only represent a momentary disruption of modernity’s constant recidivism to the pre-ethical world of myth. Even a “modern” world at no point ceases to be defined by demonic ambiguities, and the continuing existence of such ambiguities is actually guaranteed by the “demonic” interdependence of material and truth content, of myth and redemption, within history. As hopeless as this may sound, the pseudomorphosis of myth in the tragic and the traurig becomes literally fatal when it overcompensates for the primary affect of the modern age (Trauer) in order to revel in the pre-tragic idea of fate that tragedy tried to put an end to.

Benjamin’s “Elective Affinities” presents the idea of “demonic ambiguity” toward the end of his essay’s first part in direct connection with Goethe’s conception from Poetry and Truth. For Benjamin, the sheer appearance of the demonic in Goethe’s autobiography is the symptom of a massive problem for the worldview attributed to him by Gundolf. Benjamin reads the demonic as an overt desublimation, an “unpolished monolith” (eine unabgeschliffener Monolith) towering over the flat landscape of the autobiography (GS 1.1:149). This dark side of Goethe’s Olympian striving results from his “idolatry of nature” (GS 1.1:149) and especially from the “ambiguity of his concept of nature” (Doppelsinn im Naturbegriff, GS 1.1:147). Here Benjamin refers to his own preceding paragraph, in which Goethe’s susceptibility to mythic thinking is highlighted; the ambiguity of his idea of nature is that it “simultaneously refers to . . . the spheres of perceptible phenomena [der
wahrnehmbaren Erscheinungen] and to those of intuited primal forms [die der anschauhbaren Urbilder]” (GS 1.1:147). The lack of hierarchy and distinction between “perceptible appearances” and “intuited primal forms” produces the undifferentiated Urphänomen as a “chaos of symbols” (Chaos der Symbole, GS 1.1:147). As an explanation of the biographical sources of the demonic, this may sound rather obtuse, but 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.

Benjamin uses Goethe’s own words to show the risks of such a totalized idea of nature. Like Spengler’s claim that the only source of law is nature, Goethe also makes everything—culture, reason, history, or language—a part of nature:

Just shut your eyes, open your ears and listen: from the most quiet breath to the wildest noise, from the simplest tone to the most supreme harmony, from the most keen and passionate cry to the most tender words of reason—it is only nature that speaks and reveals its being, its power, its life and its relations. (GS 1.1:148)

When there is nothing that is not nature, the result is a compound—limitless—ambiguity, in which nature is the “demonic” root cause of all phenomena. The effect of this, as Benjamin will argue, is the moral muteness of the characters and world of Elective Affinities. The unspoken alternative would be an individual moral autonomy that allows decisions to be uttered that are not merely—fatally—governed by nature or which use nature as their excuse.27

In contrast to the more elevated and thorny style in which Benjamin introduces this Goethe quotation, he reacts to it in a more informal way:

If in this most extreme sense “the words of reason” themselves are made into possessions of nature, what wonder that for Goethe thought was never able to completely illuminate the realm of the Urphenomena. He had robbed himself of the possibility of making distinctions. Without any differentiation whatsoever, being falls to a conception of nature that grows and extends itself toward monstrosity. (GS 1.1:148)

This is not just an isolated terminological ambiguity like that of fate or character, and it is also not an individual or historical fate that could be “mourned.” It represents total ambiguity through the deliberate production of an epistemic foundation upon which it is impossible to make distinctions of any kind. Dimensions of hidden meaning are everywhere. Nothing is itself or what it seems to be, because everything substitutes symbolically for everything else. Every boundary is lifted and made fluid. Instead of provoking sadness, this
conception gives an excuse not to mourn, but it is not a happy pantheism or “pan-erotism.” Absolute morphological continuity “monstrously” dissolves all foundations and deprives language of its ability to name.

Benjamin introduces Hölderlin in opposition to the pandemonium of Goethe’s conception. This non-demonic morphology proceeds on the basis of the priority of the individual above the whole. This crucial contrast between Goethe and Hölderlin culminates (GS 1.1:182) in an excursus on “the expressionless” (das Ausdruckslose). As I will show below, “the expressionless” presents an idea of form as irreducible to formulaic, nominal, or Platonic conceptions. Benjamin’s version of morphology grants primacy to metamorphosis, while Hölderlinian expressionlessness seeks to reconceive artistic form as the freezing of a material whose natural state is one of motion and flux.

Morphological formalism in the style of Spengler and Gundolf demonically reduces both life and art to universal schemata, which restrict metamorphosis to an a priori canon. For the sake of universality, such forms are as general as possible, and their subsumptive typology strives toward a homogeneous continuum of always the same predetermined forms. This is the essence of what Benjamin calls myth. He diagnoses a struggle against this conception as the definitive “truth content” of Goethe’s life, work, and autobiography. This reading of the idea of morphology as part of a biographic dynamic lends it a plausibility that is lacking in Gundolf and Spengler, who only exploit morphology for the sake of glorification and mythmaking. For Benjamin, Gundolf’s selective appropriation of morphological mythologemes shows that he has given up the critical task of using insight to access truth content. Rather than breaking the hopelessness of the mythic paradigm, Gundolf’s work mechanically reproduces idealized archetypes.

To show the damage done by such an ideologically motivated reading, Benjamin focuses on Gundolf’s reading of Goethe’s Orphic “Urworte.” Benjamin introduces the “Urworte” in response to Gundolf’s hypostasized unification of the artist’s “life, essence and work” (Leben, Wesen und Werk, GS 1.1:157). Such a unity, which makes the life into a work of art and the works into direct expressions of the essence of the life, allows limitless transactions between three spheres. Without actually citing Goethe’s stanzas, Benjamin first shows how the model for Gundolf’s style of criticism can be found in the Orphic terms. The first four Urworte define the life of an idealized hero, whose exemplary and normative functions connect him to Benjamin’s concept of myth:

If in the traditional point of view, work, essence and life carelessly mixed together in an indefinite way, then he [Gundolf] explicitly understands these three aspects as a unity. He thereby construes them into the appearance of a mythic hero. Because in the realm of myth, essence, work and life indeed form the unity that they otherwise only achieve in the minds of careless literary critics. In myth, the essence
Walter Benjamin's Counter-Morphology

is called “demon” [Dämon], life is called “fate” and the work that only these two express [das nur die beiden ausprägt] is “living form” [lebende Gestalt]. (GS 1.1:157)

Benjamin here loosely varies the specific terms of Goethe’s Dämon stanza to characterize Gundolf’s understanding of the Dämon and its “characteristic form, living and self-developing” (geprägte Form, die lebend sich entwickelt). Such a unity of existence, Benjamin argues, can only be represented in the superhuman ideal of the hero, a representative of mankind before the gods who fail to reflect the “moral uniqueness” (moralische Einzigkeit) of individual responsibility (Verantwortung, GS 1.1:158). Gundolf uses this model of pre-tragic heroes such as Hercules and Orpheus to typify the poet’s life and vocation. Benjamin passes a harsh sentence on such idolization: “All representation by proxy [Stellvertretung] in the sphere of morality is mythical in nature, from the patriotic ‘one for all’ to the sacrificial death of the Redeemer [der Opfertod des Erlösers]” (GS 1.1:157). Substitution, including Spengler’s idea of historical “substitutability” (Vertretbarkeit), mistakes individual life for a representative form or for a mere function. This representational function is defined by the ability of the hero’s image to produce exemplary and ideological effects of cohesion and bonding. But neither individual responsibility nor individuality itself exists in this sphere of mythic instrumentalization or in the replaceable aspect of the individual’s part within a larger whole. Such conceptions abdicate individuality in favor of the representative function of an idealized heroic proxy who does what we cannot and is what we cannot be. The “we” who is substituted by the hero is let off the hook and simultaneously made into the object of a typological conformism.

The Elective Affinities is not tragic, and Ottilie is no hero. Greek tragedy alone was able to show that the “heroic” model was not without its redeeming aspects. In this context, Benjamin sketches a highly condensed reading of the Orphic “Urworte.” His interpretation draws its evidence from Gundolf’s misreading; by emphasizing hope (Elpis), whom Gundolf ignored, Benjamin foreshadows his essay’s concluding emphasis on the “star of hope” in the Elective Affinities:

One of the most powerful sources of this symbolism [the “evident symbolism” of figures like Orpheus and Hercules who are “clearly differentiated” from non-heroic humans] flows from the astral myth: in the superhuman type of the redeemer, the hero stands in for humanity through his work that grants him a place among the stars. It is he for whom the Orphic “Urworte” were coined: it is his Dämon that is like the sun, his Tyche that is changing like the moon, his fate that is inescapable like the astral Ananke; even Eros does not point out beyond this star-struck configuration—only Elpis does. When the author [Goethe] had the idea of including Elpis among them in order
to bring the first four down to earth, it is no coincidence that she alone needed no additional explanation, and it is also no coincidence that she has no part in the schema of Gundolf’s *Goethe*, which is entirely defined by the rigid canon of the other four. (GS 1.1:158)

Benjamin’s reading of Goethe’s “Urworte” is risky, especially his interpretation of the contradiction between the stanzas and Goethe’s commentary. Goethe seemed to understand all five *Urworte* as a universal (non-heroic) paradigm of human development, but for Benjamin, this reading is only made possible by *Elpis* (Hope). For Benjamin, the first four figures only represent a classic mythic-heroic schema governed by an “astral” infrastructure. Like Gundolf, Benjamin is thus also selective and arguably even reads Goethe differently than Goethe reads himself; but unlike Gundolf—and perhaps even to a greater degree than Goethe does himself—he reads the “Urworte” as an indissoluble unity: without *Elpis*, Benjamin argues, the universalizing intent of Goethe’s commentary would not have been possible; the lack of an *Elpis* commentary introduces a change of register to include non-heroic life; the ascended hero, whose fate was guided by the gods, has no need of hope. Thus Benjamin’s short reading of the “Urworte” manages to produce a rich interpretation of the poem and Goethe’s commentary.

Whether or not one accepts the claim that *Elpis* was necessary to “humanize” the Orphic conception, her exceptionality is in fact emphasized in the commentary’s claim that she needs no commentary. In support of Benjamin’s reading, one might also observe that without *Elpis*’s closing gesture of openness, the four initial poems would have exhibited a fierce didacticism and even pedantry, which would have appealed to the “lax literary critics” who are mostly interested in such qualities. The best evidence of Benjamin’s reading of *Elpis*’s essential role in transcending the mythic constellation of the “Urworte” is thus indirectly given by Gundolf’s attempts to exclude her from the Orphic and “morphic” terminology that he uses to characterize Goethe’s life and work.29

The fact that *Elpis* plays a decisive role in Benjamin’s reading of the *Elective Affinities* is well known, but to some it may seem exaggerated or arbitrary to invest so much in a single sentence of the novel: *Die Hoffnung fuhr wie ein Stern, der vom Himmel fällt, über ihre Häupter weg* (“Hope flew, like a star that falls from heaven, above their heads and away”). Based on the connections to the “Urworte,” however, the centrality of *Elpis* may become more convincing, even if her placement and specific interpretation in the wider contexts of Benjamin’s essay remains challenging; and the closing passages’ reliance on the *Trauerspielbuch*—in the words “mystery” (*Mysterium*), “the dramatic” (*das Dramatische*), and “representation” (*Darstellung*)—pose many questions. Without claiming to resolve this complexity, I would call attention to the idea of mourning (*Trauer*), which allows Benjamin to interpret the novel as a work of mourning—Goethe’s mourning—for his character.
Walter Benjamin’s Counter-Morphology

Ottilie. This authorial affect is inscribed in the novel in the sentence about the “star of hope,” and the dynamic of Trauer outlined in the relation of hopelessness and hope corresponds to the “inversion” (Umschwung) characteristic of the Trauerspiel. Crucially different, however, is the identification of the hope-sentence with Hölderlin’s idea of “caesura” (GS 1.1:199), which is connected with das Ausdruckslose (“the expressionless,” “the inexpress,” “the inexpressive”) and finally with the novel’s evanescent truth content. Given this difficult chain of ideas, each of which may have some ability to clarify the others, it would be possible to start at any point. The structure of Benjamin’s essay, like that of Goethe’s “Urworte,” is not linear but cyclical, making definite conclusions impossible.

I will start with the hope-sentence and work backward to das Ausdruckslose. The emphasis Benjamin places on the “star of hope” is not exaggerated, because in the novel it represents an unprecedented intervention of the voice and perspective of a narrator who mostly appears to be omniscient. He otherwise only reveals himself indirectly, for example, in the montage of documentary materials such as Ottilie’s diary. Benjamin’s emphasis on the hope-sentence thus has a solid narratological foundation, even if he does not argue in these terms. The reflections das Ausdruckslose and the connections to the Trauerspielbuch have raised the stakes to a point where the star sentence is not a narrative problem because it pertains to representation and art in general (Kunst schlecht hin, GS 1.1:181). Despite this broadness and the difficulties it poses, Benjamin still manages to include the arguments necessary to establish the more limited importance of the sentence: particularly his claim that the hope cannot be that of the characters (for themselves), but only that of the narrator for the characters (and particularly for Ottilie) is borne out by the sentence’s simile (“hope flew like a star”), which indicates that the passing of hope (the fall from hope into hopelessness) occurs beyond the vision and awareness of the protagonists (“behind their heads”). There is no star in the diegesis of the scene, because it only appears in a simile representing the viewpoint of a narrator who knows the final outcome. When Benjamin speaks of the sentence as a dramatic configuration, this may refer to a fictionalized dramatic irony with respect to the action. The dramatic configuration gives itself away in the narrator’s affect of Trauer. He feels it as the affective side of hope in the moment when hope is gone and includes a sign of it in the narration itself.

Benjamin could have presented this insight more clearly, but instead he pushes it to the breaking point in his decision to identify it with das Ausdruckslose. If the “caesura” or “transport” or “counter-rhythmic interruption” (GS 1.1:181) takes the form of the inscription of an affective and narratorial standpoint, then the caesura, rather than being “expressionless,” to the contrary, would seem to cause the work to “express” both feeling and perspective. This is not wrong, but in Benjamin’s conception what makes the work “express” is not itself “expressive”—because it is a merely technical aspect of the representation. In the essay’s first part, he writes that
“technique” (Technik) is what allows the novelist to “hide” the “mythic meaning” as an “open secret” within the material content (GS 1.1:145–46). The truth content, on the other hand, lies within the mythic content and has no existence outside of it. Though the novelist has technical command of the material content, he has no privileged access to the ultimate meaning or truth content of the work. And even criticism, which by definition specializes in truth content, is mostly a negative function: the critic cannot give positive and definite meaning to truth content but can only block those who reduce truth content to an aspect of material content. Das Ausdrucklose is another name for the “critical force” (kritische Gewalt) at work in the work and in history, “which cannot separate appearance and essence within the work, but which prevents their confusion” (GS 1.1:181).

Elpis from the “Urworte” and hope in the Elective Affinities conceptually represent the interruption of a stagnant and pre-ethical world of myth, whereas das Ausdruckslose shifts this conception toward a theory of art. “The expressionless” refers to a technique—both deliberate and accidental—of inscribing an ambiguous transcendence into a work in a way that gives rise to its truth content by destroying its systematic unity and the unequivocal coherence of its meaning. This technique of “the expressionless” is nothing other than the literary device as such and par excellence. It is the moment of ambiguous self-transcendence within a work, which only seems to place its meaning under the control of a narrator or author. It is not possible, Benjamin indicates, to name the expressionless, its “counter-rhythm,” more precisely than as “something beyond the author that cuts his work off in mid-sentence” (etwas, [daß] jenseits des Dichters der Dichtung ins Wort fällt, GS 1.1:182). The constant emphasis of the idea of an interruption coming from the outside, the loss of control in and through the perfection of technical mastery, makes the finished work a fragment, but a fragment of the true world (ein Fragment der wahren Welt, GS 1.1:181). The work is not a lie, a fiction, or a deception, nor is “appearance” (Schein, GS 1.1:181), “conjunction,” or illusion (Beschwörung, GS 1.1:180)—nor is it an immediate manifestation of beauty (das Schöne, GS 1.1:180). Ruined by the interruption of the expressionless, the work takes on affinity with the world in its lack of coherent closure, its openness to the historical horizons of meaning, redemption, and critical force. In narratological terms, the expressionless would be both extra-diegetic, as its connection to the narrator of the Elective Affinities suggests, and extra-authorial: it is a part of the formal precondition of the “work-ness” of the work, that which makes it a work in the first place (and not a hallucination or an accumulation of raw material or a sheer manifestation of beauty or harmony). The expressionless is that which cuts off the work’s “excuses” (Ausflüchte) and freezes them (bannen, einhalten, erstarren) into a constellation analogous to a facial expression. The expressionless cannot make the work speak the truth, nor is it in any way equivalent to the author’s truth, but it is that which causes the work to betray its own truth as an unspoken and unspeakable revelation.
Instead of the star in the *Elective Affinities*, Benjamin could have modeled *das Ausdruckslose* on the excurses on the demonic from *Poetry and Truth*, as a comparable moment in which ambiguity is pushed to the point of producing a loss of authorial control. A sentence from the *Trauerspielbuch* most succinctly covers all such strategies: “The tragic is to the demonic as a paradox is to ambiguity [Das Tragische verhält sich zum Dämonischen wie das Paradoxon zur Zweideutigkeit]” (GS 1.1:288). The paradox stands in a special relation to the demonic in that it is uniquely able to bind demonic ambiguities by giving them a specific form without permanently banishing or resolving them. The “idea that it is impossible to lift the veil [of appearance in works]” (die Idee der Unenthüllbarkeit) is “the idea of art criticism” (GS 1.1:195). This idea of Unenthüllbarkeit, the inability to separate appearance from essence, corresponds to the undecidability and unresolvability of demonic ambiguities. Despite the “critical violence” of *das Ausdruckslose*, the demonic persists, and will continue to persist, in the primal “mythic” forms that dwell in the encrusted concepts of a mystified “modernity.” Thus Benjamin does not hope for a utopian solution to the “problem” of demonic ambiguities. There is nothing that can permanently banish them from the forms of life and society in which they inhere. Works of art, however, have a special status as works of paradox that represent a tendency ad absurdum in their depiction of and relation to these ambiguities. Rather than a continuation of mythic violence with different means, art’s representations are discontinuous with the regime of the demonic. This moment of discontinuity is, however, as Benjamin’s name for it clearly indicates, “not express,” “inexpressible,” but, like the seal in wax, is inscribed on top of or within the demonic continuum of history. This point is evident in one of many “unexpressed” moments in Benjamin’s own essay, his description of the “evening star,” Venus, in the final paragraph: “This most paradoxical and fleeting hope finally surfaces from the semblance of reconciliation, just as, at twilight, as the sun is extinguished, the evening star arises in the dusk [im Dämmer] and outlasts the night. Its shine, of course, is that of Venus” (GS 1.1:200). The image is Benjamin’s; it cannot be equated with the “falling star” from Goethe’s novel. Throughout the essay, he associates sundown and twilight (*Dämmerung*, GS 1.1:147) with the shady hybridity of “demonic ambiguity” in contrast with the sunlight (*Sonnenlicht*, GS 1.1:132) that only shines in *The Strange Neighbor-Children*. The pairing of Hope and Love (as Eros, not Pauline Agape) is thus made to stand outside of history and the philosophy of history. The “evening star” offsets and is superimposed against the “twilight” of its background. It represents an unambiguous constant that lasts through the night, a moral fidelity in the face of the ambiguities of fate, character, myth, and law. Twilight as such is always ambiguous: depending where it appears, it may usher in the night or prefigure a coming dawn. By contrast, Benjamin’s “philosophy of history”—if one wants to call it that—occurs against the backdrop of perpetual twilight.