The Chain of Things

Downing, Eric

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The Chain of Things: Divinatory Magic and the Practice of Reading in German Literature and Thought, 1850–1940.

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Near the end of his 1929 essay on surrealism, and in the context of serious discussions of the occult, Walter Benjamin declares that “the most passionate investigation of telepathic phenomenon will not teach us half as much about reading (which is an eminently telepathic phenomenon) as the profane illumination of reading will teach us about telepathic phenomena.” The suggested link here between practices of reading and the occult is a profound one, both historically and for Benjamin’s own time and work, and not just in terms of telepathy. Some of the earliest practices of reading were not of letters, words, or books, but of stars, entrails, and birds, and these practices had a significant impact on the way literature was read and understood in the ancient world. And the relations between such ancient magic and the reading of literature were still (or again) of crucial importance to the modernists of the early twentieth century, including Benjamin; and perhaps more surprisingly, they were just as important to the realists of the mid- to late

**Introduction**

“Wie verketten sich die Dinge?”

Near the end of his 1929 essay on surrealism, and in the context of serious discussions of the occult, Walter Benjamin declares that “the most passionate investigation of telepathic phenomenon will not teach us half as much about reading (which is an eminently telepathic phenomenon) as the profane illumination of reading will teach us about telepathic phenomena.” The suggested link here between practices of reading and the occult is a profound one, both historically and for Benjamin’s own time and work, and not just in terms of telepathy. Some of the earliest practices of reading were not of letters, words, or books, but of stars, entrails, and birds, and these practices had a significant impact on the way literature was read and understood in the ancient world. And the relations between such ancient magic and the reading of literature were still (or again) of crucial importance to the modernists of the early twentieth century, including Benjamin; and perhaps more surprisingly, they were just as important to the realists of the mid- to late
nineteenth century, precisely those artists usually imagined as most distant from such practices and concerns.

In this study I intend to explore some of the more salient connections between the practices of reading and magic during the realist and modernist periods in German literature and thought, with a particular focus on the magic most closely aligned with practices of divination. I concentrate on those aspects of magic most associated with divination for two reasons. First, because practices of divination seem historically most associated with the reading of literature, and this future- or fortune-telling dimension remains an underappreciated aspect of our own reading practice, one rarely considered in its impact on modern aesthetics, even of the most realist of works. But second, I focus on divination because it engages a closely related issue of particular importance to the period here addressed, namely, the issue of futurity itself, and primarily as it fared in the transition from realism to modernism during the long turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century: both the different ways that the future figured in the reading of texts during this period, and the evident (or apparently evident) fading of its force as a narrative determinant or article of historical faith at the same moment. Posing the problem of the future during this time as one of reading—not just of texts but of the world—invites inquiry not only into traditions of divination but also into the model of the world that supported them. And as we’ll see, this involves tracing out the genealogy and fate of a “sympathetic” world order that, in ancient and premodern times, allowed for future reading and that, in the realist and modernist periods, underwent significant transformations that accompanied the changing shape of reading, magic, and the future in German art and thought.

My investigation into these concerns proceeds in three basic stages. After this introduction, I engage in readings of three major authors situated at different critical moments along this time span: Gottfried Keller, writing near the beginning of so-called poetic realism as it emerges out of romanticism; Theodor Fontane, whose so-called social realism extends up to the late 1890s, and so to the very edge of modernism; and finally, Walter Benjamin, whose cultural studies fall firmly within the modernist period itself. Keller
presents us with a midcentury Bildungsroman, firmly grounded in a fairly traditional faith in temporal progress and development, and working toward a transformation of a “romantic” conception of both the human subject and the world into a realist one; Fontane offers Gesellschaftsromanen that come increasingly to lose faith in temporal progress, both narratively and historically, and so, too, to question realist aesthetics; and Benjamin provides inquiries into contemporary German culture at a moment when time itself has become convoluted, speculation into the future all but banned, realist conceptions of both character and world abandoned, and an ancient, primitive world newly and problematically reascendant. Not coincidentally, these same works also show the transformation—rather unique to the German tradition—of so-called Naturphilosophie into Lebensphilosophie, with a crucial dislocation during the realist period. As we’ll see, these changes to the understanding of human relations to the nonhuman world closely track the changing face of time and the future in both German literature and thought. But, as we’ll also see, through all these changes and throughout this period, magic and magic reading, with a special emphasis on divination, remain absolutely central forces and practices, securing the most crucial links between the governing notions of time, world, the “real,” and art.

This art itself will take different shapes in the different works, extending beyond just literature to encompass the art of realist painting in Keller, of social conversation in Fontane, and the art of reading per se in Benjamin. But in every case, magic and magic reading will remain center stage, both for characters within the texts and for us as readers of the texts.

This introduction also proceeds in three stages. After a few additional orienting points, it begins by drawing extensively on work by Derek Collins and Peter Struck to trace out some of the early history of magical and divinatory reading and how these come to inform—even determine—key aspects of reading literature in the Western tradition, from classical antiquity up through the early modern era and into the early nineteenth century. It then offers some general consideration of magic reading and the novel, with a focus on the mid- to late nineteenth-century tradition that eventually yields to
modernism. And it closes with a brief look at the changing shape of the “sympathetic” world order during the period covered by this study, an order that, I claim, undergirds understandings of both the world and art, and with them, of both magic and divination.

**Magic Reading**

I do not begin with a definition of magic any more than with one of literature, but I will set down some of the basic features shared by magic and divination, particularly those that most suggest the connection with reading per se. Most obviously, both magic and divination represent ancient discourses, systems, even theories of representation and signification that run alongside—and not only alongside—those of both ordinary language and literature. Moreover, their discourses of signification always share two related features: they are consistently conceived as ancillary, parasitic, or simply attendant upon other more ordinary systems of signification, producing meanings in excess of those established by more normal semantic systems; and as part of this, both magic and divination point to or posit another hidden world beyond the apparent one, a world whose signs require special interpretation or manipulation in order to manifest themselves in this one.

While these two features overlap and complement each other, they also have different implications for my investigation. The fact that magic and divination present autonomous but never exclusive systems of meaning—such that, for example, even in primitive cultures magic readings of the world do not preclude other, more scientific or rational modes—this reminds us that, for all its ineliminable uniqueness (it will never not be there), magic reading always takes place in the context of other, equally viable and active reading practices, and is even always in complex, interactive, dependent relation with them.

The second feature, the posited hidden other world in need of interpretation for access to its secrets, is one of the most ticklish aspects of magic and divinatory readings. It is clearly one of the reasons for their perpetual status, even in ancient times, as
suspect—for it must be said that, for all that magic is never not there and is impossible to dismiss, it is also always open to dismissal, just because it deals with what is not there. The source of its power is also that of its fragility. This feature is of course shared by other ancient discourses, including medicine, whose early diagnostic procedures were clearly allied with both magic and divination, and like them dealt with an often mystified world of hidden causes: coming out of the nineteenth century and into our own present day, both “alternative” medical practices such as homeopathy and psychoanalysis also posit such unseen causal worlds, and so, too, invite their questioning. In the case of literature, even when approached not from a psychoanalytic perspective but from the driest of narratological vantages, the existence of this hidden other world and its agency (its well-nigh divine authority and intentions) is more readily, even universally granted. It is what in this study is called its metatextual dimension.

For all its general acceptance, considering this metatextual aspect of literary discourse in terms of both magic and divination casts its other world in a less familiar light, and helps account for why literature remains what Michel Foucault called one of the last retreats and occasions for magic in the modern world. In the case of magic, this hidden world is regularly imagined to be peopled not only by divine (possibly demonic) authorities, but also by the dead, such as always to entail a certain commerce or communication with those dead. In the case of divination, this other world is imagined as always already prescribed, such as always to entail a certain traffic with a past that, in the reader’s present, is still in the future tense. In both cases, this hidden other world brings with it a temporal dimension that asserts itself more or less autonomously from the everyday objective realm and its time experience: the function of reading and interpretation is to access that other time experience and make it active in the present—which is to say, the otherness of this hidden world is in important ways a temporal one. Stephen Greenblatt is not alone in recognizing our own reading experience as still moved by a desire to speak with the dead, a temporal experience of pastness that accompanies independently our sequential reading practices: I wish to stress how reading the
future, what Peter Brooks calls the promises and annunciations of reading, is equally part of this experience.6

Two additional features common to magic and divination with suggestive force for thinking about reading per se can be set out here at the outset. First, both begin in a sense by acting upon the wishes or responding to a demand of the audience or interpreter, who in turn expects to be affected, indeed benefited, by the response.7 This could be called the hermeneutic dimension of magic (the posing of a question, the awaiting a reply), except that it is also something more, and that is what makes it magic. In every case, a self and its future are at stake, and are invested in the procedure in a way that exceeds the subject/object relation—not least because what is sought in or asked of the engaged object or event is intrinsic to the self. This is perhaps more obviously true of divination but also holds for magic: in both cases, reading is predicated on what the anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and the psychologist C. G. Jung would call mystical participation, which includes an identification with the object and the hidden dimension that endows it with force and makes it a sign.8 This feature is clearly allied with Walter Benjamin’s notion of the mimetic faculty (his idea that we are dislocated [entstellt] by our participation in everything around us), as well as Roland Barthes’s Lacanian model of fragmenting imaginary reading (his “That’s me!”).9 But the main points for our beginning purposes are these: magic’s signification is inseparable from identification, which in turn is deeply invested in divining the self; and magic reading is an occasional reading, responding to a particular, even if unformulated, initiating wish or demand on the part of its audience or interpreter. The first point requires that there always be a porous boundary between subjects and their object world, a dispersed sense of participation in their reading practices; the second that, as Benjamin always insisted, the future, fortune seeking of reading remain indissolubly bound to both a special moment and an idea of happiness (Glück in all its senses).10

The second additional feature of both magic and divination to be stressed here at the outset is how both are steeped in a reading logic based on analogy and similarity, a logic that is key to understanding their peculiar modes of both signification and identificatory
participation. Adumbrated in E. B. Tylor’s *The Origins of Culture*, James G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* most famously identified this logic with what Frazer called *sympathetic* magic, and he distinguished between two types of its associational thought: homeopathic or imitative logic, based on the association of ideas through resemblance; and contagious logic, based on the association of ideas and objects through contact or contiguity. Each of these terms will need elaboration: “sympathy” has quite specific connotations within the historical tradition I intend to trace out, connotations that ground both the significatory and the identificatory practices of Western magic reading. And “homeopathic” and “contagious” already suggested to Roman Jakobson his own Saussurian distinctions between the metaphorical and metonymical axes of language as well as Freud’s between condensation and displacement, distinctions that have come deeply to inform both literary and psychoanalytical readings.

As noted, more anon, but it is already worth mentioning how, when thinking about magic reading, these two types of magical thought—the imitative and the contiguous—are just as likely to be contrasted as combined, with the one suggesting the meaning created via mimesis (resemblance) and the other that more properly created via relation (*Beziehung* or *Verhältnis*). Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno focused on the magic of the former, that of mimesis; I will mostly be concentrating on the latter, on relation and what Samuel Coleridge called the connective powers of our understanding. Tylor defined magic as “the mistaking of an ideal connexion for a real one, the confusion of ineffective analogy with effective cause”: one of the implicit goals of this study is to question the distinction in his first clause, and to reimagine the non-causal effect in his second.

One final preliminary point. One of the major distinctions between magic and divination is that while the latter purports only to read the presented signs, and so to anticipate the future in a more or less passive way, the former actively achieves its future effect (and fortune). As valid as this distinction sometimes is, it is also to be contested, especially in the specific context of reading: another goal of this study and its exploration of magic reading will in fact
be to emphasize the active performative dimension and force of such divinatory reading, especially with respect to futurity.\(^{15}\)

**Divination in the Ancient World**

In Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*, when Prometheus enumerates the many crafts he contrived for mortals, chief among these are the gifts of seer craft (*mantikē*), and chief among these are three arts of divinatory reading: of entrails, birds, and chance words and coincidences (*kledonomancy*).\(^{16}\) Of these, entrail reading (*extispicy*) seems to have been the most established in the ancient world, in terms of both its cultural standing and its interpretive procedures: unlike many other forms of divinatory reading, it seems always to have been practiced by a trained professional.\(^{17}\) As Collins explains, this reader would have been guided by two factors: by fixed points of reference with “objective” meaning on the entrails themselves, such as we see on the many so-called model livers that survive from antiquity (but also including size, shape, color, and smoothness); and by tacit signals and contextual connections between these points and the moment of the interpretation itself that help to establish an overall meaning.\(^{18}\) That is, entrail reading was both rule-bound by established, systematized norms and criteria, and open to association, individualized and responsive to the particular occasion and reader.

Although several internal organs were accepted sites for divinatory reading, Collins notes that the liver was the privileged one among the Greeks and Romans, primarily because it was considered the locus of emotions (especially desire, fear, anger, and anxiety), in complex relation to the faculties of reason. The primary such relation was that it was independent of intellect, the same reason animal livers were used, not human: liver reading was thought to concentrate on what we would call the nonrational, even animalistic realm, as the conveyor of a truth that could run counter to rational deliberation, such as the expert judgment of a military adviser to proceed with a campaign.\(^{19}\) Its magic reading was aimed at what we could call the unconscious and its truth, its
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subtext—but an unconscious that was not so much (or only) part of the human as it was of the natural world, or rather, of the world humans shared with nature.

A closely related reason for the practice of extispicy was that it was through the liver, not the intellect, that the gods were thought to communicate with men—to some extent, precisely because, as the seat of the emotions, it was not subject to the interference of the intellect, of the registered intents and signified responses of human consciousness. This is the same reason why animal, not human, livers were employed: since animals themselves have no future consciousness—and especially no anticipatory response to impending death or danger—their own conscious expectations would not mark livers in ways that might be mistaken for divine signs. This yields something of a double paradox for this form of reading, in which intellection interferes with the desired intelligence, and future knowing with knowing the future. In any case, the liver was chosen as the site for divinatory reading because it was the seat both of subrational emotions and of the superrational divine, which is to say, of signs produced not by the conscious subject but by some “other” authority—an authority or force both residual in natural things and capable of divinely communicating through things.

The principle by which the gods were thought to communicate through the signs of the liver was that of analogy, grounded in the ancient belief in the connections between the microcosmic and macrocosmic realms and mediated by the force that Frazer, and more importantly the Stoics and Neoplatonists, came to call sympatheia, a sense of participation in a common logos that connects all parts of nature by contact and likeness. For example, in the case of the so-called Piacenza model liver, its outer edge was divided into sixteen parts, each with the name of a divinity inscribed on it; these corresponded to the sixteen regions of the Etruscan sky, such that the liver mapped the heavens’ astrology in microcosm. The mantis would hold the liver up to the sky, properly oriented, and then read the intentions of the gods by matching up regions of the heavens (linked to the gods) and organ-text (joined to the sky), and then matching these in turn to the boding events of the human
world—with this last step in particular opening space for improvisation and selection (as to what counts as similar to what). In this way, the liver played a key role in bridging between cosmic and human affairs through a linked chain of analogies whose connections were secured by a hidden, unified world made manifest by corresponding likenesses. Crucially, this chain includes elements both seen and unseen in its drawing of the relations between the hidden divine realm and the realm of signs, whether astrologic or organic, and between the realm of signs and the hidden human future.

What we see in the example of extispicy, then, is that the most intimate connection to the other world, the most sure access to its secret truth and fate, is by reading the analogies that sign themselves in things (and I should add, animate things) below, beyond, or aside from ordinary perceptions and rational judgments, purposely bypassing the most exclusively human dimension of the world; but also that the primary guide for reading, and hence for drawing analogies, is the habit of making micro/macro connections, seeking the similarity between the present self and outside world. Both the exclusion and inclusion of the human are equally key components in the animation of the liver that transforms it into a sign (which is to say, text); both are equally key in charging the sign with its future—indeed, with the future that makes it a sign and underwrites its reading.

Collins shows that reading the birds, what Hesiod called ornithas krinōn, seems likewise to have operated according to a principle of analogy that linked together things (and again, animate things), the divine, and the human in a complex system of mutual mappings. Unlike extispicy, it does not appear to have been limited to specially appointed practitioners—Odysseus or Helen is as qualified as Kalchas or Theoklymenos to make a reading—or to have had as established rules: augury seems to have brought divination more broadly into the everyday activity and experience of the shared world, no longer the exclusive practice of a marked-off expert. As a result, it was open to not only more readers but more readings as well, with a corresponding increase in the polysemy of its signs and possibly contested status of its conclusions, even apart from the contest with other deliberative modes.
The procedure basically began with the projection of an aporetic occasion—one that stymied simple intellect or experience but with clear consequences for future fortune—out of the reader's human world onto the essentially chance activity of fowl. The projection would be grounded on conditions of analogy and coincidence that transformed the birds into signs or symbols: the assumption was that the projection (or dislocation) onto the unwilled, and so uninfluenced, activity of the birds could reveal a clearer and more meaningful picture of the present human predicament than could be directly perceived; as with the detour through the animal liver, it was its nonhuman, indeed animal, identity that made it serve as a sign, indeed as an animate sign and of the human. Again, there was also the belief that these animal signs, because free of human intention, were privileged conduits for the communication of another, invisible realm of divine will and authority, which is also what transformed them into signs: their double animation, by nature and the divine, would be conveyed by their movement. So as in the case of extispicy, the sign quality—which is to say, the reading—in augury proves a complex interaction between three realms: that of things (or texts); that of humans (or readers); and that of the divine (or authorial intent), with the animation of those signs derived from all three (inherent, projected, and communicated), but again in such a way that the distinctly human realm was both present and occluded from the equation (or perhaps better: dislocated and dispersed).

Even more, the reading of signs in augury—and the same would hold for extispicy—was an equally complex interaction between three different times: between an event that had already happened and been recorded or experienced, that is, the omen to be read, always considered as a sui generis, particular occasion; the undecided present of the reader's condition, which every bit as much as the omen was a particular occasion in need of reading; and the future fortune, what was being augured forth by the past event to resolve the present one, and what was ostensibly actually being read. It is, after all, this dimension that determines that signification is a form not only of identification (through sympathy and analogy), but also of divination (and that divination is a reading of
not only the divine but also what is to come), and as such intricately temporal—indeed that identification is itself a form of divination, and as such itself temporal. As Cicero insists in his De divinatione (our single most comprehensive ancient source), bird activity on its own and while it is happening is not a portent or sign, but only becomes so once it has happened and is made “like” some later (present) moment, a moment that transforms that past thing into a present sign, even as that sign (from the past) then functions to transform—which is to say, to read—the present in light of its signified future. Magic, divinatory reading is thus staged at once between three realms and three times both in its production and reception of signs, and in its displacements and investments of the subject.

The occasionality of divinatory reading, whether of birds or livers, is clearly conditioned by both these dimensions. In responding to a particular constellation of linked demands and sign-things, this form of reading depends on the successful and necessarily somewhat improvised alignment of both the different realms and the different times, and both in the one present instance of its immediate reading and then in the test of subsequent moments of future experience. In the first case, its magic is always to a large extent performative, its reading a mode of action and intimately bound to the immediate moment—but crucially a performance, action, and occasion heavy with, and kept empty by, a deferred futurity. In the second, that occasional reading exposes itself to the contingency of its own temporality, which can either fulfill it or, even without negating the original reading, belatedly expose the omen to the consequences of its own polysemy. In both cases, its reading takes place in a realm of exceptional power and peril, far beyond those of ordinary time- and place-bound experience, or for that matter far beyond that of ordinary deliberative or causal thought.

The inclusion of divinatory reading—and especially of augury—within ancient literature as a self-reflexive model for the reading of poetic texts themselves happens very early, and is already fully evident in Homer and the tragedians, as well as (a bit later) Virgil: we have the examples of Kalchas in the Iliad, Helen, Halitherses, and Theoklymenos in the Odyssey, Kalchas again in the Agamemnon,
all reading bird signs; and then of dreams in the *Elektra*, oracles in *Oedipus Tyrannos*, and all manner of omens in the *Aeneid*, especially in Book 7—the list could easily be extended. On the one hand, this early inclusion emphasizes the parallel between the modes of reading in these two different realms: divination is from early on explicitly a part of the literary experience. On the other hand, the actual form of its inclusion also suggests that the parallel is never exclusive, that divinatory readings have to compete with other more “normal” and equally viable modes of reading; and also that they are not always successful. But in either case, the models of divinatory reading in the ancient texts do suggest to their audience particular modes of literary reading of the text itself. They suggest, for example, a mode of reading that is future driven, aimed at the predictive quality of present signs; one that looks elsewhere than at the intentions and expectations of the human characters for its most trusted clues; one that looks to similarity or analogy as a not quite causal but still transformative force that can override ordinary logic; one that is dependent on the coincidence of the occasion and the produced or recognized sign; and finally, a mode of reading that is always at risk, always open to dismissal or counter-readings, both concurrent and subsequent. Even as the depiction of this mode of reading alerts its audience to the personal and projective dimension of all reading, it leads it to turn away from the purely (and fallible) human dimension of the text in its search for signs; even as it teaches readers to look for signs of future fortune in external things, to depend on those sign-things, it also leads them to recognize the unreliability of signs themselves.

The last form of ancient divinatory reading underscored by Aeschylus’s Prometheus focuses on the reading of chance words and coincidences, so-called kledonomancy; and although it seems to have been the least rule-bound, the least requiring of specialized training, it seems also to have been the mode that ends up being the most productive as a model for reading literature—perhaps because it is also in many ways a model for divinatory reading itself. From earliest times, divination placed great weight on seemingly chance meetings, sounds, gestures, or utterances, either singly or in some kind of combination. Indeed, there was a special word for these
things, words, or events happened upon: they were called *symbola*,
the objects of a chance meeting. The “symbolic” chance behind
such instances was in a sense, and as we have come to expect from
our previous examples, double. First, and I’ll use the example of
words, the word spoken or overheard needed to coincide with the
particular occasion of the concerned subject, an occasion that in-
troduced a new context for interpreting the word, a context that in
some sense distorted, overlooked, or simply added to the ordinary
meaning context of that word: and it was this coincidence—the
joining of that with this—that made it a sign, or rather a particular
kind of sign: a symbol. Second, just because of the word’s status
as a coincidence, as occurring over and above the ordinary causality
of its context, it was thought to be a vehicle for divine communi-
cation, for the manifestation of a super-rational, super-intentional
meaning in the rational, intentional word: to be a sign, a symbol
linking the divine and the everyday.

A famous example of this, cited by Struck from Pseudo-Plutarch
in his *Life of Homer*, comes in Book 20 of the *Odyssey*, when
Odysseus overhears the first servant he chanced to meet that morn-
ing uttering a general curse against the suitors, and he reads this
as a sign of divine support, even guarantee, for his planned attack
against them later that day. It is, significantly, a sign that only
he can read, one that is ancillary to or over and above the normal
semantic meaning of the servant’s words, whose ordinary meaning
continues to function; and the reason Odysseus can read it is that
it coincides with (is like, echoes, is in sympathy and contact with)
his moment, his need, his occasion: the occasionality of this read-
ing is an aspect of his participatory identification, which in turn
makes the sign a divination (for him). It is this added occasion of
Odysseus’s personal need and fortune that dislodges the overheard
word from its immediate embedded context and intent; and it is in
turn this dislodging, the opening up of a nonintentional, nonim-
mediate space, that creates the room for divine communication.
This mode of divinatory reading has its later descendants not only
in the practice of Freudian slips, but also in *biblicae sortes*, the
chance readings of biblical passages such as Augustine’s conversion
experience made famous—both forms of magic reading, the latter directly so.36

One consequence of this mode of divinatory reading that I want to call special attention to is how it comes to treat words as autonomous things, even animate things, like livers and birds. In availing itself of the “natural” sign, taking it out of its given context and adding to its inherent meaning, this magic form of reading turns language on the one hand into a surface for subject projection, and on the other into a vessel for divine projection, in both cases animating it with a life not strictly its own without depriving it of the life that is its own: a peculiarly oscillating process of thingification and animation that is inseparable from its magical status. This treating of utterances and words as autonomous, animate things exactly like livers or birds—which are themselves treated as utterances or words—is, we’ll see, something that carries over into written language, where words can decompose into the materiality or activity of their letters, and where letters can become charged with autonomous significance in excess even of the words in which they find themselves. But more anon.

Interestingly, even as in Homer’s poem Odysseus extracts (or extends) the words of the servant from their original context and applies them instead to his personal need, so in the ancient world there developed a tradition of extracting Homer’s words from the poem itself and applying them to new “outside” contexts, new occasions, in ways that were likewise considered to have certain magic, divine effects. At its simplest, this practice could resemble that in the famous story of Empedokles, who chanted the lines from Book 4 of the Odyssey describing Helen’s administration of nepenthes as a way of soothing (or more literally, charming) an enraged young man in his audience.37 But as Collins has shown, the use of Homeric lines as magic charms extended far beyond this, loosening the words from their simple place and function in the poem to apply to some new extra-textual occasion (be it medicinal, erotic, or vengeful) through the same principles of analogy and co-incidence operant for characters in the poem itself.38 The sympathy or similarity of the Homeric verse with the “real-world” occasion
magically expanded the meaning and force of the verse far beyond its represented realm—precisely because *sympatheia* was felt to be an active organizing principle behind all things, poetic works and world alike.

This truly magic tradition of reading Homer’s (and not only Homer’s) verses outside of literature also became folded back into literary reading itself. Readers accustomed to the extraliterary magic reading of Homeric verses would apply this same mode of reading back into the poems themselves, imagining that certain lines effective outside the poem had magical (esoteric) connotations in the poem as well, over and above their immediate meaning. But traditions of magic and divination also came more directly and equally decisively to inform the reading of Homer (and not only Homer) with the Neoplatonists and their allegorical or, more properly, “symbolic” readings of ancient texts.

As Struck has shown, the Neoplatonists were critically instrumental in transforming the traditions of divinatory magic into formal strategies for the reading of literary texts, especially those of Homer: and they did so in part by first formalizing the associational schemata of magical *sympatheia*. In the works of Iamblichus and Proclus (echoing Greek magical papyri), specific chains or *seirai* of like things were identified by which the sympathetic force of the divine emanated and communicated itself throughout nature, linking, to give just one example, the divine One with the goddess Athena, and then through her with the Platonic Form of the moon, with the moon itself, with bulls, with vegetation, with silver, with moonstones, and so on. These celestial bodies, animals, plants, minerals, and stones thus all became signs in an eminently readable even if riddling world-text: all were considered *symbola* animated with and joining up with the divine in ways that cut across ordinary classificatory systems, in ways largely hidden and only hinted at by similarities. Crucially, these *seirai* linked not only visible material things but also, with them, invisible immaterial entities such as Platonic Forms, souls, and, most importantly for us, words as well, which were considered yet another and in some ways the last link in the sympathetic chain, participant in the same ontology as all things visible and invisible, and so, too, partaking of the same
associational play that linked things according to sympathetic resemblances quite apart from or alongside their normal representational or semantic function.

The Neoplatonic systematization of the associational schemata of magical *sympatheia* (adumbrated by the Stoics) also transformed the occasional, individual nature of such magic reading—transformed, but not eliminated. For although the formalized chains would seem to limit the free play of associational thought, these chains were also still hidden, open, and endless; they still required individual unriddling in the form of collection and decipherment by the inquiring reader (the double sense of both *legere* and *lesen*); and this reader still operated not on the basis of his strictly rational faculties, which were more or less useless in this context, nor on that of a codex that was perhaps posited but nonexistent, but rather on that of his own sympathetic participation, his own microcosmic self as a crucial link in the chain—or more accurately perhaps, on the basis of the active suggestiveness of the *symbola* themselves, to which the individual needed sympathetically to respond. But even more, the occasionality of the reading was preserved by the ritual context within which such symbolic magic took place, those rituals originally associated with the theurgy practiced by Neoplatonists. Although not perhaps motivated by the more narrow kinds of immediate needs or demands associated with extispicy, augury, or kledonomancy, theurgy still began with a demand on the part of the human inquirer, and still aimed at divining the future. As Struck describes it, the “reader” would approach a statue of the god—which was not just a representation of the god, but rather through the chain of sympathetic linkages via resemblances was actually animated, even inhabited, by the god—and insert into specified slots tokens, *symbola*, of a sympathetic material (e.g., moonstone for Athena) and inscribed with appropriate signs or “characters”: the insertion would complete the “symbolic” sympathetic connection, and the divine would communicate the future to the human subject through the chain of signs.41

Neoplatonic readings of literature reproduced in their versions of texts the same basic conditions that were operant in their version of the natural world and their theurgic rituals.42 Again, there
were chains, *seirai*, that stretched from the divine One through various links, including the divine Homer, down through various realms of increasingly material signification, and eventually into the actual words of Homer’s poems, and through those words connecting the reader back up the chain to that divine One—the model for this chain being that described by Plato himself in the *Ion.*\(^{43}\)

Crucially, the words or passages that were signed by this hidden order of meaning, the “seeds” scattered throughout the material and obvious world of the epic and its language, were precisely those that seemed to run counter to the normative logic of the rest of the poem. Without denying or negating the surface sense of such words and passages, the Neoplatonists identified them—exactly like specific plants, animals, or stones—as *symbola*, animated with and joining up with the divine in ways that defied the ordinary di-egetic or mimetic dimension of the text, and signifying their meaning in mostly hidden ways only reached via sympathetic analogical thought that could follow up and along the chain of similarities. It is through the Neoplatonists that the more modern notion of the literary “symbol” comes down to us, as well as the practice of what becomes known not as symbolic but rather allegorical reading; a practice originally as fully steeped in magic and divination as extispicy and augury, and yielding much the same effect as the reinsertion of Homeric charms into the reading of the epics themselves.

**Novel Divinations**

According to Foucault in *The Order of Things*, this magic reading of the world and texts persists in the Western tradition up through the seventeenth century, when, he claims, a major epistemic shift occurs that henceforth dominates and displaces it.\(^{44}\) The world he describes before that moment is, however, one instantly recognized as extending the genealogy we’ve traced, especially in its Neoplatonic configuration—something we see in Benjamin’s writings on the baroque as well. Magic, Foucault says, was still a required *form* in the early modern era, inherent in the very way of knowing, prescribing a divinatory way of reading both the world and texts,
organized by the principles of sympathy, analogy, likeness, and contiguity (Benjamin calls it allegory); with chains of similitude connecting both the visible and the invisible forms of the world, and linking the microcosm of the reader with the macrocosm of objects and the hidden world behind them, the world that gave them meaning. Foucault speaks of the secret “signatures” of things that pointed via similitudes—or rather, chains of similitudes—to a meaning beyond their immediate being, to the “something else” that made all the world and texts at once both readable and riddling, and made so by the very resemblances the world endlessly suggested. Most importantly for us, he describes this divinatory reading as still future driven, “wholly intent on what it will have said,” as motivated by what he calls the “promise of reading”: the promise that the desired revelation of the future (what Benjamin calls fate) will come through reading.

Of course, Foucault also claims that magic reading eventually came to an end with this period, that there emerged soon after “a new arrangement in which we are still caught,” which changed forever our understanding of both things in the world and their relation to language, such that there is now, for us, nothing that recalls that earlier way—nothing, says Foucault, except literature. But that claim is easily contested, or at least qualified, and perhaps especially in the German context. As Pierre Hadot shows, the Neoplatonist worldview continued to exert a profound influence on the German romantics at the end of the eighteenth century, perhaps especially in the form of Novalis’s “magic idealism” and Friedrich Schelling’s Naturphilosophie, about which we’ll have more to say in the following section. And as Benjamin shows, drawing on his own Neoplatonist and romantic influences, magic and magic reading again played a major role a century later in the modernist period, and again in ways not restricted to literature. But as stated at the outset, magic reading and the world that supports it also persist in the intervening mid- to late nineteenth century, during the realist period, in which Foucault’s “new arrangement” would seem most fully and incontestably to have arrived—and not yet departed.

In the next section of this introduction I will consider some of the extraliterary conditions supporting magic and divinatory
reading during the realist period; but before that I’d like to sketch out some of the most general ways that magic reading figures specifically in its literature, the one area Foucault himself allows as still embedded in the older, magical mode of thinking and being. The paradox, of course, is that the literature at stake here is (and self-identifies as) “realist,” in ways that would seem to exclude such magic. But it is just that assumption that needs questioning; and somewhat ironically, this requires questioning both some Foucauldian critics and Benjamin. For these two hugely influential scholars of early modern aesthetics also helped define realism in ways that exclude the earlier tradition they themselves helped make visible, and this in spite of Foucault’s own caveat and Benjamin’s studies of nineteenth-century allegory. I wish to show how it still persists.

Perhaps the most telling place for the continued functioning of magic reading in the new literary order is in the relations therein between objects and people—which is to say, in how objects can and should be read as signs of the human world and, even more, as signs communicating authorial truth about the human world and, as part of that, offering intimations, indeed promises, of future fortune. Speaking of realist art in a slightly different context, Roland Barthes describes how “objects are accepted inducers of associations . . . or, in a more obscure way, are veritable symbols,” adding, “Objects no longer perhaps possess a power, but they certainly possess meanings.” But of course, in literature at least, meaning can be a power, transforming things into signs, and signs into forces affecting human lives and future fates.

These relations and forces are, I believe, especially evident in novels, not least because of their temporal extensivity and usual depth of material settings; and they are even especially so in realist novels of the mid-nineteenth century, with their heavy investment in objects and collections, in hidden authors who communicate only from behind the represented world, and in causal, sequential, end-driven plots. In her seminal study, How Novels Think, Nancy Armstrong explores some of these relations, focusing on how objects function to convey meaning about the human in novels of this period. Her claim, however—an exemplary one—is that realist fiction aims at surmounting the magical thinking that attributes
excess meaning and mysterious power to things beyond ourselves, as an essential part of the novels’ training the given subject to assume a self-contained individuality limited to the norms of rational bourgeois society. The argument clearly elaborates on Foucault’s model for the “new arrangement” in which modern subjects are caught, extending it into the one area Foucault himself described as still exempt; and it just as clearly echoes a Benjaminian position that also opposes novel reading to earlier, more magical ones, and equates it instead with an ideal of bourgeois rationality.  

There is considerable truth to this argument, and it plays an important part in my own. But it also needs to be balanced by that of Roman Jakobson, who reminds us how realist novels produce their meaning by establishing metonymical chains that necessarily link the protagonist to the nonhuman world of objects, animals, and so on (and on). To paraphrase Jakobson’s own example, the novel will link its protagonist’s emotion to the impatience of his horse, the swaying of nearby trees, and the sudden flight of a bird on the occasion of his anxious approach to the closed door of his future fortune. In large part, this is how realist novels teach us to read as part and parcel of their thingification of the world: they teach us to look for meaning in the signs of resemblance and sympathy between the human and the nonhuman world, and especially to regard the perceived coincidences and correspondences that cannot be attributed to human intention as privileged conduits for authorial communication. And this is especially the case in the absence of direct authorial communication that becomes ever more prevalent in nineteenth-century fiction. As Barthes says, the authorial meaning “somehow ‘emerges’ from all these signifying units [i.e., things] which are nonetheless ‘captured’ as though the scene were immediate and spontaneous, that is to say, without signification.”

A hidden world of shaping forces manifests itself in the disparate objects of the narrative world: the reader’s task is to divine the links binding them together and leading back to authorial intent. Realist novels might seem to militate against magic reading in their characters, and to advocate for more rational, purely “human” modes of reckoning. But the very nature of novel reading brings the magic back.
A few especially “magical” things happen in the process. First, despite any emphasis on the formation of individualized subjects as the core mission of the bourgeois novel, the very dependence of realist fiction on metonymical chains—which is to say, on the principle of contiguity—brings with it what Armstrong, following Adam Smith, calls “contagion” and Benjamin “mimetic blending,” and what Collins, following Lévy-Bruhl, calls “distributed or fractal personhood,” on which the very notion of contagious magic depends. This latter is the notion that “a person’s possessions or body parts can be distributed throughout his environment, and that in some sense these accoutrements and parts can be thought of as replicating him. Magic capitalizes upon the belief that acting on the distributed parts will still affect the whole. The sympathetic relation guarantees that the part of the person being acted upon magically stands for the whole person and that this connection holds true at a distance in time and space.” Just so, I’d say, the typical realist novel that can condemn the protagonist to the fate of his snuffbox, or better, that can allow the reader to anticipate the fate of the character by the sympathetic reading of his snuffbox, and far more accurately than characters can anticipate their own fate. And crucially, the very process of reading the novel—which Foucault would call disciplining—requires the reader to participate in the distribution of his or her own person throughout the text, to experience the contiguous magic in his own practice: to become, as it were, part of the thingified fictional world, and not just its human dimension. Insofar as the disciplining work of individuation is linked to the process of reading, it is linked to a practice that by its nature also dissolves such individuation and undoes such work.

The second magical dimension to the reading of even realist novels concerns the experience of time. The narrative arc of realist fiction is one often described as ineluctably aimed at the progressive development of an individual fitted to its social context, an arc familiar to the German world as the teleological trajectory of Bildung. Temporality becomes sequence, sequence consequence, and the causal chain one with a final, this-worldly goal. This rather Foucauldian position is closely linked with that of Benjamin in “The Storyteller,” who adds the alignment of the novel with a specific
notion of unfolding, progressive history: both echo the assumption that novels enforce a linear notion not only of character but also of reading, quite different from the selective excisions characteristic of Augustine’s Bible reading or Foucault’s—or Benjamin’s—premodern world. The assumption is that this linearity (and its durée, its unbreachable continuum) reinforces a rationalized, disenchanched mode of charting both the world and personhood.

But these assumptions bear rethinking on several fronts. To begin, the very idea of human time as a causal chain of events leading to a prescribed end-point is every bit as magical as it is realist—and as always, the presence of a realist explanation of an event does not rule out a magical one. As Peter Brooks argues, this magic is accentuated by the particular way novelistic texts engage in “binding” actions and events, working to “allow us to bind one textual moment to another in terms of similarity or substitution rather than mere contiguity”: one event is bound to another not so much (or not only) in terms of crude cause and effect, but in terms of successive likeness and repetition—and it is important to remember how “binding” is a magical term well before it becomes either a psychoanalytical or literary one. Which is to say, realist texts temporalize the seirai of ancient magic, but do not eliminate them: and in so doing they accentuate rather than dispose of the magical dimension of the literary world, especially in their notion of sequence as consequence.

Second, the fact that realist fiction is as a rule always retrospective, and in a highly intentional way, reinforces the magic to its narrative world and reading—indeed, this might be its most basic inheritance from ancient epic. Like epic poems, novels invite us to read each always already past event, thing, or sign as an omen of an already scripted even if still unknown future; and in this way they radically enforce a practice of divinatory reading, of parsing each past or present moment for its excess future meaning, for its resemblance to the end point that, while unknown, is still known to be set. As again Brooks argues, this mode of reading radically disrupts the strictly linear temporality of the novel, and not least because it is always directed beyond the events themselves and toward a hidden world of authorial intention that, however guardedly, is always
there, in silent excess of the real and rational.\textsuperscript{59} Retrospection transforms intentionality into temporality, and in such a way that reading becomes at once a traffic with the dead (the voice from beyond the end) and the future (the voice that knows the end), a traffic that runs alongside but also above the simple following of the plot. The opening up of this other temporal dimension, in which readers are especially trained to look for significance, keeps reading magical, quite apart from the magical experience of bound sequence in the time world of the story itself. And that it is the reader’s role to follow the prescribed rituals that bring that hidden world of the author down and to bear on the human world of the novel’s characters—this keeps his own role thoroughly magical as well.

One last point regarding the magic reading of realist novels, on the occasionality of such reading. This is an aspect of magic reading that much traditional reader theory overlooks—systematically overlooks, as it constructs a model of reading that is reproducible, universalized, and normalized, very much in imitation of its model of realist poetics. But the occasion is there, along with its identificatory participation. Foucauldian readings hint at some of this in their insistence that realist fiction is targeted toward the disciplining of the reading subject and not just the represented one, that the reader’s self is at stake, is indeed required to be at stake: in this, reading realist fiction still fulfills much the same role of spiritual exercise as Proclus or Augustine suggest. Benjamin pushes the point even further in “The Storyteller” by saying that novel readers are drawn to the certainty of significance that novels, via their certain endings, are able to give to a life, a subject: the novel reader is conceived as approaching the work with a present need or demand, projects that need onto the past signs of the given text, and tries to divine his own future fortune out of that of the work’s protagonist. The divinatory practices that are established for reading the fortune of those within the text also model (or copy—either way) the divinatory practice in effect for reading the self’s fortune through the text: the novel serves the reader as omen, with the temporal structure that adheres to all omens, and with all the possibilities for either confirmation or disappointment, ambiguity or even vacuousness, that have always held for divination.
But while both Foucauldian critics and Benjamin point to the reader’s identificatory participation, and Benjamin in particular to its divinatory aspect (Ahnung), the primary focus of both on the end point tends to overlook another magic aspect of the practice and occasion of the reading itself. This is Roland Barthes’s point about the very process of reading as grounded in a fragmenting imaginary identification: insofar as it is the reader’s own individual fate, his own person that is being put in and out of the text, then the points of entry need to be those particular moments where the text coincidentally signs him, and just him: where the text links his (microcosmic) world and person via a chain of resemblances to its narrative cosmos, and even more, where this coincidental signing of the reader seems also to signal authorial intent, not least by the ability of the reader to find the sign confirmed in the future events of the text.\footnote{The reader’s taking of such signs as signs, while rule bound, will nonetheless be somewhat arbitrary and selective, which is to say, occasional, because inevitably based on the coincidence with his immediate situation: indeed, one might say such signs will only, magically, appear as signs to him. Moreover—and this is D. A. Miller’s brilliant revision of Benjamin on novel reading—because this aspect of reading always involves a process of vertical participatory integration, linking the events of the novel’s world with those of the reader’s life, it will always fragment the text, draw it out of its immediate narrative context, and contemplate its (happy) coincidence with the present real world, in a revivified version of the aleatory excisions of the ancient tradition of sortes, or of the magical application of Homeric lines to extraliterary occasions and then back into the poems themselves.\footnote{All of which is to say that, even in the novel, reading remains a practice, a ritualized but deeply personal activity or occasion, and that the practice, activity, or occasion it resembles, indeed instantiates, is still magic.}

Benjamin himself gives a wonderful figure for this, a figure that while it already points to the modernism that succeeds realism, also suggests how modernism itself emerges from realism and a deeper past. The figure or Denkbild is called “Pretzel, Feather, Pause, Lament, Clowning” (Breze, Feder, Pause, Klage, Firlefanz), and it describes a children’s game popular in the mid-nineteenth
century that would take such words, unbound and unconnected (ohne Bindung und Zusammenhang), and work to link them together meaningfully, without changing their order. He then asks us to imagine turning the game around, to think of reading any given sentence as if it had been constructed according to these rules; and he claims that “in reality, something of this perspective is contained in every act of reading,” where the text’s surface meaning becomes “merely the background on which rest the shadows cast” by one’s arbitrarily imposed focus or desires, “like figures in relief.”62 As an isolated form of reading, he says, it closely mimics that connected with sacred works; as a form of writing, that connected to modernist surrealist prose; but as an integrated occasional practice, it is there in the most ordinary reading of novels—including realist ones.

**Sympatheia and Stimmung**

It is not just that magic and divination persist in mid-nineteenth- to early twentieth-century German literature because of intrinsic qualities of its prose fiction. These also endure because the world model that originally supports such reading—the sympathetic world of the ancients—persists as well. I mentioned how the Neoplatonic worldview elaborated in the first section continued to exert a profound influence on the German romantics, especially in the form of so-called Naturphilosophie. One of the chief forms in which Naturphilosophie exerted its own profound influence on the following period was through the again rather uniquely German tradition of Stimmung, a concept that began lexically to organize itself at about the same late eighteenth-century moment that the term Sympatheia began to lose some of its ancient meaning. But as Leo Spitzer has shown, Stimmung itself has ancient roots in the Platonist past, and came to attract to itself much of the broader conceptual framework of classical sympatheia; and as a dominant concept in both science and art during the German nineteenth century it kept alive and active the world on which both magic and divination depend.63 For this reason, this study of magic reading and the future is also
one of the changing shape, and fate, of *Stimmung*, qua *sympatheia*, during the realist and into the modernist period.

I will elaborate in considerable detail the idea set represented by *Stimmung* in the chapters that follow. What I want to do here, in the last part of this introduction, is give the barest outlines of the concept itself and some of the transformations it undergoes over the course of the period engaged. *Stimmung* is a nearly un-translatable term that hovers somewhere between human mood, surrounding atmosphere, and the attunement between the two, and although originating in the sphere of music, it found some of its broadest applications in the newly privileged field of landscape painting in the nineteenth century—a field that combined aesthetic, natural-scientific, and religious concerns. One of its most important theorists was the scientist and painter Carl Gustav Carus (1789–1869). Carus was directly influenced by the *Naturphilosophie* of Schelling as well as by its variants in Goethe and Alexander von Humboldt; and in his *Nine Letters on Landscape Painting* (*Neun Briefe über Landschaftsmalerei*, 1824) and *Twelve Letters on Earth-Life* (*Zwölf Briefe über das Erdleben*, 1841), he worked to translate that philosophy into the rituals of landscape painting, or more broadly, into a model for the interaction of the human subject with the nonhuman natural world.

He did so in terms of *Stimmung*, defining the principal task of landscape painting as “representation of a certain *Stimmung* of affective life (sense) through reproduction of a corresponding *Stimmung* of natural life (truth).”64 *Stimmung* is thus presented as both an “attunement” within the natural world itself—a kind of macrocosmic order—and an attunement between that natural life and the microcosmic observing (or representing) human subject, conceived in more affective than strictly rational terms. To characterize these relations he invokes an analogy found in many ancient texts, including Cicero’s *De divinatione*, to describe *sympatheia*: “Even as a string struck on an instrument will set a second, corresponding string in a higher or lower octave to vibrate as well; similarly, related impulses respond to each other, both in nature and in the soul, and here again the individual human appears an inseparable part of a higher whole.”65
Clearly, Carus’s model of *Stimmung* engages the conditions of a momentary coinciding occasion, of a “mystical participation” that dissolves strict subject/object relations between the human and nonhuman world, and of a common *logos* that is felt to connect all parts of nature, man included, by means of contact and likeness. In all this, *Stimmung* reproduces *sympatheia*. Even more, and just as clearly: as a feature of man’s relation to the natural world, *Stimmung* proposes a model for *reading* that world, a (magical) model delicately balanced between self-projection and a participatory engagement dissolving the strictures of discrete subjectivity. The model allows for a range of possible modes of reading, extending from a “romantic,” subjective contagion of the external world to a keenly attentive, “objective” reception of its visible and invisible order and connections. For Carus, this yields an aesthetics that can become a new kind of scientific observation of the natural world, one that calls for the active engagement and identificatory occasion of the human subject. And as we’ll see for Keller, it yields an aesthetics—and *Bildung*—that can potentially reconcile “romantic” magical thinking (in its most pejorative sense) and realist vision.

Carus’s model of *Stimmung* posits connections between the subject-ive and object-ive worlds, based on a principle of (momentary) similarity. But it also posits connections between both these worlds and an invisible divine one that communicates itself to men through the visible objects of the natural world. Indeed, it is the reading and representation of this attendant divine order, and not of things alone, that ultimately ground his practice of landscape painting, whose purpose is to interpret the apparent objects of the natural world as signs that communicate and manifest an otherwise hidden one. That is, the reading model of *Stimmung* is never only a matter of certain linked (nonrational) communications between the human subject and natural world. It is also one of communications between the natural and the divine world in ways that keep its human reception, even at its most objective, a form of intimation or divination (*Ahnung*): an intimation of the divine providence (*Vor-sehung*) and forces in-forming the natural world, animating it with a sign-ificance beyond either its intrinsic nature or its momentary reflection of a human subject.
In landscape painting, then—and in the model of natural science and religion that support it—*Stimmung* becomes divination, a way of reading the correspondences, the likenesses and connections, between the human, natural, and divine realms that sees all three in the one order of visible things—but those things as both themselves and signs of a projected human and a communicated divine (or “metatextual”) order. When translated into literature—as in the case of Keller’s novel, which takes the education in landscape painting as the basis for its protagonist’s *Bildung*—this same model of *Stimmung*, depending on the same correspondences, can, I’ll argue, yield a “realism,” for both the world and its representation, that excludes neither the subjective participation of the human agent nor a hidden divine (or metatextual) dimension to its represented world, but rather works to realize these in ways not distinct from things themselves, but always and only to be divined through such things. Moreover, since its represented world is narrative rather than just pictorial, in the novel the *Vor-sehung* and forces of its divine/metatextual dimension can and will acquire a more pronounced temporal and futural dimension. But in either case, for both Carus’s “scientific” landscape painting and Keller’s realist novel, the world made manifest through *Stimmung* emerges as a recognizably sympathetic and so still magical one, and its required mode of reading that world a form of divination.

Keller’s novel takes us well into the mid-nineteenth century and the emergence of poetic realism as the dominant aesthetic in German literature. It is at about this same time that Ute Frevert, in her book *Emotions in History—Lost and Found*, records a beginning shift in the meaning of the term *Sympathie* in Germany and indeed throughout Europe. While arguing that *Sympathie* comes to operate “on a new scale and with far greater urgency than before,” she also notes that it starts to lose the primary meaning it had held up until then as “a natural concept of ‘hidden correspondence[s]’” and “cosmic or magical connection”—the meaning we have followed—and to acquire a more “psychic” sense restricted to the human world: a sense of *Mitempfindung* or empathy with one’s fellow man. And it is also at about this same time that David Wellbery, in a seminal essay still to be discussed, implies a similar shift in the
The meaning and force of Stimmung, moving away from its sense as a property or force in the external natural world to become more exclusively a property or force of the individual human psyche, more or less equivalent to mere mood: dissipating the sense of reciprocal, macro-micro interaction and becoming more simply a matter of psychological self-projection. Each of these critics offers a variant of the argument we encountered earlier in Foucault for magic reading per se, while moving the timeline for the shift from the end of the seventeenth to the later nineteenth century: each sees the transition from a paradigm of magic—whether called Sympathie or Stimmung—as a force of the natural world to one of a human world alone.

As we see in Fontane’s novels, there is considerable truth to both these arguments, and they mark a crucial shift between early and late realism, and between the role of Stimmung qua sympatheia in poetic and so-called social realism. But both also require qualification. So, for example, the lexical retreat of Sympathie from the natural world to a purely human one that Frevert identifies does seem confirmed by the aesthetic stance of Fontane’s later texts, and with it a diminution in man’s identificatory relation to nature and so, too, of the magic in the world itself. But it is also the case that Sympathie in its more traditional form stubbornly persists in that same world in the guise of folk, pseudoscientific, alternative medical, or superstitious beliefs and practices, and in ways that prove intrinsic to both that world and its literary realist representation. Many characters in his novels, and by no means the least astute ones, continue to subscribe to a “sympathetic” view of nature, despite its high-cultural discrediting (a dismissal, we know, there since ancient times), and continue, too, to engage in related divinatory readings. And as noted in the previous section, objects in the external natural world continue to function as signifiers of a metatextual world for readers of the novels themselves, in ways that also still require divinatory or, if you will, sympathetic magic readings of the novel world.

Equally important, the retreat that Wellbery notes of Stimmung into the purely human world does not seem quite as individually restricted as his Foucauldian framework might suggest. That is, the
concept of Stimmung seems not just to move from describing external binding or coercive forces in the cosmos to describing interiorized disciplinary ones, situated within a self-contained bourgeois subject, psychologically conceived. Rather, it seems also, as Frevert’s model of sympathy suggests, to have moved into the cosmos of social interaction, with man—and life—“sociably” conceived. Even as psychology emerges at the end of the nineteenth century as a newly dominant discourse, so too sociology; and even as we saw key aspects of sympatheia migrate into the new idea of Stimmung (without ever having fully left Sympathie) in the midcentury, so, too, do key aspects of Stimmung qua sympatheia seem now to migrate into the equally new concept of Geselligkeit or sociability (without fully leaving Stimmung either). As we’ll see in both the near-contemporary sociology of Georg Simmel and the Gesellschaftsromanen of Fontane, the idea of “sociability” reproduces the elements of a momentary occasion, of micro-macro relations, of a well nigh “mystical participation” that dissolves strict subject/object relations, and of a common logos—in this case, language itself—that connects its world via contact and likeness; and in the case of Fontane, this idea of “sociability” will still be cast in terms of Stimmung itself. For both Simmel and Fontane, Stimmung qua sociability (qua sympatheia) will still involve a hidden world of invisible, communicating forces attendant upon ordinary material signifying things (including words), a world that requires a special kind of divinatory reading to become manifest or realized through those things. And for both, that world and its reading will still be magical.

This is not to say that the diminution in man’s participatory identification with nature and the nonhuman world in general that is evident in Frevert’s account of Sympathie and Wellbery’s of Stimmung, and even in Simmel’s notion of sociability, is without consequence. It certainly is, and in ways that endanger both the magical and the realist worlds, threatening their similar dependence on binding connections with forces of a more modernist dissociation. And a crucial corollary to this—not important to Frevert’s or Wellbery’s arguments, but very much so to mine—is that the seeming retreat of Sympathie and Stimmung from man’s relation to the
natural world is accompanied by a retreat from his relation to the future as well. This is the case for subjects in the historical world, whose faith in progress becomes notably diminished at the turn of the century; for characters in novels, whose lessened capacity to predict their future is conspicuous in Fontane’s last works; and for novels and their readers, who can no longer always rely on consequential, linearly unfolding plots. Sympathie and Stimmung, magic and divination, novels and the future: the argument of this study is that all seem linked to a similar fate.

The sense of dissociation from both nature and the future that appears to emerge near the end of realism becomes, as Barbara Stafford argues, dominant in modernism, where it even comes increasingly to include a sense of broken connections to the social order and its recent past. But the paradox is that, at the same time and under these very conditions, modernism also represents a new, and often problematic, resurgence of felt magic in both the world and art. In part, this is reflective of conditions more or less unique to the twentieth-century world: the rise of new technologies (“techno-magic”), the pervasiveness of newly manufactured things (commodity-magic), and the en-trancing spread of mass political movements (fascism). But in part it also reflects conditions extending out of the previous half century, including the elaboration of those somewhat debased forms of Naturphilosophie and Sympathie evident in the pseudo- or occult sciences of Fontane’s time into what becomes the Lebensphilosophie or vitalism of Benjamin’s; and including, too, a reckoning with the magical, binding, sympathetic powers that had come to inhere in bourgeois society (and realism) itself. But even beyond this, the magic that erupts in modernism reflects a direct turn back to more ancient traditions: as Benjamin says, “Precisely modernity is always citing primal history.” And in his own case that included invoking a Neoplatonist-inflected model of sympatheia for understanding both his own present world and its relation to the past, recent and ancient; and along with it, the practices of its divinatory reading—albeit now all but deprived of its future dimension.

This re-turn to a Neoplatonic world-model of sympatheia and its divination—what Benjamin calls “natural prophecy”—is
perhaps most evident in his “Storyteller” essay on the mid- to late
nineteenth-century author Nikolai Leskov, where he writes, “The
hierarchy of the creaturely world, which has its apex in the righ-
teous man, reaches down into the abyss of the inanimate through
many gradations. In this connection, one particular circumstance
must be noted. This whole creaturely world speaks not so much
with the human voice as with what could be called ‘the voice of
Nature’”; and he adds, “The lower Leskov descends on the scale
of created things, the more obviously his way of viewing things
approaches the mystical. . . . The mineral is the lowest stratum of
created things. For the storyteller, however, it is directly connected
to the highest. He is able to see in it a natural prophecy.” To be
sure, Benjamin posits a growing loss of connection to this world,
one fading along with the storyteller, a figure at once epically ar-
chaic and of the recent nineteenth-century past. But the sympa-
thetic world itself is imagined as still there: it is just a matter of
divining and releasing its hidden powers anew.

The form that those sympathetic powers (and their reading) take
in Benjamin’s modern world is once again that of Stimmung; al-
though, as in the cases discussed above, there is also a migration of
some of its key aspects into new terms, even if themselves ancient.
So, for example, in the penultimate sentence of the “Storyteller”
essay, Benjamin refers to “the incomparable Stimmung” that sur-
rounds and adheres to every true storyteller of the preceding cen-
tury. And in his essay on surrealism, he writes, “Surrealism brings
the immense forces of ‘Stimmung’ concealed in past things to the
point of explosion,”; and insofar as they do so, the surrealists are,
he says, “visionaries and augurs”: in this respect, very much the
modernist descendants of storytellers. But a good part of the idea
set of Stimmung also comes to be absorbed by Benjamin’s now
more familiar notion of “aura,” certainly one of his most explicitly
magical terms and one with its own links to ancient sympatheia.

We see this shift already in his “Little History of Photography,”
which has one of the earliest mentions of aura, and where it and
Stimmung are used as synonyms—and where we also have one of
the earliest formulations of Benjamin’s ambivalence toward it. He
defines aura as the “weave” or Gespinst of an object in space and
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time and as a mode of participation in the natural object world, and in a formulation he repeats across several essays, he writes, “What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time. . . . While at rest on a summer’s noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance—that is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch.”

It is described as an invisible power that seems to both emanate out of a given object and encompass it; and as a perceptual experience that belongs only to objects that have successfully evaded our conscious mind. But most decisive for my present purpose is, first, how aura is presented as a quality of both the ancient world—Benjamin refers to it elsewhere as a “breath of prehistory”—and the nineteenth century, in the latter case explicitly linked to Stimmung; and second, how it is a quality that much of modernism works to disrupt, to disperse in favor of an alienated, dissociated stimmunglos ideal. Every bit as much as realism, modernism is imagined as playing out in a dialectic of magic and disenchantment, with now one, now the other the privileged state—but (as in antiquity itself) with neither one ever really not there.

Despite—or perhaps because of—its centrality to so many takes on Benjamin’s work, and despite, too, its emphatically magical quality, this study does not overly dwell on aura. Rather, even as it sees aura as a reformulation of Stimmung, so does it follow Miriam Hansen in regarding aura itself as a transitional formulation on the way to Benjamin’s more encompassing notion of the mimetic faculty, or, more precisely, of his doctrine of the similar, a doctrine that more fully re-presents the world model of sympathieia and, with it, more directly the matter of divinatory reading. Reflecting on the claim that “to experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us,” Hansen writes, “The reflexivity of [such] a mode of perception, its reciprocity across [time], seems to both hinge upon and bring to fleeting consciousness an archaic element in our present senses, a forgotten trace of our material bond with nonhuman nature.” That archaic element is the mimetic faculty, that material bond one that, like both nineteenth-century Stimmung and ancient sympathieia, unites
through similitude the human and nonhuman worlds, and, also like them, determines the conditions of their necessarily divinatory reading. It is on the consequences for the practices of reading that this arrangement entails that Benjamin chooses to focus, and we along with him: practices heavily inflected by a modernist questioning of its value and futurity, but nonetheless still divinatory, and still magic.