

METHOD IS A DETOUR. A BENJAMINIAN READING OF GOETHE

El método es una digresión. Una lectura benjaminiana de Goethe

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ABSTRACT

Benjamin himself tells us that reading Simmel's work on the concept of truth in Goethe helped him realise that the concept of origin proposed in his book on *Trauerspiel* was a transposition of the Goethean concept of original phenomenon. To argue how economical facts can become original phenomena, Benjamin brings in an analogy with Goethe's concept of the metamorphosis of plants. Thus, here, we try to demonstrate that understanding what philosophy is in Benjamin implies a threshold experience –in the form of leap, discontinuity, interruption, renunciation, dissipation, obedience and metamorphosis–, whose supreme, concise and enigmatic formulation is as follows: "Method is a detour" [*Methode is Umweg*]. Some elements from Goethe's morphological thought will permit the establishment of a constellation of affinities, something quite useful for the interpretation of this enigma.

Key words: Benjamin; Goethe; Morfología.

RESUMEN

El propio Benjamin nos dice que leer el trabajo de Simmel sobre el concepto de verdad en Goethe le ayudó a comprender que el concepto de origen propuesto en su libro sobre el *Trauerspiel* era una transposición del concepto

goethiano de fenómeno original. Para discutir cómo los hechos económicos pueden convertirse en fenómenos originales, Benjamin se sirve de una analogía con el concepto de Goethe de la metamorfosis de las plantas. Por eso, aquí, intentaremos demostrar que comprender lo que es la filosofía en Benjamin implica una experiencia de umbral –en forma de salto, discontinuidad, interrupción, renuncia, disipación, obediencia y metamorfosis– cuya formulación suprema, concisa y enigmática es la siguiente: “El método es un desvío” [Methode is Umweg]. Algunos elementos del pensamiento morfológico de Goethe permitirán establecer una constelación de afinidades, algo bastante útil para la interpretación de este enigma.

Palabras clave: Benjamin; Goethe; Morphology.

1. TRANSPOSITIONS

Benjamin himself tells us that reading Simmel’s work on the concept of truth in Goethe helped him realise that the concept of origin proposed in his book on *Trauerspiel* was a transposition of the Goethean concept of original phenomenon¹ “extracted from the pagan context of nature and brought into

1. Here are a few Goethean excerpts on the original phenomenon:

“The highest point man can reach is astonishment [*das Erstaunen*]. When an original phenomenon inspires that astonishment in him, he must consider himself satisfied; nothing greater can be conceded to him, he cannot look for anything that is beyond it, here is the limit. But, in general, the sight of an original phenomenon is yet not enough for men; they think they need to go even further. They are like children, who, having seen themselves in a mirror, at once turn it around to see what is on the other side”, GOETHE, J.W., “Conversation with Eckermann, 18 February 1829”, in: *Gedenken Ausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Gespräche* 28. August 1949, [AA], 24 vols., ed. Ernst Beutler, Zürich, Artemis Verlag, 1948-1954, p. 319.

“[...] We call these primordial phenomena, because nothing appreciable by the senses lies beyond them, on the contrary, they are perfectly fit to be considered as a fixed point to which we first ascended, step by step, and from which we may, in like manner, descend to the commonest case of every-day experience. Such an original phenomenon is that which has lately engaged our attention. We see on the one side light, brightness; on the other darkness, obscurity: we bring the semi-transparent medium [*das Trübe*] between the two, and from these contrasts and this medium the colours develop themselves, contrasted, in like manner, but soon, through a reciprocal relation, directly tending again to a point of union [*auf ein Gemeinsames*]”, GOETHE, J.W. *Theory of Colours*, trans. Charles Lock Eastlake, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, The M.I.T. Press, 1970, §175, p. 72.

“*Urphänomen*: ideal, real, symbolic, identical. [...] *Urphänomen*: Ideal as the ultimate we can know. Real as what we know. Symbolic, because it includes all instances.

the Jewish contexts of history”². And he adds that, in the book about Paris he is preparing, he will return to the concept of origin, now in relation to the forms and transformations of Parisian arcades, from birth to decline³. Economic facts act as original phenomena, but only if they are not defined as causes –which would curtail their original character. At this moment, to argue how economical facts can become original phenomena, Benjamin brings in an analogy with Goethe’s concept of the metamorphosis of plants: “[t]hey become such only insofar as in their own individual development –“unfolding” might be a better term– they give rise to the whole series of the arcade’s concrete historical forms, just as the leaf unfolds from itself all the riches of the empirical world of plants”⁴. Later, during the explanation of the concept of origin, this passage will be revived and its connection with Goethe expanded.

Let us take this direction from Benjamin as both an omen and an aegis of what we intend to do, namely, try to demonstrate, by analysing the “Prologue” to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* –in combination with excerpts from other texts, specifically *One Way Street*, “Thought Figures”, *The Arcades Project* and “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”– that understanding what philosophy is in Benjamin implies a threshold experience –in the form of leap, discontinuity, interruption, renunciation, dissipation, obedience and metamorphosis–, whose supreme, concise and enigmatic formulation is

Identical with all instances”, GOETHE, J.W., *Werke*, “Hamburger Ausgabe” [HA], vol. 12, ed. Erich Trunz, Hamburg, Christian Wegner Verlag, 1948-1966, München, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, C.H. Beck, 1982, *Maxim* 15, p. 3.

2. BENJAMIN, W., *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eijand/Kevin McLaughlin, prepared on the Baui of the German Volume edited by Rolf Tiedemann, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, [N2a, 4].

3. A polarity that is essential to the constitution of the dialectical image, which is, in fact, a variation of the concept of origin: “Actualized in the dialectical image, together with the thing itself, are its origin and its decline. Should both be eternal? (eternal transience)”, *Das Passagen-Werk*, “Addenda” n° 24. This rhythmic polarity will return later on, in conjunction with the developments in the relationship between the concepts of origin and of original phenomenon.

4. Here is, in Goethe’s own words, the concept of the metamorphosis of plants: “Whether then the plant vegetates, blossoms, or bears fruit, it nevertheless is always the same organs, with varying functions and with frequent changes in form, that fulfil the dictates of Nature. The same organ which expanded on the stem as a leaf and assumed a highly diverse form, will contract in the calyx, expand in the petal, contract in reproductive organs, and expand for the last time as fruit”, GOETHE, J. W., *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, Wyomimg, Bio-Dynamic Literature, 1978, § 115, p. 54.

as follows: “Method is a detour” [*Methodie is Umweg*]. Some elements from Goethe’s morphological thought will permit the establishment of a constellation of affinities, something quite useful for the interpretation of this enigma.

2. SECRET EPIGRAPHS

As we return to the comparison between art and science, we light upon the following consideration: (here begins the quote used as the epigraph to the “Prologue” of *Origin*) neither in knowledge nor in reflection can anything whole be put together, since in the former the internal is missing and in the latter the external; and so we must necessarily think of science as art if we expect to derive any kind of wholeness from it. Nor should we look for this in the general, the excessive, but, since art is always wholly represented in every individual work of art, so science ought to reveal itself completely in every individual object treated (here ends the abovementioned quote). In order to meet such a demand, all human faculties must be brought to bear on scientific work. The depths of premonition, a precise intuition of the present, mathematical profoundness, physical precision, elevation of intellect, sharpness of understanding, agile and nostalgic imagination, benevolent joy of the senses; nothing can be left out of the lively and fecund capture of the moment, which is the only means through which a work of art, of whatever content, can come to be.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Materialen zur Geschichte der Farbenlehre*.

Above all, he who dedicates himself to analysis should investigate, or more properly direct his attention to the issue of finding out whether it has more to do with a mysterious/secret synthesis or whether his pursuit is no more than aggregation, juxtaposition [...] or how all this could be changed.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *WA*, part. II, vol. II, p. 72.

Let us identify these epigraphs: the first belongs to *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, the second to *Der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*. The secret nature of these epigraphs is not related to any omission of their source. In both cases their author is mentioned, in the first via the simple indication of the quoted work’s title [more precisely: “Betrachtungen über Farbenlehre und Farbenhandlung der Alten” (“Considerations on the theory of colours and the treatment of colour among the Ancient”⁵)]; as for the second, the

5. GOETHE, J.W., *HA*, ed. cit., vol. 14, p. 41.

Weimar edition is mentioned, as well as the volume and pages, but not the text's title, to wit: "Analyse und Synthese"⁶. What is secret here is the effect they have on the works to which they act as "threshold dwellers", protectors of the homes' existence and entrance (we will return to them at the end of the present text). The finest formulation of their power is probably one Benjamin applies to the link between form and content in an artistic domain: the metaphysical content should not be seen as situated within the form, "but should appear in action, like the blood coursing through the body"⁷.

The epigraphs, therefore, are secret because their links to the writings over which they preside are not made explicit. In fact, the traces of their effects can only be followed if we make the effort to return to them as we read and re-read the texts. They are long-term effects, lingeringly taking on new aspects.

As to the second epigraph, straightforward evidence of its effectiveness is even harder to come by; but in future works, particularly *Origin* and *The Arcades Project*, signs of its action will become quite evident, demanding a re-reading of *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism* (though that particular book does not concern us here). In *Origin*, we come across a fine demonstration of this when Benjamin argues that names have different values depending on whether they are taken as concepts (agents of knowledge, features of understanding) or ideas (words that, having had their symbolic value restored to them, disengaged themselves from the core of reality) within the context of the philosophy of art. To him, what such names as Baroque and Renaissance cannot accomplish as concepts they achieve as ideas: "they do not make the similar identical, but they effect a synthesis between extremes. Although it should be stated that conceptual analysis, too, does not invariably encounter totally heterogeneous phenomena, and it can occasionally reveal the outlines of a synthesis even if it is not able to confirm it"⁸.

As for the *Arcades Project*, the connection could not be clearer, bringing the Goethean demands of the relationship between analysis and synthesis back to the core of the dialectical image: "The dialectical image is that form of the historical object which satisfies Goethe's requirements for the object of analysis: to exhibit a genuine synthesis. It is the primal phenomenon of history"⁹.

6. GOETHE, J.W., *HA*, ed. cit., vol. 13, p. 52.

7. BENJAMIN, W., *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, intro. George Steiner, London, New York, Verso, 2003, p. 39.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

9. BENJAMIN, W., *The Arcades Project*, ed. cit, [N 9a, 4].

It is always a matter of highlighting the complex rapports between analysis and synthesis –because for Goethe the original phenomenon is the phenomenon that, having undergone analysis, reveals itself as condition, that is to say, a true synthesis (we will return to this)–, of shielding oneself against false syntheses or hasty, arrogant hypotheses, and accepting the fragmentary, inconclusive, true synthesis: a drawing, a profile, an outline, a miniature, all that is within the power of human creativity (for it lacks access to flesh, to the *parenchyma*), that which Goethe calls an *Aperçu*:

Everything depends on an *Aperçu*. It is the highest point man can reach, and neither can he reach any further. He cannot offer the *parenchyma* of detail, for he is not a second creator. This power to formulate an *Aperçu* is similar to his artistic power, the power of capturing and subjecting the image of an object. As for the historic *Aperçu*, the only thing one can do concerning the origin of an event is present an outline of the whole¹⁰.

What do science, knowledge and reflection mean to Goethe? Knowledge [*das Wissen*] is a form of cumulative, operatory cognition that lacks an internal (in modern terms, the subjective element, which Goethe sometimes uses, but prefers to call internal or intimate self). In turn, science [*die Wissenschaft*] is a form of cognition that emerges out of a crisis in knowledge: the revelation of the problematic, that is to say, the recognition that what stands between two points of view is not, contrarily to general belief, the solution, but the problem itself.

All individuals and, in the event of their having the ability to influence others, all schools see the *problematic* in the sciences as something in which, through which or against which they must struggle, as if it were one more side to take or oppose, instead of understanding that the scientific element [*das Wissenschaftliche*] demands a solution, a compromise or a relationship between irreconcilable antinomies¹¹.

This recognition is a form of mature knowledge, an overcoming of the naive belief that “truth will not evade us”. In this context, morphology, the science of forms, is a prime example of a crisis in knowledge. Morphology is a science without an object, which deals with “whatever the other sciences approach randomly and occasionally, gathering together what is scattered across them and defining a new point of view, out of which things are easily

10. GOETHE, J. W. in: SCHMIDT, F., “Über den Wert des *Aperçus*“, *Jahrbuch der Goethe-Gesellschaft*, 29 (1967), p. 266.

11. GOETHE, J.W., *HA*, ed. cit., vol. 12, *Maxim* 414, p. 41.

and adequately contemplated”¹². Lastly, reflection [*die Reflexion*], certainly philosophy, lacks an external, since it is unable to return to reality once it has left it (a condition without which there can be no philosophy), and this intensified critical feature also keeps most philosophers, due to their insatiable voraciousness regarding the foundation of things, from contributing to the weaving of the world’s tapestry, which lends to their words a marked degree of unreality¹³.

On the one hand, Benjamin wishes to attain that point at which science –in the Goethean sense– would, just like art, manifest fully in its singular objects. We must think science as art, if we are to expect from it some kind of totality; and, to do so, we will have to separate science from both knowledge and reflection. As it will be shown, there exists an affinity between science in the Goethean sense and philosophy (of art) in the Benjaminian sense.

On the other hand, he is guided by the conviction that only through immersing oneself in the work it is possible to find its universal, its idea (the dramatic genre, tragedy or *Trauerspiel*). Also of extreme importance is the Goethean concept of the relationship between the singular and the universal¹⁴, which is highly useful to the Benjaminian task of understanding a literary genre as an idea that is historically actualised as an origin.

Neither criticism nor the criteria of a terminology –the test of the philosophical theory of ideas in arte– evolves in response to external comparison, but they take shape immanently, in a development of the formal language of

12. GOETHE, J.W., “Betrachtung über Morphologie”, in: *HA*, ed. cit., vol. 13, p. 127.

13. He calls them “philosophers of understanding”, who write “obscurely out of their great love for clarity” And why? “Because they want to show the source or path of each statement, from its position in the reasoning to its origin, and at that point another [reasoning] is set in motion and brought in; they act like someone who follows a river from its mouth to its source and is constantly finding rivulets and streams that flow into it and branch out, causing him to become completely lost and constrained to lodge himself in *deverticulis*”. Examples: Kant and Hegel. Aristotle is not yet wholly taken by that obsession. “They do not weave a carpet; instead, they unravel it and pull out its threads; ideal philosophers [Spinoza?] actually take the weaver’s seat, prepare the warp and throw the shuttle. Sometimes, of course, a thread snaps or becomes knotted, but, in the end, we will have a true carpet”, in: GOETHE, J.W., “Conversation with Riemer, November 1806”, in: *AA*, ed. cit., vol. 22, pp. 421-422. (Cfr., also “Winckelman”, *HA*, ed. cit., vol. 12, pp.118-120).

14. “What is the universal? The single case. What is the particular? Millions of cases”, GOETHE, J.W., *HA*, ed. cit., vol. 12, *Maxim* 489, p. 433. “The universal and the particular coincide: the particular is the universal made manifest under different conditions”, GOETHE, J.W., *HA*, ed. cit., vol. 12, *Maxim* 491, p. 433.

the work itself, which brings out its content at the expense of its effect. It is, moreover, precisely the more significant works, inasmuch as they are not the original, and, so to speak, ideal embodiments of the genre, which fall outside the limits of the genre. A major work will either establish the genre or abolish it; and the perfect work will do both¹⁵.

All forces, all energies, all spiritual moods in their irreducible singularity and mutual calls, “nothing can be left out of the lively and fecund capture of the moment”, the only rule that is not a rule, but actually the source from which all works of art flow and to which critical analysis must do full justice. In fact, even though Benjamin chose not to include these lines in the epigraph, they echo throughout his text on the *Trauerspiel*, as illustrated by the quotation above, besides an agreement with the spirit of early Romanticism, recognisable in the demand for a critical approach immanent to the work itself as the only means to access it. Later, in *The Arcades Project*, we find a kind of symmetry of resonance, in which all the life and fecundity of seizing the moment¹⁶, that joyous obedience to the instant’s intimations, floods our face like the sober light of dawn; through that image, we discover how progress in art might be defined, to wit: every time for the first time, that is to say, when a work both founds a genre and transcends it:

In every true work of art there is a place where, for one who removes there, it blows cool like the wind of a coming dawn. From this it follows that art, which has often been considered refractory to every relation with progress, can provide its true definition. Progress has its seat not in the continuity of elapsing time but in its interferences – where the truly new makes itself felt for the first time, with the sobriety of dawn¹⁷.

3. CRITIQUE OF THE SUBJECT/OBJECT RELATIONSHIP MYTHOLOGY

Why is method a detour [*Umweg*]? The answer can only be found within the scope of the process whereby truth is defined as self-presentation, which presumes and demands the implicit overcoming of the “subject/object relationship mythology”¹⁸, as well as the dissolution of the modern concept of

15. BENJAMIN, W., *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, ed. cit., p.44.

16. A major subject and constant feature in Goethe’s life and work. See Pierre Hadot’s *N’oublie pas de vivre. Goethe et la tradition des exercices spirituels*.

17. BENJAMIN, W., *The Arcades Project*, ed. cit, [N 9a, 7].

18. Cfr., BENJAMIN, W., “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”, in: *Selected Writings*, General Editor Michael W. Jennings, Editorial Board Markus Bullock, Howard

empirical. In Benjamin's thought, the connection between the dissolution of the empirical element and the overcoming of the subject/object relationship will be enriched with the discovery of such concepts as origin, original fact or original phenomenon. Furthermore, one should also avoid confusing empirical with concrete or empirical with fact, in the Goethean sense¹⁹.

Strictly speaking, the poor and empty experience that is the theoretical plane in Kant did not demand any degree of metaphysics, since its very determinations eschewed it. Now, it is a matter "of envisioning this future metaphysics"²⁰ from the vantage point of a superior experience, whose unity and continuity cannot be mangled by disciplinary dispersion or foiled by the predominant physical-mathematical paradigm.

If Kant's contribution to philosophy can be described as reducing experience to scientific experience, it is no less true, adds Benjamin, that he also developed a stance against the dispersion and division of the "experience into the realms of the individual sciences"²¹. At any rate, "[a]rt, jurisprudence, and history; these and other areas must orient themselves according to the theory of categories with much more intensity than Kant oriented them"²².

In Kant's admirable attempt to justify knowledge, Benjamin finds, alongside the restricting concept of a mechanical-mathematical approach, Kant's

Eiland, Gary Smith, vol. 1 1913-1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 100-110.

19. A constant feature in all of Benjamin's work, from "On language as such and on the language of man" to *The Arcades Project*. Consider, particularly, the following statement in "The Task of the Translator": "Even in times of narrowly prejudiced thought, there was an inkling that life was not limited to organic corporeality. But it cannot be a matter of extending its dominion under the feeble sceptre of the soul, as Fechner tried to do, or, conversely, of basing its definition on the even less conclusive factors of animality, such as sensation, which characterizes life only occasionally. The concept of life is given its due only if everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life. In the final analysis, the range of life must be determined by history rather than by nature, least of all by such tenuous factors as sensation and soul. The philosopher's task consists in comprehending all of natural life through the more encompassing life of history", BENJAMIN, W., "The Task of the Translator", in: *Selected Writings*, vol. 1 1913-1926, ed. cit., pp. 254-255. The empirical is the phenomenon left to its own devices, subjected to all manner of operative abuse, deprived of the recollective experience that makes up history, in which the body, soul and animality are seen through redemptive eyes.

20. BENJAMIN, W., "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy", ed. cit., p. 102.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

own awareness of that restriction, which lends heroic grandeur to his effort. In other words, Kant acknowledged, if not the lack of dignity, at least the limitations of that “temporal experience” regarding above all the living creatures and the works of art, both neglected by the “transcendental Logic”.

To overcome the constitutional meagreness of the “temporal experience” and its effects on the lasting one, it is mandatory to reject the “mythology” of the subject/object relationship. In fact, Kant never managed to relinquish a “conception of knowledge as a relation between some sort of subjects and objects”²³. For Benjamin, the coming philosophy must eliminate “the subject nature of the cognizing consciousness”²⁴, freeing it from any traces of psychologising mythology, which, though in sublimated form, is recognisable in Kant, namely: “the notion [...] of an individual ego which receives sensations by means of its senses and forms its ideas on the basis of them”²⁵.

On the one hand, this rejection should be read in the light of Benjamin’s constant concern with doing justice to experience, freeing its understanding from a theory of subjectivity²⁶. On the other, what is at stake here is the search for a superior knowledge that does away with the concepts of subject and object, which implies that experience must be withdrawn from the sphere of empirical consciousness, the place in which the abovementioned mythology can be applied, thus keeping intact the notion that the conditions of knowledge are the conditions of experience, which is now expanded to comprise religion, history and language.

It is necessary to preserve the unity of experience, something that, according to Benjamin, is already highlighted in the “transcendental Dialectic”. However, one category is missing to complete that unity: identity, which as an autonomous entity could define the sphere of knowledge without resorting

23. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

24. *Ibidem*.

25. *Ibidem*.

26. Which seems quite nonsensical within the Kantian context. And yet, in the “Analytics of the Beautiful” in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Kant introduces a concept that disturbs, so to speak, the continuity of that mythology, because the structure of sentimental affection has come to the forefront and also because subjectivity is conceived as expressive energy, a free play. Besides that, the concept of object is gradually replaced by the concept of visible and audible form. Consequently, it becomes impossible to avoid unforeseen passages between faculties (without resorting to schematism) and between the human being and nature (without resorting to a law court), so much so that imagination seems to be, in a way, not only the sum of all faculties but also of all things perceived as forms, which brings into action a new concept of *a priori* and a new sense of human community, which intersects with a nature that now speaks to us. Objectively, the subject/object terminology is avoided.

to any subject-object terminology. Even so, that point is not pursued, perhaps because Benjamin had focused so much on it in his essay on two poems by Hölderlin. Besides that, and with the same objective in mind, Benjamin reckons that empirical consciousness must be absorbed by transcendental consciousness, because it is precisely in the former that mythological construction takes place; at the same time, he wonders whether it still makes sense to speak of consciousness at the precise moment it must “be stiffed of everything subjective”²⁷. A good question, which must receive a decidedly negative answer, considering that, once one admits that language is the medium for thought and its expression, there ceases to be a separation between the empirical and transcendental consciousnesses, and consequently there will be no more use for the structure of subjectivity, as formalised by Kant. Focusing on language invariably leads to the abandonment of any theories of subjectivity.

4. A HUGE “CHUZPE”

In this “Prologue” to *Origin of German Tragic Drama* we find, laid out with the utmost care, the methodological stipulations that support the theory that “in the sense in which is treated in the philosophy of art the *Trauerspiel* is an idea”²⁸. A consequence of this was the conduction of a survey of the various theses which have emerged since Baroque times regarding that age’s version of the tragedy –another form of drama– since “all essences exist in complete and immaculate independence”²⁹.

What is at issue here? Nothing more and nothing less than the most thorough definition of philosophy, more precisely philosophy of art, ever attempted by Benjamin. So thorough, indeed, that he offered no further development of the subject, though the text would henceforth influence his work. In fact, this “Prologue” remained a model to which he would refer back at key moments³⁰.

It is not insignificant to highlight the fact that the “Prologue” is presented as epistemo-critical or its description as a “huge ‘Chuzpe’” (letter to Gerschom Scholem, 19 February 1925), if we consider that it represents a bold attempt

27. BENJAMIN, W., *Gesammelte Schriften* [GS], ed. Rolf Tiedemann/Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1978, vol. II, 1, p. 163.

28. BENJAMIN, W., *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, ed. cit., p. 38.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

30. Take, for instance, *The Arcades Project*, [N 1a, 2]: “The book on the Baroque exposed the seventeenth century to the light of the present day. Here, something analogous must be done for the nineteenth century, but with greater distinctness”.

at organising all the recurring philosophic motifs (which, as it will be later shown, is one of the features of a true philosophical style) that were more or less recognisable in Benjamin's previous writings: language as medium, the link between truth and theology, history as real life, the critique of empiricism, the overcoming of the subject/object relationship mythology. In this work, all these motifs will attain their constellation (a concept that was in fact coined in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*).

5. CONTEMPLATING AND BREATHING. PHILOSOPHY AND PHYSIOLOGY

Thinking is breathing, renewal, ceaseless restarting: "This continual pausing for breath is the mode most proper to the process of the contemplation"³¹. That is the reason why philosophical presentation resorts to an original form of prose, one that aims not to enrapture or excite. It befits writing to take time with each sentence and start over again. This losing and catching of breath conveys the rhythmic impulse and structure of the contemplated object itself. Contemplating is thus an initiatic activity that follows the intimations of its object. "The more significant its objects, the more detached the reflexion must be. Short of the didactic precept, such sober prose is the only style suited to philosophical investigation. Ideas are the object of this investigation"³². Besides the presence of Novalis, we also manage to recognise here a "productive scepticism"³³ regarding all the usual methods of philosophy of art, namely induction, deduction and empathy –strictly speaking, not so much a method as a stance– which should be compared to "a pause for breath, after which thought can be totally and unhurriedly concentrated even on the very minutest object without the slightest inhibition"³⁴. This immersion is always exceedingly lucid but, as we will see later, devoid of intentionality. It is more like a drowning: you plunge into the object, and the waters of truth submerge you.

6. IMAGES OF IDEAS: CONSTELLATION AND MOTHER

"Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars"³⁵. Ideas, as objective interpretations of phenomena, that is to say, of their elements, determine

31. BENJAMIN, W., *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, ed. cit., p. 28.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

33. A version of the Goethean concept of "conditioned trust". Cfr., GOETHE, J.W., *HA*, ed. cit., vol. 12, *Maxim* 299, p. 406.

34. BENJAMIN, W., *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, ed. cit., p. 45.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

their reciprocal belonging [*Zusammengehörigkeit*], an insight that is not achieved by means of the inductive or deductive methods. Of special interest is the supreme importance of magnetism-based images, which will become a constant in future texts. “Ideas are timeless constellations³⁶, and by virtue of the elements being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed”³⁷. *Zusammengehörigkeit* is the concept that makes explicit the magnetic imagery. The idea can be defined as the configuration of a context (the constellation) in which extremes, in their utmost form (as their most intense limits) meet their equals: the more the empirical can be perceived as an extreme, the deeper it will be possible to penetrate it, and that same extreme is the starting-point of the concept³⁸. In the rapport between idea and image –for instance, tragedy, a unique instance in which origin and idea coincide– these extremes reveal themselves as guilt and expiation; or, on a broader canvas, like the idea of the *Trauerspiel*, as their virtual development, conceived as pre- and post-history.

Ideas –or, to use Goethe’s term, ideals– are the Faustian “Mothers” [...] It is the function of concepts to group phenomena together, and the division which is brought about within them thanks to the distinguishing power of the intellect is all the more significant in that it brings about two things at a single stroke: the salvation of phenomena and the representation of ideas³⁹.

Faustian mothers are those who engender the outlines of all things. In truth, they are more matrices than mothers (those who give birth to and look after children). Matrices preserve phenomena by displaying their essence and conceding them their reciprocal belonging, thus preventing their dispersion.

However, we find the image of the mother at the same paragraph outside the Faustian context: “Just as a mother is seen to begin to live in the fullness of her power only when the circle of her children, inspired by the feeling of her proximity, closes around her, so do ideas come to life only when extremes are assembled around them”⁴⁰.

That is the reason why it is not enough to add the *kath’auto* epithet to a concept-word for it to turn into an idea; consequently, Hegel’s “so much the worse for facts” is read here in non-idealistic terms, which is to say

36. This concept should be taken in the same light as the “eternal subject” that man is for art: cfr. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

38. Cfr. *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

40. *Ibidem*.

that, in order for the word to strike us like a *rocher de bronze*⁴¹, the authenticity of phenomena must be kindled at their source: “The authentic –the hallmark of origin in phenomena– is the object of discovery, a discovery which is connected in a unique way with the process of recognition”⁴². We will return to this.

7. TRUTH AND TREATISE

If we accept that there are certain objects without which we cannot think about the truth, namely, the theological objects⁴³, we will have to admit that the treatise is the form of written thought in which that is evident: the treatise cares not about the name of its writer, quotation and commentary being the two tools in its workshop. It is a matter of stripping oneself of all subjective authority, listening to the many voices and obeying that which causes one to think and must be thought about. The treatise becomes the paradigm of the voice that becomes medium, the voice without authority. Then, the anticipated formula appears: “Its method is essentially representation. Method is a digression”⁴⁴. Its most salient distinguishing feature is its relinquishment of the unbroken flow of intention.

The model of the treatise, the sober form of prose, reemerges in *One Way Street*⁴⁵. Benjamin details its characteristics: discretion, secret structure, discreet expressiveness due to ornamental interlacing, which in expository terms means that “the distinction between thematic and excursive expositions is abolished”. A decisive feature that links itself with the concepts of

41. A quote from King Frederick I of Prussia reproduced in a passage of an essay by Jean Hering quoted by Benjamin: *cf. Ibid.*, note 3, p. 257.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

43. Acknowledging this does not imply any degree of confusion between the sphere of revelation and philosophy. Theological objects are intimately linked to the meaning of languages and particularly to the desire for salvation.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

45. “Interior Decoration”, *One Way Street*: “The tractatus is an Arabic form. Its exterior is undifferentiated and unobtrusive, like the façades of Arabian buildings, whose articulation begins only in the courtyard. So, too, the articulated structure of the tractatus is invisible from the outside, revealing itself only from within. If it is formed by chapters, they have not verbal headings but numbers. The surface of its deliberations is not enlivened with pictures, but covered with unbroken, proliferating arabesques. In the ornamental density of this presentation, the distinction between thematic and excursive expositions is abolished”, BENJAMIN, W., “One Way Street” in: *Selected Writings*, vol. 1 1913-1926, ed. cit., pp. 444-488.

vestige and fragment in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, which should be read as miniatures of a whole whose image was shattered: “The value of fragments of thought is all the greater the less direct their relationship to the underlying idea, and the brilliance of the representation depends as much on this value [...]”⁴⁶. A conception’s degree of truth “is only to be grasped through immersion in the most minute details of subject-matter”⁴⁷. Obeying the object, being loyal to the object, letting the object (it may be a text, of course) step into our life: these are the ingredients that turn method into a digression.

As the object of a treatise on philosophy of art, the *Trauerspiel* is consequently an idea, while as a concept from the history of literature it would be added to the number of classifying concepts in aesthetics:

In literary-historical analysis differences and extremes are brought together in order that they might be relativized in evolutionary terms; in a conceptual treatment they acquire the status of complementary forces, and history is seen as no more than the coloured border to their crystalline simultaneity. From the point of the view of the philosophy of art the extremes are necessary; the historical process is merely virtual⁴⁸.

The idea –the extreme of a form or genre– has no place in the history of literature, and it is the idea that interests Benjamin in his book on the *Trauerspiel*.

8. WHAT DO PHILOSOPHIES DO? PHILOSOPHY, ART, SCIENCE. THE PHILOSOPHER’S TASK

What do philosophies do? They bring the world into the order of ideas. The philosopher’s task: to pursue a project into which the empirical world spontaneously enters and dissipates itself. We are looking here at an anti-empiricist statement. The philosopher stands midway between the scientific researcher –whose work and dignity consists in extinguishing the empirical order, by scattering it as concepts– and the artist, who also has its representative gesture: sketching “a foreshortened picture [*ein Bildchen*] of the world of ideas”. The effects of Goethe’s epigraph are quite visible.

46. BENJAMIN, W., *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, ed. cit., p. 29.

47. *Ibidem*.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Here are the typical paradoxes of the philosophic style: 1) an art of the discontinuous, as opposed to the chain of deduction⁴⁹; 2) the perseverance of the treatise, as opposed to the gesture of the fragment (it is not, therefore, a matter of making philosophy via a mimesis of the fragmentary; the intention is to grasp truth, as if it were a *rocher de bronze*); 3) the repetition of motifs, as opposed to shallow universalism; 4) the plenitude of concise positivity, as opposed to negative polemics⁵⁰. Let us now spell it out, as an aide-memoire: discontinuity, perseverance, repetition of motifs and positive plenitude.

If we rely on Benjamin's words, presentation as philosophic method implies the philosopher's task is a recurring one: "It is the task of the philosopher to restore, by presentation, the primacy of the symbolic character of the word, in which the idea is given self-consciousness [...]"⁵¹. The breathing image remains valid.

9. SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY

Let us try to summarise the contrasting features between science and philosophy, knowledge and truth. First criterion: the elimination of *Darstellung*. Second criterion: renunciation to the truth domain conveyed by languages [*meinen*⁵²], something quite obvious in mathematics (so begins the "Prologue"). What the languages mean is always related to God, with the implements of theology, even though "philosophy may not presume to speak in the tones of revelation"⁵³. A third criterion is an immanent relationship with

49. Logic, ethics, and aesthetics are names of specialised disciplines, but they are also "monuments in the discontinuous structure of the world of ideas". A confirmation of the "art of the discontinuous": cfr. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

50. Cfr. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 36, translation modified.

52. This appears to contradict the following: "The proper approach to it [the truth] is not therefore of meaning in knowledge, but rather a total immersion and absorption on it", *Ibid.*, p.36, translation modified. But there is actually no contradiction, if we consider that *meinen* can have two different meanings depending on whether its context is truth or knowledge. If the focus is on the connection with truth, to mean is the proper task of languages. The identity of meaning between all languages, on which the original condition of their relationship is based, is what Benjamin calls pure language (cfr. BENJAMIN, W., "The Task of the Translator", in: *Selected Writings*, vol. 1 1913-1926, ed. cit., pp. 254-255). If the meaning finds its determination in the empirical sphere, then it is part of an intentional cognitive process. In fact, this double scope of concepts is not unusual in Benjamin; witness, for instance, the double use of the concept of history in the above-mentioned work and in his 9 December 1923 letter to Florens Christian Rang.

53. BENJAMIN, W., *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, ed. cit., p. 217.

beauty. Actually, this is not just another criterion, but the master criterion, since it “provides an explanation of that simple and yet unpopular fact that even those philosophical systems whose cognitional element has long since lost any claim to scientific truth still possess contemporary relevance”⁵⁴.

10. METHOD IS A DETOUR. THE CONCEPT OF ORIGIN

Essence is not attained through comparisons and the definition of average values. Words that emerge from a thought or concept that is superficial, generalist or formal will never reach the level of ideas; hence the caution the philosopher must exercise regarding the tendency to convert words into typological concepts in order to better grasp them⁵⁵. Philosophy of art has often been a victim of this tendency. Regarding those authors who place Greek tragedies side-by-side with Baroque plays, the following must be said: “whether the tragic is a form which can be realized at all at the present time, or whether it is not a historically limited form, then, [...] the effect [...] is not one of tension, but of sheer incongruity”⁵⁶.

Such a form of research –which has subjected itself to all that shapeless mass in order to establish a “common ground”– can yield nothing more than some psychological data, impressions and behavioural reactions to tragedy, which are actually indicative of indifference towards tragedy, since they are comparable to reactions triggered by other elements, and are thus unable to convey “the essence of a field of artistic endeavour. This can only be done in a comprehensive explanation of the underlying concept of its form, the metaphysical substance of which should not simply be found within, but should appear in action, like the blood coursing through the body”⁵⁷.

Dependence on diversity (subjection to empirical variety); indifference towards rigorous thought (indistinction between concepts and ideas; relinquishing the presentation of essentialities –once again by referring to the Platonic theory of ideas): such are the ruling principles of induction in art history, and they entangle the researcher in a “boundless scepticism”⁵⁸.

A methodology should not be reduced to a preventive canon, ruled “by the simple fear of inadequacy on a factual level”⁵⁹, sometimes mingled with

54. *Ibid.*, p.32

55. *Cfr. Ibid.*, p. 39.

56. *Ibidem.*

57. *Ibidem.*

58. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

empathy, that is to say, the intuition of subjective moods, a stance that is untenable from a critical point of view. On the other hand, these studies also encompass a deductive method, in which the work is evaluated by means of “given magnitudes”, created out of comparisons between eminent representatives of each genre. This allows the definition of rules and laws, whereby the singular work is evaluated; the comparison between genres inspires a desire for universal artistic laws⁶⁰.

While induction degrades ideas into concepts by dispensing with their articulation, deduction degrades them by projecting them onto a pseudological continuum⁶¹. Croce’s correction of this problem in philosophy of art exerted a decisive influence on Benjamin (the generative element, the use of history and the refusal of generalist concepts), though he opposed Croce’s severity regarding the existence of ideas and refused his concept of intuition. In this manner, he reached his own concept of origin: “(one must look) for that which is exemplary, even if this exemplary character can be admitted only in respect of the merest fragment⁶²”. Here we have the good method, one that does not set out aggressively towards its object. As we will see, to look around is a Goethean gaze.

Quite elucidative in this context is a passage in “Versuch einer Witterungslehre”⁶³, where a “central point” is presented as a means to overcome rushed and restrictive causalities, purely empiricist inductions and formalistic deductions. This echoes in the concept of “literary genre” as idea in *Origin*, a name that finds itself once again elevated to its symbolic status, instead of a generalist concept that conveys the average value obtained through empirical comparison.

Also in “Essay on Meteorology”, we find the concept of correlate, which qualifies the rapport between the condition of appearance and concrete appearance.

60. Cfr. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

61. Cfr. *Ibidem*.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

63. “Essay on Meteorology”: “What the researcher must always pursue is that *central point* out of which rapports can be grasped [...] we cannot think about anything in isolation, in absolute muteness, whether existing or appearing, remaining or passing through, each one is always entered, transformed, enveloped by the other, causing and undergoing changes; and, if so many beings act through one another, when could we finally be able to decide who is master and who is servant, what determines beforehand, what necessarily follows? This is the great difficulty that accompanies all theoretical statements, here lies the danger of confusing cause with effect, sickness with symptom, action with character. In these circumstances, nothing more is left to the serious observer than deciding where to situate the central point [*der Mittelpunkt*] and then try to see how he might deal with the rest”, GOETHE, J.W., *HA*, ed. cit., vol. 13, pp. 306-307.

Correlates stand out from the stream of becoming as products of activities that manifest themselves by competing and cooperating with one another⁶⁴. This notion undeniably resounds in the concepts of origin and dialectic image.

Origin is what Benjamin calls the rhythmic confrontation of an idea with history; in other words, the original phenomenon is an actualisation of the idea presented as virtuality. Contemplation tends to resort to “an ever wider-ranging, an ever more intense reappraisal of phenomena [...] as long as the representation of them is also a representation of ideas, for it is here that their individuality is preserved”⁶⁵. In the concept of origin we find the fullest expression of the contemplative act’s essential features –restoration and incompleteness– and of its method: self-presentation.

The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance (this polarity will reemerge in the dialectical image). Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis. That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and reestablishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete⁶⁶.

Each original phenomenon defines the figure under which an idea, for instance, the idea of tragedy or *Trauerspiel*, repeatedly confronts the historic world until it has attained its fullest expression throughout its history. “Origin is not, therefore, discovered by the examination of actual findings, but is related to their history and their subsequent development”⁶⁷. Its proper dialectic develops between singularity and repetition. The effects of contemplative breathing are perceptible.

In the relationship between idea and history where origin plays a central role we observe the influence of Goethe’s epigraph (quoted at the beginning of this text), while the definition of what an idea might be is completed: “For in the science of philosophy the concept of being is not satisfied by the phenomenon until it has absorbed all its history. [...] This gives the idea its total scope. And its structure is a monadological one, imposed by totality in contrast to its own inalienable isolation”⁶⁸.

64. Cfr. GOETHE, J.W., *HA*, ed. cit., vol. 13, pp. 311-313.

65. BENJAMIN, W., *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, ed. cit., p.45.

66. *Ibidem*.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

The idea as a monad is a way of minutely concentrating the notion of idea as an objective interpretation of phenomena, while at the same time celebrating the quite Goethean coincidence between the singular and the universal: “The purpose of the representation of the idea is nothing less than an abbreviated outline of this image of the world”⁶⁹.

Let us now consider the relationship between the Benjaminian origin and the Goethean original phenomenon. To Goethe, there is nothing behind the original phenomenon: it is simultaneously the limit of the cognoscible, and thus real, and the brightness of the final cognoscibility, and thus ideal. It is not, consequently, an empirical element; rather, it is the limit of the empirical, though it does not transcend it: it is the figure of growth and appearance in action, displaying across time, so to speak, an outline, a miniature sketch of the world of plants and colours, a drawing in motion, generator of new forms. But probably there is also nothing behind the phenomena, since the original phenomenon is neither a foundation nor a cause that may be behind or under the phenomena, just that condition of the visibility and temporality of phenomena that is inseparable from them and reflects itself on them whenever we immerse ourselves into their details (to use a formulation by Benjamin), for instance, the various leaf shapes in the metamorphosis of plants. Lastly, the metamorphosis has its own rhythm, defined through the polarity of expansion and contraction.

It is time now to address the (far-reaching) irradiation of the conceptual constellation created by the realisation that method is a digression. We will resort to texts written after *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, which display clear connections with Goethe’s morphological thought, in the hope of expanding our comprehension of the experience of the threshold.

11. WHAT-HAS-BEEN: THE MOST INTIMATE IMAGE OF THE NOW. THE NOW: THE MOST INTIMATE IMAGE OF WHAT-HAS-BEEN

A dream:

A visit to Goethe’s house. I cannot recall having seen rooms in the dream. It was a perspective of whitewashed corridors like those in a school. Two elderly English lady visitors and a curator are the dream’s extras. The curator requests us to sign the visitors’ book lying open on a desk at the farthest end of a passage. On reaching it, I find as I turn the pages my name already entered in big, unruly, childish characters⁷⁰.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

70. BENJAMIN, W., “Vestibule”, in: *One Way Street*, ed. cit., p.445

Another dream:

In a dream I saw myself in Goethe's study. It bore no resemblance to the one in Weimar. Above all, it was very small and had only one window. The side of the writing desk abutted on the wall opposite the window. Sitting and writing at it was the poet, in extreme old age. I was standing to one side when he broke off to give me a small vase, an urn from antiquity, as a present. I turned it between my hands. An immense heat filled the room. Goethe rose to his feet and accompanied me to an adjoining chamber, where a table was set for my relatives. It seemed prepared, however, for many more than their number. Doubtless there were places for my ancestors, too. At the end, on the right, I sat down beside Goethe. When the meal was over, he rose with difficulty, and by gesturing I sought leave to support him. Touching his elbow, I began to weep with emotion⁷¹.

These dreams offer precise corroboration of the practice of remembering the night on the opposite bank of life: the day. Both are unsurpassable touchstones of the "now of cognoscibility", a subject that presents itself as an anticipation and confirmation of the now as a matter of interest.

In the first dream, Benjamin sees himself visiting Goethe's house. It reminds him of a school, a row of corridors repeating themselves. As he leafs through the visitors' book to sign it, he sees that his name is already there, confirming that in order to be able to follow the traces of a being, one must have already followed them, which prepares us for the relationship between trace and aura. Following traces is an activity that answers a calling from the aura (an experience that is immediate rather than instantaneous, since immediacy is connected with divestment, something that demands preparation and, consequently, time and delay): "Trace and aura. The trace is appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace, we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us"⁷².

In the second dream, we observe an intensification of the then/now relationship, which becomes ever more intimate, ever more profound, as can be seen by the identification of a particular place in Goethe's house (we are there again), in which the dream unfolds: his study. Benjamin had visited it in the Summer of 1928 (while preparing the "Goethe" entry for the *Great*

71. BENJAMIN, W., "Dining Hall", in: *One Way Street*, ed. cit., pp. 445-446.

72. BENJAMIN, W., *The Arcades Project*, ed. cit, [M16a, 4].

Soviet Encyclopedia), and wrote a masterful description of it, in which we find the ultimate formulation of the “Antiquity of the poet”⁷³.

Goethe welcomes Benjamin and gives him a present. “Gifts must affect the receiver to the point of shock”, as stated in *One Way Street*⁷⁴. Though there is no shock here, properly speaking, there is no doubt that the atmosphere in which the gift, an antique urn, is accepted is disturbing, for the temperature rises: “An immense heat filled the room”. In this first moment where the what-has-been recognises the now, Benjamin receives more than the spoils of the past; he also receives confirmation that “it is the present that polarizes the event into fore- and after-history”⁷⁵. Goethe’s gift anticipates that image in which then and now become magnetically linked and form a constellation, and the most intimate image of the what-has-been emerges out of now⁷⁶.

At a certain point in the dream, Benjamin is led by Goethe to a room with a table set for him and relatives, but so ample that it was certainly also intended for his ancestors. It is impossible not to be reminded of the herald who calls the dead to the feast in *The Arcades Project*: “At any given time, the living see themselves in the midday of history. They are obliged to prepare a banquet for the past. The historian is the herald who invites the dead to the table”⁷⁷. Such is the task of historian Walter Benjamin. But, in the dream, the herald is the poet.

Benjamin is accorded the privilege (born out of veneration, a particular form of connection by affinity) of sitting besides Goethe, at the head of the table. At the end of the meal, Goethe rises and the dreamer, noticing that he staggers, asks permission to help him, thus acknowledging that deep longing to touch the person one venerates. The original instance of that relationship is found in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*⁷⁸. There, the journey

73. Cfr., BENJAMIN, W., “Weimar”, in: *Selected Writings*, General Editor Michael W. Jennings, Editorial Board Markus Bullock, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith, vol. 2 1927-1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone and others, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 148-151. Concerning the relation between the “Antiquity of the poet” (Goethe) and the “Antiquity of the philosopher” (Benjamin), cfr. MOLDER, M. F., “O eterno motivo”, in: *Semear na neve. Estudos sobre Walter Benjamin*, Lisboa, Relógio d’Água, 1999, pp. 155-185.

74. BENJAMIN, W., “Fancy Goods”, in: *One Way Street*, ed. cit., p. 463.

75. BENJAMIN, W., *The Arcades Project*, ed. cit, [N7a, 8].

76. Cfr. *Ibid.*, [N 2a, 3].

77. *Ibid.*, [N15, 2].

78. DANTE, *Divina Commedia* [bilingual edition], trans., intro. and notes Vasco Graça Moura, Lisboa, Bertrand Editora, 1977 (3rd edition).

that saves the narrator from the *selva oscura* and all its evils is undertaken under the direction of his master, author, guide, father and most loved poet: Virgil. The difference regarding Benjamin lies in the fact that the help Dante receives from Virgil has no reciprocity. On the contrary, Benjamin's dream presents a reciprocal solicitude: he helps his master, who staggers as he rises. Goethe accepts that help. Here we have a second instance of then's acknowledgement of now: in a fecund symmetry, now becomes the most intimate image of then. The emotional weeping conveys the irreparable: nothing can make Goethe live again.

Goethe will always be a very old master, father and author (as Virgil was to Dante), while, before Goethe, Benjamin will always be young, even a child, as indicated by the "big, unruly, childish characters" in which his name is written on the visitors' book in the first dream.

12. MAGIC WORKSHOP

To those who focus more on what is calling them than on their reactions to the calling, no moment is idle; all moments interweave in endless combinations, searching for their transmutation into gold. That is why those passages describing penetrating insights into life are more important than finished works, which true writers tend to undervalue. Once again, Benjamin draws inspiration from Goethe to convey to us that work of witchcraft called genius:

To great writers, finished works weigh lighter than those fragments on which they work throughout their lives. For only the more feeble and distracted take an inimitable pleasure on closure, feeling that their lives have thereby been given back to them. For the genius each ceasura, and the heavy blows of fate, fall like gentle sleep itself into his workshop labor. Around it he draws a charmed circle of fragments. "Genius is application"⁷⁹.

In a later text, where he, obeying his own injunctions, follows Goethe's example, we find a variation on that workshop, which he describes as "the method of composition itself", stressing that power of incorporation that is inherent to it. A work in gestation feeds on everything; nothing is alien to it, from voluntary decision through unexpected grace to the vertigo of opposition:

79. BENJAMIN, W., "Standard Clock", in: *One Way Street*, ed. cit., p.446.

Say something about the method of composition itself: how everything one is thinking at a specific moment in time must at all costs be incorporated into the project then at hand. Assume that the intensity of the project is thereby attested, or that one's thoughts, from the very beginning, bear this project within them as their telos. So it is with the present portion of the work, which aims to characterize and to preserve the intervals of reflection, the distances lying between the most essential parts of this work, which are turned most intensively to the outside⁸⁰.

Then, to search every corner of the workshop, Benjamin descends deep into the inner ear in thesis III of "The Writer's Technique in Thirteen Theses"⁸¹, urging us to "avoid everyday mediocrity". If we want the magical operation to take place, we will not need to restrict ourselves to the "perceptible silence of the night", that natural tuner of the inner ear, since an "accompaniment by an *étude* or a cacophony of voices", once absorbed, will become the touchstone of the alchemical power of the work to come.

13. MATTERS OF STYLE

Benjamin will always be closer to an affinity between body and soul (the Greeks, Goethe, Hamann, Wittgenstein) than to the subject/object mythology or to phenomenological reductiveness. Matters of style, too, manifest as physiological matters, depending on bodily moods devoid of transcendence, intentionality or theories of consciousness, moods anticipated by a requirement of loyalty towards things. Hence his comparing of the body of the "bad, untrained runner", which falters through his "slack, overenthusiastic body action", a metaphor of a bad writer, with the "well-trained body" that stands for the good writer.

The good writer says no more than he thinks. And much depends on that. For speech is not simply the expression but also the making real of thought. In the same way that running is not the expression of the desire to reach a goal, but also the realization of that goal. But the kind of realization—whether it is precisely adapted to the goal, or whether it loosely and wantonly wastes itself on the desire—depends on the training of the person who is running. The more he has himself on hand and avoids superfluous, exaggerated, and uncoordinated movements, the more self-sufficient his position will be

80. BENJAMIN, W., *The Arcades Project*, ed. cit., [N1, 3].

81. BENJAMIN, W., *One Way Street*, ed. cit., p. 458.

and the more economical his use of his body. The bad writer has many ideas which he lets run riot, just like the bad, untrained runner with his slack, over-enthusiastic body action. And for that very reason, he can never say soberly what he thinks. The talent of the good writer is to make use of his style to supply his thought with a spectacle of the kind provided by a well-trained body. He never says more than he has thought. Hence, writing redounds not to his own benefit, but solely to the benefit of what he wants to say⁸².

Here we have, then, that rejection of all subjective preeminence that allows us to avoid phantasmal pretensions: refuse “finds”, never fall for your own wit, do not cheat, distance yourself, unknow yourself, keep vigilant: such is the forge of sobriety Benjamin so loves (a legacy from Hölderlin and the Romantics). To soberly state is to renounce undue, premature satiety. Writing must not serve the writer, only the writer’s meaning; here we have the very formula of sobriety. The fact that good writers say no more than what they think does not imply that their writing is totally controlled by reason, for thought encompasses a swarm of activities, of which the first and most absorbing is called contemplation –an immersion in the object that is independent of intention, emphatically refusing any psychological elements–.

14. A DISCIPLINE OF DETOUR: LEARNING TO LOSE ONESELF

We must learn to lose ourselves in a city just as we lose ourselves in a forest. This kind of learning is associated to the most secret inhabitants of the most initiatic garden, the *Tiergarten*: the “threshold dwellers”, protectors of entrances, skilled in waiting, who share a kinship with the Matrices of *Faust* –here they are again–.

Not to find one’s way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one’s way in a city, as one loses one’s way in a forest, requires some schooling. Street names must speak to the urban wanderer like the snapping of dry twigs, and little streets in the heart of the city must reflect the times of the day, for him, as clearly as a mountain valley. This art I acquired rather late in life; it fulfilled a dream, of which the first traces were labyrinths on the blotting papers in my school notebooks [...] He led the way along these paths, and each, for him, became precipitous. They led downward, if not to the Mothers of all being, then certainly to those of this garden [...]

82. BENJAMIN, W., “Thought Figures”, in: *Selected Writings*, vol. 2., ed. cit., pp. 723-724.

Among the caryatids and atlantes, the putti and pomonas, which in those days looked on me, I stood closest to those dust-shrouded specimens of the race of threshold dwellers –those who guard the entrance to life, or to a house–. For they are versed in waiting⁸³.

We constantly witness, in Benjamin's writings, a multitude of threshold experiences⁸⁴, of which learning to lose oneself is an exemplary case, a variation on and explanation of "method is a detour". Our awareness grows of how Benjamin's way of thinking drives him to a discipline of vertigo, which began quite early, with the ink labyrinths on the blotters of his childhood. The keepers of the house and existence, the threshold dwellers, are not allowed to enter the house, to wander through existence. The threshold dwellers do not move: they observe, foresee, watch and wait, and because of that Benjamin recognises in them a high form of historical knowledge, the art of waiting, which makes them akin to those who know the full, messianic time.

Lastly, the return to the pit, to the subterranean of the Mothers, of the Faustian Matrices, if not of all being, at least of that garden, the *Tiergarten*. Seriousness and a humorous tone combine to turn that garden into a miniature that redeems both his childhood and the whole of his existence, now dedicated to forebodings of endless destruction.

15. NEW OBJECTS, NEW METHODS

Scientific method is distinguished by the fact that, in leading to new objects, it develops new methods. Just as form in art is distinguished by the fact that, opening up new contents, it develops new forms⁸⁵. It is only from without that a work of art has one and *only* one form, that a treatise has one and *only* one method⁸⁶.

83. BENJAMIN, W., "Berlin Childhood around 1900" (Final Version), in: *Selected Writings*, General Editor Michael W. Jennings, Editorial Board Markus Bullock, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith, vol. 3 1935-1938, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland and others, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, pp.352-353.

84. The "Arcades", too, are threshold experiences stabilised as architectural forms within an urban context.

85. How different this is from the negligence and even contempt with which these concepts are handled in "The Author as Producer", where his lack of adjustment to the materialistic thought concerning aesthetics is nevertheless quite obvious. And so, even in that text Benjamin's understanding intelligence does not completely renounce truth.

86. Cfr. BENJAMIN, W., *The Arcades Project*, ed. cit, [N9, 2]

In the above passage we come across, on the one hand, a new variation on “method is a digression”, given that those who focus on an object renounce all rules that precede or are not part of the process of their search for it⁸⁷. And, on the other, we observe a return to the prose form that is appropriate to the philosophy of art, namely the treatise. It is not a matter, evidently, of falling into the false dilemma of wondering whether it is form that yields content or vice versa, but of admitting that works of art generate the magical workshop out of which they themselves emerge, forcing whoever wishes to understand them to follow whatever they find most desirable (in the Goethean sense): “The most desirable would be [...] that the language needed to describe the details of a particular circle, could be drawn from the circle itself [...]”⁸⁸. Once again, we find such Benjaminian motifs as the dispersion of the empirical as elements, the overcoming of the conscious plane, intentionality, and the critique on the mythology of the subject/object relationship: “Each act of vision [*Ansehen*] becomes contemplation [*Betrachten*], each act of contemplation becomes an act of meditation [*Sinnen*], each act of meditation becomes an act of connection [*Verknüpfen*], so much so that we can say that, with each careful gaze, we are already theorising about the world”⁸⁹.

The careful gaze integrates a series of metamorphoses that trigger a crescendo in terms of receptivity, fertility, precision and abundance: vision turns into connection, traversing contemplation and meditation. All this, adds Goethe, takes place in a sphere of awareness, self-knowledge, freedom and irony.

Once again, it should be stressed that this has nothing to do with the empirical, which has become, with the help of the concept, a scientific construct that has solidified as a theory of progress whose petrified apogee is known as Positivism. On the contrary, the careful gaze demands that “the observer must remain as malleable as the organs he sees seem malleable to him”⁹⁰. It is here that we find the “new objects call for the development of new methods” motif.

16. SELF-PRESENTATION AND MONTAGE

As a matter of fact, it should be stressed that in *Das Passagen-Werk* Benjamin continues to discuss the form of the treatise. Indeed, he goes a step

87. It is worth noting that in these final writings Benjamin has dropped the opposition between scientific knowledge and philosophy, perhaps out of obedience to science in the Goethean sense, perhaps to adapt himself to the theses of historic materialism.

88. GOETHE, J.W., *Die Farbenlehre*, in: *HA*, ed. cit., vol. 13, §755, p.107.

89. GOETHE, J.W., *Die Farbenlehre*, Preface, in: *HA*, ed. cit., vol. 13, p.317.

90. “Einzelnes”, *LA*, I, p. 90.

further than he did in his *Trauerpsiel* book and takes that discussion to the brink of no return, deepening the “method is a digression” concept. There is a growing conceptual simplicity, closely connected to a proven discipline, namely, the art of quoting without using inverted commas, a suspension of authorship that resorts to an editing technique: a construction of collected and organised facts that entirely does away with theory. “This work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage”⁹¹.

Benjamin has nothing to tell, only to show. His guide is still Goethe, as explicitly stated, regarding the fundamental formula of what is at issue: “Formula: construction out of facts. Construction with the complete elimination of theory. What only Goethe in his morphological writings has attempted”⁹². This means that facts are already the theory, and should not be mistaken for the lazy belief that “facts speak for themselves”: “The highest thing would be to understand that everything factual is already theory. The blue of the sky reveals to us the fundamental law of chromatics. One should never search for anything behind the phenomena: they themselves are the theory”⁹³.

The above text should be combined with § 228 in the *Theory of colours* in order to grasp the concept of “primitive fact”, which Benjamin associates with the concepts of origin and of dialectic image, and has nothing to do with the empirical of the scientific knowledge, but instead with an underlying coincidence between *ordo de facto* and *ordo de jure*:

[...] when confronted with nature’s manifestations, one needs to perform an act of looking around [*umhersehen*], at the point in which something similar, something akin appears, because only through the reunion of what is akin can occur the slow emergence of a totality that expresses itself and needs no ulterior explanation”⁹⁴.

This Goethean “looking around” will make it possible to revisit motifs already addressed in the “Prologue” to *Origin*. To look around implies a movement of the whole body, fulfils its sagittal alignments and promotes the exercise of contemplation as the power to discover connections until a constellation is formed; in other words, until a comprehensive configuration of reality is drawn out of its core. The look around retains the good resemblance, that is to say, the one that leads to the reunion of the akin (affinity,

91. BENJAMIN, W., *The Arcades Project*, ed. cit, [N1, 10].

92. *Ibid.*, [O°, 73].

93. GOETHE, J.W., *HA*, ed. cit., vol. 12, *Maxim* 488, p. 432.

94. GOETHE, J.W., *Die Farbenlehre*, in: *HA*, ed. cit., vol. 13, §228, p.108.

not contiguity; the magnetic connection is the most powerful affinitive relation), with a view to attain a self-expressive totality, free from any causal explanatory illusion. The fact that method is a digression, interpreted here as a variation on the threshold, has to do with the morphological demands of doing justice to what one observes, by choosing from the realm of what is being observed the elements that allow one to understand it. Benjamin left his fingerprints on the ancient vase Goethe gave him: he wants to disclose, not the growth of plants or the laws of chromatic energy, but the traces of human life, dignifying them in the only possible way: by using them, that is to say, quoting them. “Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them”⁹⁵.

17. MAGNETIC NEEDLE AND DANGEROUS HEIGHTS

Let us linger upon the images relating to journey and movement (particularly, climbing up a mountain) –and on the extremely frequent use of images of attraction: the magnetic element– which convey an experience of coming out of one’s self (in Goethe’s mind the magnet itself is the *in nuce* presentation of the original phenomenon⁹⁶). The image of the compass, the quivering of the magnetic needle as it searches for the magnetic north, possesses a primordial value in terms of communicating what happens with those who absorb themselves into study, into contemplative ecstasy.

Comparison of other people’s attempts to the undertaking of a sea voyage in which the ships are drawn off course by the magnetic North Pole. Discover *this* North Pole. What for others are deviations are, for me, the data which determine my course. –On the differentials of time (which, for others, disturb the main lines of the inquiry), I base my reckoning⁹⁷.

What matters is finding the magnetic pole and incorporating the deviations, the digressions. “[T]he philosopher [...] must be someone immune to vertigo –an independent and, if need be, solitary worker”⁹⁸. The look around,

95. BENJAMIN, W., *The Arcades Project*, ed. cit, [N1a, 8].

96. GOETHE, J.W., *HA*, ed. cit., vol. 12, *Maxim* 19, p. 367.

97. BENJAMIN, W., *The Arcades Project*, ed. cit, [N1, 2].

98. *Ibid.*, [N 1a,1].

which is, as previously stated, a Goethean look, is suspended for fear of vertigo, a reticence that paradoxically allows one to train one's body against vertigo, for that reticence is a renunciation of premature happiness, preparing us for the happiness (which will come punctually with the catching of breath) that the landscape, finally seen in all its splendour, will inspire. To scale "dangerous heights", through risk and ascesis, in the joyous expectancy of subjection to plenitude.

How this work was written: rung by rung, according as chance would offer a narrow foothold, and always like someone who scales dangerous heights and never allows himself a moment to look around, for fear of becoming dizzy (but also because he would save for the end the full force of the panorama opening out to him)⁹⁹.

18. FINALE

The true method of making things present is to represent them in our space (not to represent ourselves in their space). [...] The same method applies, in essence, to the consideration of great things from the past –the cathedral of Chartres, the temple of Paestum– when, that is, a favorable prospect presents itself: the method of receiving the things into our space. We don't displace our being into theirs; they step into our life¹⁰⁰.

For the immortal stands like this obelisk (Place de la Concorde), regulating the spiritual traffic that surges thunderously about him –and the inscription he bears helps no one¹⁰¹.

In the second excerpt we find a dreadful, grotesque confirmation of the fact that if the thing does not enter our space, changing us, that is to say, if the thing is forced to serve the illusion that we have entered it, then the immortal, the undecipherable one, will fulfill a grotesque duty by reigning over an alien noise, in a shrewd form of glory. The Egyptian Obelisk at the Place de la Concorde is a deafening illustration of that.

If the oneiric state is the transformation inherent in that which has already passed, that which once was and no longer is, and if "[t]he dream waits secretly for the awakening", the awakening that frees it from death, then the false entrance into the temple of Paestum is a twisted control operation (composed of noxiously empathetic gestures) that keeps that awakening from taking place. If

99. *Ibid.*, [N2, 4].

100. *Ibid.*, [H2, 3].

101. BENJAMIN, W., "Paperweight", in: *One Way Street*, ed. cit., p. 462.

we are to fulfill its expectation of being awakened, the temple will have to enter our life; then, what we have been waiting for will flood us.

And that leads us to discover, in the first excerpt, another formulation—one of the most illuminating—concerning the issues of method in Benjamin and the multiple threshold experiences they imply, which sheds light on the metamorphosis undergone by those who open themselves to knowledge, a process that mixes, in quantities no one will ever be able to regulate, being initiated into life with doing justice to it. Hence our joy at the following Goethean words: “Every new object, properly contemplated, opens up a new organ in us”¹⁰².

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102. “Bedeutende Fördernis durch ein einziges geistreiches Wort”, GOETHE, J.W., *HA*, ed. cit., vol. 13, p. 38.

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