

## Walter Benjamin's Unacknowledged Romanticism

Nicholas Halmi  
(University of Washington)

No language was intended for translation into English, and every language contains words that remind us of this fact. Such words make a necessity of what Walter Benjamin considered a virtue in translations: refraining from conveying the meaning of the original. In German, one of those words is *Darstellung*.

There is no single English equivalent to this word. Depending on the context, it might be translated *presentation*, *representation*, *depiction*, *portrayal*, or *performance*. The choice is of particular significance in the context of Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (published in 1928), or *Origin of the German Mourning Play*, where the term is crucial to the author's explanation of his task. For the most part this word is least inadequately rendered *presentation*, but in the so-called "epistemo-critical preface" to the *Trauerspiel* book Benjamin himself offers another possibility that is especially suggestive for my purposes. He defines *Darstellung* as *Umweg*—as a detour, as an indirect way of revealing something that cannot be observed or known directly (208).<sup>1)</sup> Nowhere is Adorno's observation that "concepts in

---

**【Keywords】** Benjamin, German Romanticism, representation, *Darstellung*, accessibility of truth, temporality of Ideas, denunciation of the concept of symbol, Ideas as monads

Benjamin have a tendency to hide their conceptuality in an authoritarian fashion” (62) more justified than in the case of *Darstellung*, a concept predicated on the inadequacy of concepts to the task of philosophy or—what amounts to the same thing in the *Trauerspiel* book—of literary criticism. Whereas, according to Benjamin, “the methodology of knowledge” consists in organizing phenomena by means of concepts formed in the consciousness, the “true method of the philosophical treatise” must consist in presenting ideas or essences to the consciousness by means of phenomena (209). But if one kind of roundabout method, indirectly relating Ideas to historical phenomena, is needed to reveal (in this instance) the nature of the German Baroque *Trauerspiel*, then a different kind, refusing any mystifying appeal to transcendence, is needed to expose the affinity between the conceptual foundation of Benjamin’s methodological theory and German Romantic aesthetic theory, of which he is highly critical in the *Trauerspiel* book. The detour to be taken here is an exposition of the concept of *Darstellung* itself.

In his dissertation of 1920, Benjamin argued that the early Romantics (particularly Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel) conceived criticism not as the occasion for judging a work of art but as the method of completing it [die Methode seiner Vollendung] (*Begriff* 69). This completion was to manifest itself as the presentation of a work’s “prosaic core” [die Darstellung des prosaischen Kerns in jedem Werk] (*Begriff* 109). Proceeding from a work’s intrinsic properties rather than from norms extrinsic to it, the criticism envisaged by the Romantics,

---

1) Other contextually plausible translations of Benjamin’s *Darstellung*, suggested by Carol Jacobs, are translation, citation, and plagiarism (23). I shall discuss the role of citation in *Darstellung* presently.

as opposed to that which judges works or assigns them to generic categories, was an immanent critique. Its purpose was “to unfold the formal possibilities inherent in a work of art, supplementing what was achieved in the actual work ... with other possible works that together constitute what Benjamin describes as the speculative ‘idea of art’” (Caygill 45). Benjamin’s term for this process, *Entfaltung*, the German equivalent of the Latin *explicatio*, conveys a sense not merely of unfolding but of developing and displaying, as well as of interpreting, and hence it encapsulates very effectively his conception of Romantic criticism as an extension of its object of study: “Critique of a work is ... its reflection, which obviously can only bring about the unfolding of the germ of the reflection that is immanent to the work” (*Begriff* 78).<sup>2</sup> Three years after publishing his dissertation, Benjamin began his own immanent critique of the Baroque *Trauerspiel*, and one of the goals of this critique was to rescue the mourning play in its distinctiveness from the conventional derision of it as a gross caricature of classical tragedy. But the context in which he elaborated his conception of this project—and of the centrality of *Darstellung* to it—was quite different from that of the dissertation.

For one thing, he was no longer concerned specifically with early Romantic criticism, which in fact he had judged negatively in the dissertation for having dissolved the distinction between the absolute and the profane by postulating the accessibility of the absolute to reflection and its representability in symbolic form in the individual work of art (see Gasché). The claim he advanced now was at once more universal and more personal: *Darstellung* is the method of all

---

2) For further discussion of the concept of immanent critique, see McCole 8999.

philosophical writing, and hence also of his own study. That is why the question of *Darstellung* must not be avoided in a reflection on philosophical methodology. In the preface to the *Trauerspiel* book, this question is treated under the aspects of content and form: what is to be represented, and how it is to be represented? Benjamin's answer to the first part of this question is unequivocal: "If presentation is to assert itself as the true method of the philosophical treatise, then it must be the presentation of Ideas" (*Ursprung* 209). In this respect the methodology of philosophy differs fundamentally from that of knowledge [Erkenntnis], by which Benjamin seems to mean primarily the natural sciences, for he laments the common tendency to associate "the philosopher all too closely with the scientist [Forscher], and often with the inferior sort of scientist," allowing "no place for consideration of *Darstellung* in the philosopher's task" (212). Whereas knowledge imposes coherence on phenomena by means of concepts formed in the consciousness, philosophy describes the unity inherent in truth by means of Ideas given for reflection.

What follows from this distinction between knowledge and truth is the definition of Idea as *Sein*, a word that is better translated here as *essence* than as *being* or *existence*. Its nearest equivalent, as Benjamin suggests by invoking at this point in his argument Plato's doctrine of Ideas, is the Platonic term *ta ontos on*, the truly real: "As essence, truth and Idea acquire that supreme metaphysical significance which the Platonic system emphatically attributes to them" (*Ursprung* 210). Unlike the objects of knowledge, Ideas are beyond question because they are not products of the mind itself: "Ideas are something pre-existent [ein Vorgegebenes]" (210). The implication of this conception of philosophy's task for Benjamin's own book is that it

cannot content itself with organizing empirical data into a coherent form, but must instead present the very essence of the *Trauerspiel*. This is not the same as an abstract or average, which can be arrived at inductively. For the Idea of the *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin states vigorously, “defines no class and does not contain that generality on which the respective conceptual levels of the system of classification depend, namely the average” (218). That this hostility to the inductive method was personal as well as theoretical can be inferred from a letter of 10 January 1924 in which Benjamin informed his friend Florens Christian Rang about the state of his preparation: “My foundation is remarkably –indeed disquietingly –poor: a knowledge of some few dramas, nothing like all that are relevant. An encyclopedic reading of the works in the tiny amount of time available to me would inevitably have produced an unconquerable disgust in me” (*Briefe* 406). But more was at stake here than the understandable desire to avoid tedious work by means of a methodology that disavowed the need for an exhaustive foundation of empirical data.

Induction depends on access to information, *Darstellung* on access to truth. Inductive scholarship, which amasses similar-sounding quotations so that generalizations may be made about them, makes readers concede its point by exhausting their patience. The presentation of Ideas, in contrast, functions as a ladder that is discarded once it has been ascended, for it seeks discursively to transcend discourse, directing readers to the point at which, the mind being one with its object, nothing further can be said: “It’s not a mysterious horribleness in the facts of the matter that brings this about but the nature of truth itself, in the face of which even the purest fire of enquiry ... is extinguished” (*Ursprung* 216). Of course, this conclusion neglects the

fact that access to truth is not necessarily grounds for academic advancement. Benjamin was to discover that the truth claims implied in his appeal to the realm of Ideas could not ensure the acceptance of his book as a *Habilitationsschrift*, the post-doctoral dissertation he needed to qualify for a university lectureship. But beyond that, the quasi-Platonism of his preface raises important questions to which I shall turn now: an epistemological question about the accessibility of truth and an ontological question about the relation between a priori Ideas and historical phenomena.

I refer to a quasi-Platonism because Benjamin, notwithstanding his approving reference to Plato's theory of Ideas, departs from that theory in a crucial respect, which has important consequences for his conception of *Darstellung*. The departure is signalled in the very title of the book, which specifies the origin [Ursprung] of the German mourning play as its subject. By means of his conception of literary form as origin, Benjamin radically historicizes the theory of Ideas:

Origin, though a thoroughly historical category, has nothing in common with genesis. What is meant by origin is not the process in which something emergent comes into being [Werden des Entsprungenen], but rather that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearing [Werden und Vergehen Entspringendes]. Origin stands like a whirlpool in the river of becoming [*im Fluss des Werdens*], and it draws the material of genesis [das Entstehungsmaterial] into its own rhythm. ... In every originary phenomenon [Ursprungsphänomen] the form is determined in which an Idea confronts the historical world again and again until it stands completed [*vollendet*] in the totality of its history. (*Ursprung* 226)

Bernd Witte rightly observes that “far from being ahistorical,” as the Platonic terminology of the “Epistemo-critical Preface” suggests,

Benjamin's theory "takes history particularly seriously" (*Intellektuelle* 111). Whereas for Plato Ideas are immutable, providing patterns for everything in the phenomenal world without themselves being implicated in it, for Benjamin Ideas manifest themselves precisely through change, in a "series of historical formulations" (*Ursprung* 227). As origin, the Idea is at once transcendental and historical, unfolding in time according to its inherent logic. Thus "the form of the 'mourning play' as an 'origin' cannot be inductively extracted from surviving examples of the genre, nor deduced from Ideal considerations in abstraction from individual works" (Caygill 57). Because the Idea consists in the totality of its possible and actual incarnations, it never reveals itself fully in any individual work, or what Benjamin calls "the naked and manifest existence of the factual [des Faktischen]" (*Ursprung* 226), but rather yields itself only to the insight into the dual rhythm of every originary phenomenon: "It has to be recognized on the one hand as a restoration, as a re-establishment, and on the other hand—for exactly that reason—as something incomplete, something unfinished [Unvollendetes, Unabgeschlossenes]" (226).

Benjamin's assertion of the temporality of Ideas, from which it follows that an Idea and a phenomenon can never perfectly coincide, helps explain his vehement denunciation, in the third section of the *Trauerspiel* book, of the concept of the symbol in Romantic aesthetics. What he particularly objects to is the claim, as in the canonical formulation of the classicist Friedrich Creuzer (quoted by Benjamin himself), that the symbol is "the sensualized, embodied Idea itself [die versinnlichte, verkörperte Idee selbst]" (Creuzer 70; *Ursprung* 341). To Benjamin this notion is nothing more than an illegitimate secularization of an authentically theological concept:

The most striking aspect of this vulgar use of the term [i.e. *symbol*] is that the concept which refers in an imperative manner, as it were, to the inseparable connection of form and content serves as a philosophical glossing over [Beschönigung] of the inability, owing to a lack of dialectical rigor [Sthlung], to account for content in formal analysis and for form in the aesthetics of content. For this abuse occurs precisely wherever the “appearance” of an “Idea” in a work of art is proclaimed a “symbol.” The unity of the sensuous and the suprasensuous, which constitutes the paradox of the theological symbol, is distorted [verzerrt] into a relationship of appearance and essence [Erscheinung und Wesen]. The introduction of such a distorted [entstellten] concept of the symbol into aesthetics, a degenerate Romantic extravagance [romantische und lebenswidrige Verschwendung], preceded the desolation of recent art criticism. (*Ursprung* 336-37)

In proposing a method of *Darstellung* that will be consistent with and adequate to his theory of Ideas, Benjamin dissociates himself from Romantic criticism in two ways, while retaining his commitment to the Idea of immanent critique as elaborated in his dissertation on the Romantics: “This critique should do nothing other than uncover the secret predispositions [Anlagen] of the work itself, carrying out its concealed intentions” (*Begriff* 69). Not only does he reject the concept of the symbol, with its promise of access to Ideas in their completeness, but he abandons the whole sphere of aesthetics, with its presumption of recovering an experience of the absolute by means of reflection, for that of theology. For models of the form that *Darstellung* must assume, Benjamin turns to the mosaic and the scholastic treatise [Traktat], two cultural products of the Middle Ages, which is to say of the era before the loss of transcendence that he identifies with the beginnings of modernity, the development of capitalism, and the emergence of the sovereign nation-state (see Caygill



54-57). Both the mosaic and the *Traktat* are constructed out of fragments, “the distinct and the disparate,” a fact from which Benjamin concludes, somewhat elliptically, that “nothing proves more powerfully the transcendent force, whether of the sacred image or of truth” (*Ursprung* 208).

While Benjamin claims that “the value of fragments of thought [Denkbruchstrcke]” is inversely proportional to the directness of their relation to an “underlying conception [Grundkonzeption]” (208), he nonetheless assumes that *Darstellung* must correspond in form to its object. The discontinuous manifestation of Ideas in the world—i.e. in individual works of art—demands a manifestly discontinuous presentation of Ideas in criticism: “A system [of thought] has validity only where its outline [Grundriss] is inspired by the constitution of the world of Ideas [Ideenwelt] itself. The major categories that define not only systems but philosophical terminology—logic, ethics, and aesthetics are the most general ones—acquire their significance not as names of disciplines but as monuments of a discontinuous structure of the world of Ideas” (213). In contrast to the early Romantics, particularly Friedrich Schlegel, for whom the fragment was a distinctive and self-contained form of criticism (see Behler), Benjamin proposes to assemble out of fragments a whole without wholeness, a totality of “unconcealed ruptures into which the world with all its contradictions can enter” (Witte, *Selbstzeugnissen* 58). Thus, implicitly but unmistakably trying to forestall any appearance of an affinity with or dependence on Romantic criticism, he contrasts “the perseverance of the treatise [die Ausdauer der Abhandlung],” which is composed of fragments, with “the gesture of the fragment [Geste des Fragments],” which stands on its own (*Ursprung* 212).

There is no mystery about what these fragments or tesserae in the treatise are. In a letter of 22 December 1924, having finished the body of the *Trauerspiel* book but before writing the preface, Benjamin expressed to Gershom Scholem his surprise that “what I have written consists almost entirely of citations [Zitaten]. The craziest mosaic technique one can imagine, which for works of this kind might seem so strange that I suppose I shall retouch it here and there in the final draft” (*Briefe* 508). But in the preface to the book itself he dignified this technique historically by identifying it with the combination of quotation and commentary that is found in the medieval theological treatise, and epistemologically by defining its role in *Darstellung*. The fragmentary quotation, detached from its original context (a Baroque tragic drama) and inserted into a new one, is now described as “the authoritative citation [das autoritäre Zitat]” (*Ursprung* 208). What makes the quotation authoritative is not its illustrative value, a criterion of selection that would be relevant only if Ideas were, like concepts, the objects of knowledge and of the knowing subject’s intentionality, but rather its function as the empirical medium for the Idea: “For Ideas are presented [stellen sich dar] not in themselves, but uniquely and solely in an arrangement of concrete [dinglicher] elements in the concept—and precisely as the configuration of those elements” (214). Through their decomposition and dispersal into new compositions, phenomena accomplish what Benjamin calls their redemption or salvation [Rettung]: “Phenomena do not enter the realm of Ideas as wholes [integral], in their raw empirical state, adulterated by appearances, but only in their constituent elements, redeemed [gerettet]. They dispose of their false unity so that, divided up, they may participate in the genuine unity of truth” (213). While Ideas cannot

reveal themselves without phenomena, phenomena cannot acquire meaning without Ideas. Hence Benjamin's famous astronomical analogy: "Ideas are related to things as constellations are to stars" (214). There are no constellations without stars, but it is the constellation that gives a group of stars an identity. As Richard Wolin observes, Benjamin's insistence on the mutual dependence of Ideas and phenomena embodies the contradictory goal of his theory of knowledge: "to force the phenomenal sphere itself to yield noumenal truth" (92).

It was a goal that Benjamin shared with Romantic writers. The truth they sought was the objective harmony of the human mind and nature under the aegis of reason: "All philosophizing," F. W. J. Schelling taught, "consists in a recollection of the condition in which we were one with nature" ("Deduktion" 77).<sup>3</sup> In the absence of empirical evidence of such harmony, and in the face of mechanistic philosophies that sought to resolve natural phenomena into numbers and magnitudes, the early Romantics sought to assure themselves that their interpretation of nature as endowed with specifically human significance was grounded in nature itself, and not merely arbitrarily imposed on it by humans. Accordingly, Schelling (followed by Novalis and S. T. Coleridge) developed a philosophy of nature in which the concept of the symbolic phenomenon played a prominent role. He defined the symbol as an unmotivated mode of representation (that is, neither instituted nor intentional) in which the ontological content of the signifying object is identical with its referent: "Meaning here is simultaneously being itself, passed over into the object and one with

---

3) For an excellent overview of Romantic thinking about nature, see Schneider.

it” (*Philosophie* 411). In other words, the symbol is what it *means*. Under this condition, which parallels the “intentionless state of being [intentionloses Sein] formed of Ideas” that Benjamin conceives as truth (*Ursprung* 216), any and every phenomenon can be proclaimed a symbol simply by virtue of its existence. Like Goethe, who informed a correspondent in April 1818 that “everything that happens is a symbol, and by fully representing itself refers to everything else” (*Gedenkausgabe* 21:286), Schelling used the concept of the inherently meaningful symbol to justify his disposition to discover meaning precisely where it was not intuitively evident. Naturalizing the symbol, as I have argued elsewhere, was the prerequisite to making nature symbolic (Halmi 13-16).

The claim that, to quote Friedrich Creuzer, “in the symbol the Idea itself has descended into the physical world, and we see it directly in the image” (70) is exactly what Benjamin finds objectionable because it denies the distinction between Ideas and phenomena, a distinction fundamental to his own conception of truth in Ideas. “Ideas are not given in the world of phenomena,” as he reminds us (*Ursprung* 215). In that respect, Carol Jacobs is perfectly correct to affirm Benjamin’s opposition to Romantic symbolist theory: “The constellation, the spatial relationship among its points, is in no way a repository for the individual stars; the Idea in no way a repository for empirical phenomena; just as Benjamin’s figure disarticulates the connection between his language and its ostensible object. For Benjamin rejects here as elsewhere the romantic sense of ‘symbolic’ language, with its promise of unity of appearance and being” (5). Now if Benjamin’s conceptual constellation did not include *monad* along with *truth*, *Idea*, and *origin*, Jacob’s summary would demand no rejoinder. But in the

identification of the Idea with the monad, a gesture that might seem when we first encounter it to be little more than evidence of metaphysical pretension in his epistemology, Benjamin betrays an surprising affinity with the Romantics.

Whatever its other attractions, Leibniz's monadology offered both Benjamin and the Romantic theorists of the symbol an easily adaptable epistemological expedient.<sup>44</sup> In its original context in Leibniz's mature metaphysics, monads are defined as the individual immaterial entities of which the universe is composed, each one in its individuality mirroring the universe as a whole. The representation of the universe in the monad is thus grounded in the participation of the monad in the universe—or to rephrase this in more abstract terms, the semiotic relation between signifier and signified is guaranteed by the ontological relation of part and whole, that relation in turn being guaranteed by a pre-established, divinely ordained harmony. On the assumption of such a relation between two entities, the inaccessibility of one the entities to the human mind will not necessarily constitute an obstacle to comprehension, for the absent entity will be recognizable in or inferable from the accessible one. Logically, that assumption would be unjustified, since the only basis for it would be a prior knowledge of the two entities in question, and that would be possible only if both were, as is precisely not the case, accessible to the mind. Historically, however, the appeal of the ontological claim itself—that is, the claim that one thing participates in another in an ordered system—was

---

4) It is impossible here to do justice to the historical significance of Leibniz's monadology, which Boyle plausibly interprets as "a prophetic exposition of the entire eighteenth-century world-view" (13). Both he and Nisbet devote considerable space to demonstrating Leibniz's influence on Goethe's thought.

sufficiently powerful to suppress the recognition of the infinite regress that monadological thought unavoidably entails because, as in any system of knowledge based solely on analogies or resemblances, the attempt to relate one entity to a second necessitates positing a third.

Transplanted to natural philosophy by Schelling and Goethe, among others, the concept of the monad served to disguise, perhaps most of all from those who effected the transplantation, the equally illogical equation of meaning and being in the symbol, which was needed to make theoretically plausible the notion of the symbolism of natural phenomena. If the part is related monadologically to the whole, then, as far as the individual subject is concerned, the otherwise intolerable constitutional separation between them, and hence between phenomenon and idea, immanent and transcendental, signifier and signified, is effaced: by virtue of participating in an ordered whole, the symbol may be considered identical to that whole, even while preserving its individuality. Only after developing his organic theory of “the complete representation [Darstellung] of the universal life ... in a particular life” (*Weltseele* 374) did Schelling recognize the applicability of such a concept of the symbol in aesthetics, and the recognition encouraged him to dissolve the distinction between nature and art altogether, especially in his discussion of Greek mythology (*Philosophie* 449, 567; see also Sørensen 251-52). In Goethe’s case too the concept of the symbol migrated to aesthetics without ever entirely leaving the sphere of natural philosophy, where it was closely connected with his concept of the primal or archetypal phenomenon [Urphänomen], a concept to which Benjamin was alerted by Georg Simmel’s *Goethe* of 1913 (see *Schriften* 1:953-54, citing Simmel 56-57, 60-61). For Goethe, natural phenomena owe their symbolic

function to their monadological character as self-subsisting entities on the one hand and manifestations of the *Urphänomene* on the other. Because the *Urphänomen* is supposed to be at once idea and phenomenon, the scientist's effort to study it empirically mediates "between nature and concept, between nature and idea, between concept and idea" (*Farbenlehre* 331). To recognize the idea in the phenomenon, the archetype in the individual, is to confirm the correspondence between the mind and nature, and thus to reconcile humanity with the world (see Nisbet 42-43).

The prospect of such a reconciliation seems also to have motivated Benjamin's claim, in the preface to the *Trauerspiel* book, for the monadological status of Ideas:

The idea is a monad—the representation [Repräsentation] of phenomena rests in it, pre-established, as in the objective interpretation of phenomena. The higher the order of Ideas, the more perfect the representation in them. And so the real world [reale Welt] could well be a task in the sense that everything real [Wirkliches] ought to be penetrated so deeply that an objective interpretation of the world emerges. ... The Idea is a monad—in short that means: every Idea contains the image of the world. The task set for the presentation of Ideas is nothing less than to sketch this reduced image of the world. (*Ursprung* 228; cf. Wolin 98-100)

Small wonder, then, Benjamin selected as the epigraph to his preface a passage from the *Farbenlehre*, or *Theory of Colors*, in which Goethe, who like Benjamin himself assumed a structural correspondence between the study of an object and the object itself, proposed that the individual investigation has its own monadological relation to the whole of science: "Since neither in knowledge nor in reflection can a totality be assembled ... we must necessarily think of science

[Wissenschaft] as art if we expect any kind of wholeness from it. ... Just as art is always wholly represented in every individual work of art, so science ought always to reveal itself wholly in every individual object it treats” (Goethe 332-33; Benjamin, *Ursprung* 207). If every phenomenon symbolizes the order of nature by participating in it, then every scientific endeavor symbolizes science for the same reason. Presumably Benjamin was willing in the *Trauerspiel* book to acknowledge the *Farbenlehre* as a model because he already denied, in a manuscript note of about 1918, that Goethe’s concept of the symbol in that context had anything to do with aesthetics: “It was not through poetic analogies that the symbols in which nature is discernible became accessible to Goethe, but through prophetic insights [seherischen Einsichten]. The primal phenomenon is a systematic-symbolic concept [systematisch- symbolischer Begriff]. It is the symbol as an ideal” (*Schriften* 6:38).

What Benjamin did not acknowledge, however, is that the logic (such as it is) of his theory of the presentation of Ideas demands that the monadological relation between part and whole apply not only when the whole is defined as the world, but also when it is defined as an instance of *Darstellung* itself. Consider the dilemma inherent in Benjamin’s self-appointed task, the presentation of the Idea of the Baroque *Trauerspiel*: on the one hand the proper arrangement of empirical elements is needed to reveal the Idea, and on the other the Idea is needed to determine the proper arrangement of empirical elements, since the presentation of Ideas and salvation of phenomena are one and the same: “As the salvation of phenomena takes place by means of Ideas, the presentation of Ideas takes place in the medium of empirical reality” (*Ursprung* 214). To break out of this circle, the critic



must have prior access to the Idea he is seeking to present. Barring a divine revelation of the Idea of the *Trauerspiel*, an event for which Benjamin's theory makes no explicit allowance, he can proceed only in one of two ways: either by laying down a purely subjective definition of the form (which is exactly what Bernd Witte accuses Benjamin of doing [*Intellektuelle* 125-32]), or by assuming that the empirical elements—the quotations—from which he assembles his critical mosaic themselves reveal in miniature the very Idea he is trying to present on a larger scale. As Goethe put it, "Willst du dich im Ganzen erquickern, / So musst du das Ganze im Kleinsten erblicken" [If you would seek comfort in the whole, / you must discover the whole in the smallest part] (*Gedenkausgabe* 1:410). But Benjamin comes no closer to affirming Goethe's advice, and thereby conceding that phenomena and Ideas are no less monadological in their relation to each other than are Ideas and the world, than to state, in a draft of the preface to the *Trauerspiel* book, that the Idea, as the existential foundation of the empirical object, supports the object by means of the object's participation in the Idea: "Die Idee als Seinsgrund gründet das Ding durch dessen Anteil an der Idee" (*Schriften* 1:929). Benjamin must have resorted to the notion of ontological participation—the foundation of the monad—in the hope of avoiding the tautology of the hermeneutic circle, whereby the whole can be known only through its parts and the parts only through the whole. But if he feared an infinite regress, he feared the company of the Romantic theorists of the symbol even more. In the end he escaped neither.

## Works Cited

- Adorno, T. W. *Negative Dialektik*. Vol. 6 of *Gesammelte Schriften*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973.
- Behler, Ernst. "Das Fragment." *Prosa-kunst ohne Erzählen: Die Gattungen der night-fiktionalen Kunstrprosa*. Ed. Klaus Weissenberger. Tbingen: Niemeyer, 1985. 125-43.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*. *Gesammelte Schriften* 1:7-122.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Gesammelte Briefe*. Ed. Christoph Göde and Henri Lonitz. Vol. 2. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. 7 vols. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972-89.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. *Gesammelte Schriften* 2:203-430.
- Boyle, Nicholas. *Goethe: The Poet and the Age*. Vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.
- Creuzer, Friedrich. *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker*. 2nd ed. Vol. 1. Leipzig, 1819.
- Caygill, Howard. *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Gasché, Rudolphe. "The Sober Absolute: On Benjamin and the Early Romantics." *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions*. Ed. David Ferris. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998. 50-74.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. *Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Gespräche*. Ed. Ernst Beutler. 27 vols. Zürich: Artemis, 1948-71.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Schriften zur Farbenlehre*. Vol. 16 of the *Gedenkausgabe*.
- Halmi, Nicholas. "An Anthropological Approach to the Romantic Symbol." *European Romantic Review* 4 (1993): 13-33.
- Jacobs, Carol. *In the Language of Walter Benjamin*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. [*Monadologie*.] *Philosophische Schriften*. Ed. C. I. Gerhardt. Vol. 6. Berlin, 1885. 607-23.
- McCole, John. *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993.

- Nisbet, H. B. *Goethe and the Scientific Tradition*. London: Institute of Germanic Studies, 1972.
- Schelling, F. W. J. "Allgemeine Deduktion des dynamischen Processes oder der Kategorien der Physik." *Sämmtliche Werke* 4:1-78.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Philosophie der Kunst. Sämmtliche Werke* 5:353-736.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sämmtliche Werke*. Ed. K. F. A. Schelling. 14 vols. Stuttgart, 185661.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Von der Weltseele. Sämmtliche Werke* 2:345583.
- Schneider, Helmut J. "Nature." Romanticism. Ed. Marshall Brown. Vol. 5 of *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 92114.
- Simmel, Georg. *Goethe*. Leipzig: Klinkhardt, 1913.
- Sørensen, Bengt Algot. *Symbol und Symbolismus in den ästhetischen Theorien des 18. Jahrhunderts und der deutschen Romantik*. Copenhagen: Munsgaard, 1963.
- Witte, Bernd. *Walter Benjamin – Der Intellektuelle als Kritiker*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1976.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Walter Benjamin: Mit Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1985.
- Wolin, Richard. *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

## Abstract

In *Origin of the German Mourning Play*(1928), the critic Walter Benjamin strongly criticized the German Romantic concept of the symbol, according to which the universal and ideal can be represented wholly in the particular and empirical by virtue of an ontological connection between them. Yet this criticism did not prevent Benjamin, in his epistemological preface to the book, from availing himself of the same monadological model (derived from Leibniz and Goethe) on which the Romantics had relied. Although he specifically rejected their insistence on the fusion of the phenomenal and the ideal in the symbol, his own theory of Ideas and their presentation in criticism nonetheless requires just such a fusion.

This is not immediately apparent for two reasons: first, Benjamin proposes, in contrast to Platonic and Romantic theory, that Ideas themselves are subject to historical change, and therefore not capable of manifesting themselves fully in any given historical phenomenon; and second, he proposes that Ideas rather than phenomena are monads, individually representing the whole of the world in which they participate. The task of the critic, which Benjamin calls *Darstellung* (“presentation”), consists in revealing Ideas by reducing historical phenomena to their constituent elements and reassembling those elements in what amounts to a mosaic of quotations. But this task is possible only if the critic has a preconception of the Idea he is trying to reveal—a possibility that Benjamin’s theory of knowledge does not allow for at all—or if he can discern the Ideas in the individual phenomenal fragments from which he creates his mosaic, in which case phenomena and Ideas must be related monadologically after all. Benjamin seems to admit the latter possibility in a cryptic sentence in the manuscript draft of his preface to the *Origin*, but he does not do so in the final printed version. Thus he effectively deprived the critic of an epistemological basis for the presentation of Ideas.