Life after Life
A Reading of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Walter Benjamin

Mathelinda A. Nabugodi
UCL
PhD Comparative Literature
Creative Critical Writing
I, Mathelinda Apolona Nabugodi, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.
Abstract

The title of this thesis, *Life after Life*, cites an essay by Jacques Derrida where he translates the title of Percy Bysshe Shelley's last poem 'The Triumph of Life' into life's triumph, a life after life, or else a living on, *sur-vivre, Überleben*. The latter term, *Überleben*, is in its turn a citation from Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Task of the Translator' where Benjamin conceptualises the life of literary works as their afterlife in future readings. This comparative reading of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Walter Benjamin begins with this intersection in the afterlives of their works. I explore their reception in contemporary literary theory with the dual aim of reading Shelley and Benjamin and reading how they have been read by other critics. The thesis is written under the ‘Creative Critical Writing’ strand of the Comparative Literature PhD, which has allowed me to develop my methodology in response to the material that I study. Central themes include translation, autobiography, disfiguration, poetic histories of language, the problems of historical representation, ekphrasis, tragedy, violence, and, finally, forgiveness as a force stronger than violence. I focus on Shelley's translation of the Homeric 'Hymn to Mercury,' 'The Triumph of Life,' 'The Defence of Poetry,' 'The Cloud,' 'On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery,' and *The Cenci*. Of Benjamin's works I read 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,' 'The Task of the Translator,' 'Doctrine of the Similar' and 'On the Mimetic Faculty.' Furthermore, I look at his 'Critique of Violence,' 'Goethe's Elective Affinities,' *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, some of the methodological notes in 'Convolute N' of *The Arcades Project*, and 'On the Concept of History.'
# Table of Contents

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** .................................................................................................................. 7
**LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS** ............................................................................................................... 8
**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS** ............................................................................................................... 9

**INTRODUCTION** ............................................................................................................................... 10
1. Death ............................................................................................................................................. 10
2. Afterlife ......................................................................................................................................... 18
3. Methodology ................................................................................................................................ 22
4. The roads not taken ..................................................................................................................... 27
5. Outline .......................................................................................................................................... 31

**IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE NAME** ....................................................................................... 36
6. Shells ........................................................................................................................................... 36
7. The aura of being named ............................................................................................................. 38
8. A tortoise ....................................................................................................................................... 40
9. Feet ............................................................................................................................................... 44
10. Violence ...................................................................................................................................... 46
11. Sense and non-sense .................................................................................................................. 49

**POETIC NATURE** .......................................................................................................................... 51
12. Air-in-motion .............................................................................................................................. 51
13. Ruach .......................................................................................................................................... 53
14. Child’s play ................................................................................................................................. 54
15. A certain rhythm or order .......................................................................................................... 57
16. Flash of similarities .................................................................................................................... 58
17. Imagination ................................................................................................................................ 59

**VIOLETS** ........................................................................................................................................ 62
18. The violet in the crucible ............................................................................................................ 62
19. Shattered and assembled ........................................................................................................... 67
20. Philosophical supplement ......................................................................................................... 70
21. A flower absent from every bouquet ...................................................................................... 72
22. The colour violet ....................................................................................................................... 72

**TWO WORDS** ................................................................................................................................ 75
23. Disfiguration/Entstellung ............................................................................................................ 75
24. The Shape all light ..................................................................................................................... 77
25. Thread, tread, trample ................................................................................................................. 80

**A CLOUD THAT IS NOT ONE** ................................................................................................... 82
26. Recap .......................................................................................................................................... 82
27. Hover .......................................................................................................................................... 83
28. Glimmer ....................................................................................................................................... 86
29. Veil .............................................................................................................................................. 90

**MURMURING SOUNDS** ................................................................................................................. 91
30. The lamp ..................................................................................................................................... 91
31. Muhme Rehlen, Mummerehlen, Mißverstehen .................................................................... 93
32. The mimetic imperative ............................................................................................................. 97

**STRANGE DISTORTION** ............................................................................................................... 100
33. Prosopopoelae .......................................................................................................................... 100
34. In the photographer's studio................................................................. 102
35. Tit for tat................................ ............................................................... 107
36. Shelley's remains................................ ...................................................... 108
37. 'Then, what is Life?' I said. ................................................................. 109
38. Go figure................................ ................................................................. 111
39. A final remark on 'Life.' ................................ ....................................... 112

SLIGHT ADJUSTMENTS........................................................................ 113
40. Rousseau ......................................................................................... 113
41. Triumphal procession................................ ........................................ 115
42. The reformer's duty................................ ................................ ............... 117
43. Bequest............................................................................................. 119
44. Now you see it, now you don't ........................................................ 120
45. Simulacra ......................................................................................... 124
46. Putting things right................................ .............................................. 127

SPECULATIONS ..................................................................................... 130
47. The word 'I.'..................................................................................... 130
48. Caveat ............................................................................................. 133
49. Self-positing..................................................................................... 136
50. Cyclopaedic history................................ ............................................ 137

DISTORTED REFLECTIONS.................................................................. 141
51. Metaphors of mirroring................................ ...................................... 141
52. Goethe's Medusa............................................................................. 142
53. Shelley translates Goethe................................ .................................. 144

IN THE GALLERY ................................................................................... 151
54. Ekphrasis......................................................................................... 151
55. Automorphosis............................................................................... 152
56. The ever-shifting mirror................................ ...................................... 154
57. Returning a gaze............................................................................... 157

MEDUSAN GAZE .................................................................................. 159
58. Adorno's portrait of Benjamin ....................................................... 159
59. Undulating life................................................................................ 160
60. 'Historiotropography.' ................................................................ 162
61. Angelus Novus............................................................................... 163
62. Petrified unrest.............................................................................. 166

BENJAMIN READS SHELLEY ............................................................. 169
63. Correspondences............................................................................ 169
64. A grasp on allegory........................................................................ 171
65. Metropolitan masses...................................................................... 172
66. Allegorical realism.......................................................................... 174

TRAGIC CIRCUMSTANCES.................................................................... 179
67. The highest species of the drama.................................................. 179
68. Cold impersonations ....................................................................... 181
69. Fate and circumstance................................................................... 183
70. Myth in modern costume.............................................................. 185
71. Forgiveness.................................................................................... 187
BEATRICE & OTTILIE .............................................................................................................. 191
72. A portrait not of Beatrice Cenci ...................................................................................... 191
73. Elective affinities ............................................................................................................. 192
74. Choreography ................................................................................................................ 193
75. Tragic or traurisch? ......................................................................................................... 195
76. Chastity ........................................................................................................................... 197
77. Expressionless ................................................................................................................. 198
78. Outside the law ............................................................................................................... 200
79. Sacrifice .......................................................................................................................... 202
80. The limit .......................................................................................................................... 203
81. Caesura ........................................................................................................................... 204

PAYBACK TIME .................................................................................................................. 207
82. 1819 ............................................................................................................................... 207
83. Drama in the age of calculation ..................................................................................... 210
84. Fathers and sons ............................................................................................................. 214
85. Compensation .................................................................................................................. 215
86. Hereditary guilt ............................................................................................................... 216
87. A bonfire on the Campagna ........................................................................................... 217

LIVING ON ......................................................................................................................... 219
88. Growing old ..................................................................................................................... 219
89. The Cenci name .............................................................................................................. 222
90. Father and daughter ....................................................................................................... 223
91. Mists ............................................................................................................................... 228

REBELLION .......................................................................................................................... 231
92. Extrajudicial violence .................................................................................................... 231
93. Defiance ......................................................................................................................... 232
94. Niobe ............................................................................................................................... 234
95. Auto-destruction ............................................................................................................. 236

LAST LINE OF RESISTANCE .......................................................................................... 239
96. Political theology ........................................................................................................... 239
97. Beatrice’s gaze ............................................................................................................... 241
98. The trial scene .................................................................................................................. 243
99. Promethean violence ..................................................................................................... 246
100. Non-violence ............................................................................................................... 247

BIBLIOGRAPHY ................................................................................................................ 250

APPENDIX: TRANSLATIONS FROM THE GERMAN .......................................................... 267
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr Tim Beasley-Murray and Prof Paul Hamilton for agreeing to supervise what must initially have seemed as a rather nonsensical doctoral project. The former’s sceptical gaze arrested countless false starts and the latter’s almost mischievously incisive comments encouraged me to explore directions I would never have discovered myself. Without their support and patience this thesis would never have reached its end. I would also like to thank Prof Tim Mathews, whose unwavering enthusiasm for creative critical thought offered the opportunity and gave me the confidence to explore a creative critical methodology, and Prof Carol Jacobs for asking a number of fundamental questions that changed the course of this project. Dr Kirsten Kreider, perhaps unbeknownst to herself, offered a point of inspiration in navigating the language of writing. I am also grateful to Dr Peter Zusi for making it clear that there was no way around Benjamin’s work on Goethe. Agnes Broome, Liz Harvey, Christiane Luck, Niall Screenan, and Yva Jung shared the various woes and tribulations of doctoral research; these would have been much more difficult to overcome without them. Last but of course not least, I would like to thank my examiners, Prof Michael Rossington and Dr Florian Mussgnug, for the care they took in reading this thesis and for pointing me in the direction where to go from here.
List of Illustrations

Photograph of Walter and Georg Benjamin, ca. 1902, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, ÖLA 237/04, repr. in Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2006), iii, p. 391 ................................................................. 103


Flemish Artist, Head of Medusa, 16th century, oil on wood, 49 × 74 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, repr. in The Medusa Reader, ed. by Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), [Figure 14] .............................................. 154


List of Abbreviations

Percy Bysshe Shelley

I use Longman's edition of *The Poems of Shelley* for all poems except *Hellas* and 'The Triumph of Life.' For these, in addition to the essays 'On Love,' 'On Life,' and the 'Defence of Poetry,' I use Norton's edition of *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. For 'Speculations on Metaphysics and Morals' and the fragments 'On Beauty,' I use David Lee Clark's edition of *Shelley's Prose*.

**PS**  

**SPP**  

**BSM**  

**Prose**  
*Shelley's Prose; or The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. by David Lee Clark (New York: New Amsterdam, 1988)

**Letters**  

Walter Benjamin

I use Suhrkamp's editions of Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften* and *Briefe* and provide translations in an appendix.

**GS**  
*Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972-1999), 7 vols. Cited with volume number 1-7

**Briefe**  

**SW**  

**AP**  
*The Arcades Project*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002) Except for the exposés at the beginning of *The Arcades Project*, I cite only the convolute and entry reference in square brackets, e.g. [N1a,10]

**Trauerspiel**  
Introduction

1. Death.

On 8th July 1822 Percy Bysshe Shelley dies in a shipwreck off the Italian coast a few weeks short of his thirtieth birthday. Back in England, the news of Shelley's death is greeted with the announcement that 'Shelley, the writer of some infidel poetry has been drowned; now he knows whether there is a God or no.' This scurrilous obituary reflects Shelley's notoriety as atheist and radical in his lifetime, yet, by the end of the century, he is become the paragon of the Romantic poet. His death scene is memorialised in works like Louis Édouard Fournier's *The Funeral of Shelley* (1889) and Edward Onslow Ford's *Shelley Memorial* (1893) at University College, Oxford. 'Surely, no stranger revenge has ever been brought about by the whirligig of time,' *The Times* reports on the unveiling of the statue: 'The college which expelled Shelley living honours him dead.' However, the dead Shelley that University College, Oxford honours is a highly sanitised image of the poet, one that covers up his politics and foregrounds the tender delicacy of his verse. Alan Halsey's *collation of The Text of Shelley's Death*, a kind of variorum edition of contemporary accounts by close friends and government officials involved in the aftermath of the shipwreck, dates the birth of the Shelley myth to Edward John Trelawny's confirmation to Mary Shelley that Shelley is dead. ‘The idealization of Shelley begins almost at once [...] from the moment at which Trelawny announces the finding of the bodies [...] Shelley the divinity, the spirit, Shelley as Ariel, has this evening of July 19th 1822 begun his afterlife.’ For Mary Shelley, Shelley’s death seems to have set her a 'task, [to] commemorate the virtues of the only creature on earth worth loving or living for,' as she writes in one of the first entries in her 'Journal of Sorrow' begun a few months after Shelley's death. Mary Shelley turns Shelley's afterlife into her lifework: already in the early autumn of 1822 she sets about transcribing Shelley's drafts for publication, resulting in the 1824 *The Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, revised and expanded as the *Collected Poems* of 1839 and followed by Shelley's *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments* in

---


2 Cited by David J. Getsy, in *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877-1905* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 129. As Getsy points out, the installation was a success for Jane, Lady Shelley, Shelley's daughter-in-law who was his primary champion in the Victorian era, yet '[b]eyond the suspect politics Lady Shelley hoped to sanitize, and despite his popular appeal, Shelley's reputation as a poet was far from secure,' (p. 129) and the mere fact of a *Shelley Memorial* (conceived and paid for by Lady Shelley) should not be taken as proof of Shelley's complete rehabilitation among the upper strata of society.


1840. Mary Shelley’s editorial efforts, carried out under the constant threat of injunction from her father-in-law (lest she publish something unpalatable to public taste), provided the textual basis for the image of Shelley – foregrounding the lyrics, downplaying the politics. Mary Shelley’s achievement as editor is complemented by the memorial writings by her friends; Thomas Love Peacock, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, and Thomas Medwin published memoirs of Shelley but it is probably Trelawny’s 1858 *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron*, reissued in 1878 as *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author*, that stands as the definitive firsthand account of Shelley the Poet and his melodramatically tragic death. These memorial and editorial efforts served to redeem Shelley’s reputation and create an image of Shelley as an ethereal lyricist, an image that dominated his reception for the next hundred years – and still does. ‘Shelley has not been the same man in our century since posterity in his own transformed him into Ariel: beautiful, ethereal, with the waves washing or wind blowing through his hair,’ Marilyn Butler notes. Later scholarship has uncovered how Shelley’s political writings gained circulation in pirated editions already in his lifetime, and how his political verse played a key role in the Chartist movement: his early *Queen Mab* was so widely read as to be known as ‘The Chartist’s Bible.’ The end of the nineteenth century had two images of Shelley: the ‘official’ reception captured in Matthew Arnold’s notorious characterisation of Shelley as ‘a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain’ and the radical reception of Shelley’s political works reflected in Karl Marx’s alleged view of Shelley as ‘essentially a revolutionist, and […] one of the advanced guard of Socialism’ or

5 Trelawney consistently writes poet with a capital P when referring to Shelley. Although Trelawny styled himself as a Byronic hero, his recollections consistently delineate Shelley’s angelic nature against Byron’s aristocratic depravity.


8 ‘Shelley’, in *The Last Word*, ed. by R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1977), pp. 305–27 (p. 327); Arnold’s comment is often cited, but not the context it is taken from. Originally appearing in an essay on Byron, Arnold cites himself at the end of a review of Edward Dowden’s *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Arnold complains that the biography destroys the inherited image of Shelley. ‘I propose to mark firmly what is ridiculous and odious in the Shelley brought to our knowledge by the new materials, and then to show that our former beautiful and loveable Shelley nevertheless survives.’ (p. 309) Thus, Arnold is deliberately imposing the image of Shelley as ‘ineffectual angel’ in polemics with the decidedly non-angelic facts about his behaviour (particularly his treatment of his first wife Harriet Shelley nee Westbrook) that came to light in Dowden’s biography.

George Bernard Shaw’s assertion that ‘[i]n politics Shelley was a Republican, a Leveller, a Radical of the most extreme type.’

On 26th September 1940 Walter Benjamin ends his own life on the Spanish border during an attempt to escape Nazi-occupied France. Benjamin’s failure to cross the border seems all the more fateful since it had just been closed when Benjamin reached it. As Hannah Arendt describes it: ‘One day earlier Benjamin would have got through without any trouble, one day later the people in Marseilles [whence Benjamin had departed] would have known that for the time being it was impossible to pass through Spain. Only on that particular day was the catastrophe possible.’

Arendt’s dramatic characterisation of Benjamin’s death first appeared as an article in The New Yorker and was later reprinted as the introduction to Illuminations (1968). It is part of an attempt, initiated by Benjamin’s friends in exile, to rescue Benjamin’s legacy posthumously. ‘Fama, that much-coveted goddess, has many faces, and fame comes in many sorts and sizes – from the one-week notoriety of the cover story to the splendor of an everlasting name,’ Arendt opens her piece (p. 1). Since Illuminations is the first collection of Benjamin’s essays to appear in English and still his most widely read work in the language, Arendt’s reflection on posthumous fame stands as a form of gatekeeper to Benjamin’s work in English. In his lifetime Benjamin had established a reputation as a literary critic and man of letters, but this came to an end with the Nazi seizure of power after which he struggled to make a living publishing under German-sounding pseudonyms and soliciting grants from the University of Jerusalem and the exiled Institut für Sozialforschung (now more often referred to as the Frankfurt School). The Institut published Benjamin’s last finished work Über den Begriff der Geschichte [On the Concept of History] in a limited mimeograph edition in 1942, followed by a republication of the text in Die Neue Rundschau 61 (1950). In 1955 Theodor W. and Gretel Adorno edited a two-volume edition of Benjamin’s Schriften, a book that initiated Benjamin’s wider reception in German. Gershom Scholem, the twentieth century’s premier interpreter of Judaic thought and Benjamin’s long-time friend was also instrumental in making Benjamin’s texts available, co-editing Benjamin’s Briefe together with Adorno in 1978. Adorno and Scholem both lay claim to Benjamin’s legacy and the two have shaped the two oft-incompatible images of Benjamin that still divide his reception – the Marxist materialist and the Jewish mystic. In spite of this internal division, Benjamin’s writings have flourished both within and outside of the academy. He received a monument at Portbeau in 1994, which confirms the secure place he now occupies in the canon of European intellectuals.

I begin with the deaths of Shelley and Benjamin to acknowledge that this study would not have been possible without the passage from death to monument that I have briefly sketched out. While both Shelley and Benjamin had some success in their lifetimes, their fame rests primarily on posthumous editions of their works. In both cases, these were brought out by close friends seeking to do justice to their memory. If these editions secured their fame, this fame in its turn inspired further editorial effort. Michael Rossington, commenting on how almost all subsequent editors of Shelley have followed ‘Mary Shelley’s comprehensive principle’ in publishing any writing – no matter how fragmentary – by Shelley that they could lay their hands on, wonders whether ‘it is possible, let alone prudent, to manufacture reading texts out of rough holographs that are in many cases far from being finished, label them as ‘poems’, then present them as part of the Shelley canon?’ Whatever one’s answer to this question may be, it is doubtless that the Shelley canon would not be what it is had it not been for such manufacturing efforts.

The state of affairs is quite similar in Benjamin’s archive. What is often regarded as his magnum opus, Das Passagen-Werk [The Arcades Project], is nothing more than a catalogue of citations and notes, compiled over thirteen years (1927-1940), towards a study of the nineteenth century that he never managed to complete. ‘Es gibt Bücher, die haben ein Schicksal, lange bevor sie als Bücher überhaupt existieren: das ist der Fall von Benjamin’s unvollendetem Passagenwerk,’ writes Rolf Tiedemann, the editor who is responsible for turning Benjamin’s notes into a book (“Einleitung des Herausgebers,’ GS5, p. 11). ‘But the Passagen-Werk itself does not exist – not even a first page, let alone a draft of the whole,’ Susan Buck-Morss cautions at the outset of her critical reading of this unwritten book. But it would be more accurate to say that Benjamin’s Passagen-Werk did not exist before it was manufactured by scholars such as Tiedemann and Buck-Morss, whose works offered some of the first editorial and conceptual reconstructions of Benjamin’s notes. By now the convolutes that make up the collection, primarily the one labelled N: ‘Erkenntnisteoretisches, Theorie des Fortschritts’ [‘On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress’] are regularly scoured for insight into Benjamin’s late thought on history, dialectical images, and messianic materialism. But if there is something in the very conceptual foundations of Das Passagen-Werk that invites us to view it as perfected in its fragmentation, it is not Benjamin’s only draft to become the object of scholarly scrutiny. Daniel Weidner notes that Benjamin is the only twentieth-century philosopher to have two critical editions of his complete works in print. In addition to the comprehensive scholarly apparatus of

14 ‘Life after Life: A Figure of Thought in Walter Benjamin,’ presented at Afterlife. Writing and Image in Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg (Belo Horizonte, Brazil, October 2012), accessible on
Suhrkamp’s seven volume *Gesammelte Schriften* (1972-1999), the same publisher’s *Werke und Nachlass: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (2008-) is projected to encompass 21 volumes where ‘die zu Lebzeiten publizierten und die geplanten, aber Fragment gebliebenen Bücher jeweils in einem Band erscheinen, der auch sämtliche Vorfassungen, Notizen und Entwürfe versammelt. Alle Bände enthalten einen umfangreichen Apparat mit detaillierten Sacherläuterungen sowie einen Zeilenkommentar, der die Entstehungs- und Überlieferungsvarianten verzeichnet.’

In other words, this ambitious edition grants the same dignity and scholarly attention to uncompleted fragments as to finished works.

What Rossington notes à propos Shelley’s poetry is also true with regards to Benjamin’s critical essays: they are manufactured by scholars who seem to share Mary Shelley’s ‘fear lest any monument of his genius should escape me’ (introduction to *Posthumous Poems*, cited in Rossington, p. 652) and therefore reproduce all available material written by the author in question. However, this reconstructive effort is also conditioned by the manner in which Shelley and Benjamin, respectively, lived their lives and how they died. Both were nomadic exiles and both died unexpectedly at a young age, not having had the chance to consolidate their works and lay the foundations for their legacy. Had they lived longer it may well be that they would have completed many of the fragmentary writings that editors are now obliged to manufacture into reading texts. In this sense, Shelley’s and Benjamin’s deaths also affect the canon and nature of the materials that a scholar coming to their works has access to. If one adds to this the images of Shelley and Benjamin that their friends and defenders successfully projected as part of an attempt to secure their fame, one can safely aver that both Shelley’s and Benjamin’s deaths have become near-inextricably entwined with the afterlife of their works.

Both Shelley and Benjamin commented on the relation between life and writing in ways that seem to serendipitously anticipate their own subsequent afterlives. ‘I once imagined, that in everything any man ever wrote, spoke, acted, or imagined, is contained, as it were, an allegorical idea of his own future life, as the acorn contains the oak,’ Shelley once wrote to his friend Thomas Love Peacock (*Letters* 2, p. 192) and so it has often turned out with his own works. For instance, Jane, Lady Shelley’s volume of *Shelley Memorials: from

---

http://www.zfl-berlin.org/tl_files/zfl/downloads/personen/weidner/life_after_life.pdf accessed 23 November 2015. Weidner’s paper coincidentally shares its title with this thesis. I assume that Weidner chose his title as a double reference to the conference where the paper was presented (called ‘Afterlife’) and to the themes he covers (Benjamin’s concept of afterlife and Benjamin’s actual afterlife in his reception). The latter also plays into my choice of title, with the addition that afterlife or living on are also critical terms that figure in the reception of Shelley’s writings.


16 This edition does not, however, publish *Das Passagen-Werk* as one project but separates the *Pariser Passagen* (v. 17) and Benjamin’s work on Baudelaire (v. 18) from the more accurately labelled *Manuskriptkonvolute* (v. 21).
Authentic Sources – a hallmark of the Victorian hagiography of Shelley – includes a letter Shelley wrote to his publisher Charles Ollier. In this letter Shelley responds to the Quarterly Review’s attack on his works and character:

It describes the result of my battle with their Omnipotent God; his pulling me under the sea by the hair of my head, like Pharaoh; my calling out like the devil who was game to the last; swearing and cursing in all comic and horrid oaths, like a French postilion on Mount Cenis; entreating everybody to drown themselves; pretending not to be drowned myself when I am drowned; and, lastly, being drowned. (Letters 2, p. 128)\(^{17}\)

Lady Shelley comments that ‘Shelley’s frequent allusions to his being drowned are singular,’\(^{18}\) a comment that alludes to the even more singular irony of Shelley’s drowning while working on a poem called ‘The Triumph of Life.’ ‘Shelley’s own death, which left the poem “unfinished,” has revealed the profound uncertainties in our cultural and critical attitudes toward death and authorship,’ Hugh Roberts writes. ‘If we read Shelley’s life as a narrative totality, the “Triumph” gains special significance as the moment when he looks back on his life and seeks to capture its essence.’\(^{19}\) The poem’s very genre invites us to transgress on the boundary between life and literature. ‘How can we have a “Triumph”, in the manner of Petrarch’s great series of poems, not of the usual subjects of love, fame or death, but a “Triumph” of life, the very element in which we move and have our being?’ Paul Hamilton asks, pointing to the impossible presumption of representing life’s triumph from within life.\(^{20}\) ‘As many commentators have remarked, the attempt to discursively grasp life in this poem is overwhelmed by the unstoppable perpetuation of life itself. There is no ending to speak of here, other than the poem’s curtailment in Shelley’s death,’ Ross Wilson writes in his study of Shelley’s apprehension of life.\(^{21}\) Shelley’s death, that is, life’s triumph over Shelley, appears as the only possible conclusion to ‘The Triumph of Life.’ It may have been a similar insight that prompted Paul de Man to place Shelley’s dead body ‘in the margins of the last manuscript page,’ where, he asserts, it ‘has become an inseparable part of the poem.’\(^{22}\) When de Man calls his essay ‘Shelley Disfigured’ he not only refers to the disfiguration of the poem’s literary figures, but also to Shelley’s own disfigured corpse washed up on the Italian shore. This is an instance of history, in the form

---

\(^{17}\) Another striking anticipation of his own death by drowning is found in the words that Shelley has the Byronic Maddalo say to his self-portrait as Julian: ‘You were ever still | Among Christ’s flock a perilous infidel […] if you can’t swim | Beware of Providence.’ ‘Julian and Maddalo,’ ll. 115-8

\(^{18}\) Shelley Memorials: From Authentic Sources (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1859), p. 134


\(^{22}\) ‘Shelley Disfigured’, in The Rhetoric of Romanticism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 93–123 (p. 120); further references in text.
of this accidental event, intruding upon the text – something seen as uncharacteristic of de Man’s work, which is often attacked for its lack of historical awareness. Yet de Man’s introduction of Shelley’s corpse into his critical text dovetails with Butler’s insight that we cannot read Shelley apart from the iconology generated by his death. This is ironic since Butler’s own work was pivotal in the development of ‘new historicism’ – an approach often in explicit opposition to deconstruction of de Man’s kind. New historicist critics are likely to see de Man as being in thrall to what Jerome J. McGann famously classified as the ‘romantic ideology.’

However, de Man’s treatment of Shelley disfigured on the Italian shore is an attempt to acknowledge the need to come to terms with a historical accident within the framework of his reading – not least because it is this historical accident that determines the final form of a poem that, apart from its first 48 lines, only exists in a chaotic draft manuscript. ‘At this point,’ writes de Man, meaning the draft’s break-off point, ‘figuration and cognition are actually interrupted by an event [i.e. Shelley’s death] which shapes the text but which is not present in its represented or articulated meaning.’ (p. 120)

Shelley’s death is both inside and outside of the poem – while not part of either its imagery nor its figurative patterns, it is this event that determines the form in which the poem comes down to us. Hence de Man concludes that ‘[t]he final test of reading, in The Triumph of Life, depends on how one reads the textuality of this event, how one disposes of Shelley’s body.’ (p. 121) ‘The Triumph of Life’ emerges as a fatefully overdetermined piece of work: the poem thematises life’s triumph over the living, the circumstances of its creation ineluctably refer us to life’s triumph over Shelley, and its fragmentary manuscript makes evident the editorial effort required to enable a text to live on amongst future generations of readers in the first place. In the final section of ‘Shelley Disfigured,’ de Man goes so far as to make Shelley’s peculiar case representative of all literary scholarship.

Evoking the trope of prosopopoeia, de Man claims that the circumstances surrounding ‘The Triumph of Life’ are only an extreme instance of something that always happens:

> And to read is to understand, to question, to know, to forget, to erase, to deface, to repeat – that is to say, the endless prosopopoeia by which the dead are made to have a face and a voice which tells the allegory of their demise and allows us to apostrophize them in our turn. (p. 122)

Reading as such is perpetuating the image of an author handed down by posterity. But, as Claire Colebrook notes in a recent reassessment of de Man’s work, in giving face and voice

---

23 The thrust of McGann’s argument is captured in the following two sentences: ‘The idea that poetry, or even consciousness, can set one free of the ruins of history and culture is the grand illusion of every Romantic poet. The idea has been inherited and reproduced in the cultural support systems – principally the academy – which have followed in the wake of the Romantic movement.’ The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 137
to the authors he criticises, the critic at the same time creates a critical persona for his own work.\textsuperscript{24} In a similar vein, Marc Redfield argues that de Man ‘for three decades provided this spectre [i.e. literary theory] with a face and a name.’\textsuperscript{25} The fact that de Man became the face of a certain strand of deconstructive literary theory helps explain why the revelations that de Man had published anti-Semitic articles during the Nazi occupation of Belgium could be taken to invalidate deconstructive literary theory as a whole. \textit{Theory and the Disappearing Future}, in which Colebrook’s essay is published, is structured around the publication of de Man’s notes for his Cornell lecture on Benjamin’s ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers’ [‘The Task of the Translator’], but it is telling that de Man’s notes are framed by four critical essays (by Colebrook, J. Hillis Miller, and Tom Cohen) that all position de Man’s legacy in relation to deconstruction and the war-time journalism revelations. Their defence of de Man shows how difficult it still is to engage with his work – almost thirty years after the revelations – without addressing them. Ironically, if de Man saw Shelley’s death as an extra-textual event that determines the text of ‘The Triumph of Life,’ his argument also anticipates the afterlife of his own work: paraphrasing his conclusion on Shelley cited above one may say that the final test of reading de Man depends on how one disposes of de Man’s war-time journalism.\textsuperscript{26}

History also intrudes upon our reading of Benjamin’s work. Alongside Shelley’s idea that a man’s writings contain ‘an allegorical idea of his own future life’ one can put Benjamin’s comment, reported by Arendt, that if he came to America ‘people would probably find no other use for him than to cart him up and down the country to exhibit him as the “last European.”’ (pp. 17-8) Arendt’s relation of this anecdote in her description of Benjamin’s suicide turns his humorous comment into a prophetic premonition: Benjamin’s failure to escape Europe for the safety of America appears as predestined by his intellectual temperament. One may also think of Benjamin’s adaptation of Moritz Heimann’s phrase: ‘Ein Mann, der mit fünfunddreißig stirbt […] ist auf jedem Punkt seines Lebens ein Mann, der mit fünfunddreißig stirbt.’ Citing this line in ‘Der Erzähler’ [‘The Storyteller’], Benjamin adds: ‘Nichts ist zweifelhafter als dieser Satz. Aber dies einzig und allein, weil er sich im


\textsuperscript{26} Although I draw heavily on ‘Shelley Disfigured,’ I do not address this problem directly. However, if asked to take a stance I would, with Tom Cohen, point to the hypocrisy of condemning de Man for his war-time journalism when we are all complicit in the rapaciousness of current global capitalism, both generally as Western consumers and more specifically as members of academic institutions more invested in promoting students’ ‘employability’ than in offering the imaginative and critical tools for a different kind of future. (cf. ‘Toxic Assets’ in \textit{Theory and the Disappearing Future}, pp. 89-129 [p. 107])
Tempus vergreift. Ein Mann, so heißt die Wahrheit, die hier gemeint war, der mit fünfunddreißig Jahren gestorben ist, wird *dem Eingedenken* an jedem Punkte seines Lebens als ein Mann erscheinen, der mit fünfunddreißig Jahren stirbt.’ (GS2, p. 456) Death becomes a point of authority, the moment around which ‘the meaning of a life’ arranges itself:

Nun ist es aber an dem, daß nicht etwa nur das Wissen oder die Weisheit des Menschen sondern vor allem sein gelebtes Leben – und das ist der Stoff, aus dem die Geschichten werden – tradierbare Form am ersten am Sterbenden annimmt. So wie im Innern des Menschen mit dem Ablauf des Lebens eine Folge von Bildern sich in Bewegung setzt – bestehend aus den Ansichten der eigenen Person, unter denen er, ohne es inne zu werden, sich selber begegnet ist –, so geht mit einem Mal in seinen Mienen und Blicken das Unvergeßliche auf und teilt allem, was ihn betraf, die Autorität mit, die auch der ärmste Schächer im Sterben für die Lebenden um ihn her besitzt. Am Ursprung des Erzählten steht diese Autorität. ('Der Erzähler,' GS2, pp. 449-50)

The irreducible aura of death also attaches to our image of Benjamin. A good example is seen in Herbert Lindenberger’s adaptation of Benjamin’s adjustment of Heimann’s line to describe an exhibition of Auschwitz victim Betty Levi’s family photographs. “A person who died in Auschwitz will appear to remembrance at every point in her life as a woman who died at Auschwitz.” (Benjamin himself, of course, took poison rather than be returned over the French border to the Nazis.) Lindenberger’s parenthesis writes Benjamin’s *bon mot* into the ‘narrative totality’ presented by his own life: a philosopher who ends his life by taking poison will at every point in his life... etc. If Benjamin here emerges as a latter day Socrates (and we may once again think of the phrase, the ‘last European’ which places Benjamin last in a line where Socrates was the first), the pathos of his death is complemented by the rumour that he carried a completed copy of *Das Passagen-Werk*, with him when he died. The loss of this (probably never-extant) work is comparable to how the ending of ‘The Triumph of Life’ is lost together with Shelley’s life. In both cases, the author’s death is not simply his end, but a moment of transition; it is the beginning of the life, or rather afterlife, of his writings.

2. *Afterlife.*

‘Life’ is a concept that spans and connects the two spheres of literature and history; that one speaks of living beings is obvious, but one also speaks of living artworks even though it is clear that such life cannot be like the biological life of humans, animals, or plants. In *Adonais*, an elegy for John Keats that ‘describe[s] the afterlife of Keats among the writers

---

who cared for him’ as James Chandler puts it. Shelley consistently distinguishes between temporal and temporary mortal life and the eternal life of art – Keats the person may die, but the Keats the poet will live on, moreover, the poet will live on in the very realm from which his poetic inspiration sprung:

Dust to the dust! but the pure spirit shall flow
Back to the burning fountain whence it came,
A portion of the Eternal, which must glow
Through time and change, unquenchably the same (ll. 338-41)

While biological life is subject to mutability, the life of poetry remains ‘unquenchably the same’ through time and change. But even as Adonais speaks of the eternal life of poetry to which the dead poet’s spirit returns, the poem acknowledges that poets are in fact forgotten. Alongside allusions to living authors such as Lord Byron (l. 264), Thomas Moore (l. 268), and Shelley himself (l. 271), Shelley lists dead poets, e.g. Chatterton (l. 399), Sidney (l. 401), and Lucan (l. 404), but, more importantly, he also commemorates ‘many more, whose names on Earth are dark, | But whose transmitted effluence cannot die | So long as fire outlives the parent spark’ (ll. 406-8). In other words, the life of poetry and the afterlives of poets are distinct from the mutable memories of men. ‘So dürfte von einem unvergeßlichen Leben oder Augenblick gesprochen werden, auch wenn alle Menschen sie vergessen hätten,’ Benjamin says in his deliberations on translation (GS4, p. 10), where he develops a comparable concept of literary life:

In völlig unmetaphorischer Sachlichkeit ist der Gedanke vom Leben und Fortleben der Kunstwerke zu erfassen. […] Vielmehr nur wenn allem demjenigen, wovon es Geschichte gibt und was nicht allein ihr Schauplatz ist, Leben zuerkannt wird, kommt dessen Begriff zu seinem Recht. Denn von der Geschichte, nicht von der Natur aus, geschweige von so schwankender wie Empfindung und Seele, ist zuletzt der Umkreis des Lebens zu bestimmen. (GS4, p. 11)

The life of an individual work is thus a particular moment in the development of history overall. This move connects poetics and history as no literary utterance can be interpreted in isolation from its history; that is, the meaning of a text is revealed in the future history of its readings. It is a meaning determined in relation to other texts. ‘Die Geschichte der großen Kunstwerke kennt ihre Deszendenz aus den Quellen, ihre Gestaltung im Zeitalter des Künstlers und die Periode ihres grundsätzlich ewigen Fortlebens bei den nachfolgenden Generationen,’ Benjamin continues (GS4, p. 11). Uwe Steiner argues that Benjamin’s concept of life is defined in systematic opposition to the Lebensphilosophie that

---

flourished in the German realm in the early twentieth century. In contrast to its celebration of vital power, Benjamin defines life as historical unfolding: life emerges out of the historical process as texts continue to be read and used by new generations. The emphasis on afterlife in succeeding generations includes subsequently derived texts into the life of a text: translation is one such example although one may also include rewritings, adaptations, and critical interpretations of works as constituents of their afterlife. The separation of biological and literary life positions the latter in relation to a future that lies beyond any mortal’s lifespan and the meaning of a work in interpretation beyond any author’s intention. Thus, for instance, Steiner notes that the popularity of Benjamin’s thought on translation among deconstructive critics has overshadowed what Steiner believes to be at the heart of Benjamin’s thought, what he terms Benjamin’s ‘Lehre vom Leben und Fortleben der Werke’ (p. 50, cf. 65). It is this ‘doctrine of the life and afterlife of works,’ rather than translation proper, that is the key point of the translation essay according to Steiner. Shelley’s comments on futurity also sketch something akin to ‘a doctrine of the life and afterlife of works.’ He states that ‘it is reserved for future generations to contemplate and measure the mighty cause and effect in all the strength and splendour’ of the combined ‘wisdom’ and ‘delight’ of poetic compositions (SPP, p. 516). Both Shelley and Benjamin use the word ‘fame’ to characterise the posthumous maturing of a literary work: ‘Even in modern times, no living poet ever arrived at the fulness of his fame,’ Shelley asserts (SPP, p. 516) anticipating Benjamin’s claim of the ‘ewiges Fortleben’ of literary works that ‘[es] heißt, wo es zutage tritt, Ruhm.’ (GS4, p. 11) The life of works is in their subsequent fame – their being read, cited, and interpreted by future generations. The present thesis is conceived as a further moment in Shelley’s and Benjamin’s respective afterlives that contributes to their fame and our appreciation of their works.

This juxtaposition of Adonais and ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers’ indicates how I propose to move between poetical and theoretical argumentation. This movement between poetry and theory is further supplemented by critical material that responds to affinities between Shelley and Benjamin, as for example Jacques Derrida’s reading of Shelley’s ‘The Triumph of Life.’ Noting that ‘the triumph of life can also triumph over life’ whereas ‘living on can mean a reprieve or an afterlife, “life after life” or life after death, more life or more than life, and better; the state of suspension in which it’s over – and over again,’ Derrida follows ‘the procession of one language into another’ as the genitive article of Shelley’s title generates

---

29 Uwe Steiner, ‘Exemplarische Kritik: Anmerkungen zu Benjamins Kritik der Wahlverwandtschaften,’ in Benjamins Wahlverwandtschaften: zur Kritik einer Programmatischen Interpretation, ed. by Helmut Hühn, Jan Urblich, and Uwe Steiner (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015), pp. 37-67 (p. 59); further references in text.
more and more meanings. My title – *Life after Life* – cites a moment in this essay when Derrida moves between Shelley’s poetry and Benjamin’s theory: ‘A text lives only if it lives on {sur-viv}, and it lives on only if it is at once translatable and untranslatable [...] Thus triumphant translation is neither the life nor the death of the text, only or already its living on, its life after life, its life after death.’ (pp. 102-3) In this passage Derrida not only uses translation as a metaphor for the afterlife of texts in future acts of reading, he also uses translation in a more literal, if creative, sense: he translates ‘The Triumph of Life’ as a life after life, a *living-on*, *sur-vivre*, *über-leben*. If one follows the trajectory set by Derrida’s translation, the *living-on* that brings the text to life turns out to be identical with Benjamin’s formulation of the afterlife of literature in ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers.’ The passage from ‘Living on’ stands in a supplementary relation to Derrida’s discussion of Benjamin’s translation essay in ‘Des Tours de Babel.’ Derrida describes the latter essay as an ‘attempt to translate in my own way the translation of another text on translation,’31 namely Maurice de Gandillac’s 1971 translation of Benjamin’s piece. Also in this other act of translation, Derrida foregrounds *sur-vivre*: ‘it is rather starting from the notion of a language and its “sur-vival” in translation that we could have access to the notion of what life [...] mean[s]. This reversal is operated expressly by Benjamin. His preface [...] circulates without cease among the values of seed, life, and especially “sur-vival.”’ (p. 178) The transformation of terms such as life, survival, and *Überleben* between languages feeds into Derrida’s theoretical argument about the relation between translation and the life of language. But it also responds to one of the key points of Benjamin’s essay ‘Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen’ ['On Language as such and on the Language of Man']: ‘Die Übersetzung ist die Überführung der einen Sprache in die andere durch ein Kontinuum von Verwandlungen. Kontinua der Verwandlung, nicht abstrakte Gleichheits- und Ähnlichkeitsbezirke durchmißt die Übersetzung.’ (GS2, p. 151) Derrida’s essays thus perform the kind of translation they would theorise, a procedure that blurs the boundary between form and content in a way often limited to literary texts. Werner

31 ‘Des Tours de Babel’, in *Difference in Translation*, ed. & trans. by Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 165–207 (p. 175); further references in text. Towards the end of the footnote that spans the length of ‘Living On: Border Lines’, Derrida acknowledges that a seminar he gave in Paris on ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers’ forms one of the contexts for ‘Living On: Border Lines’. He also confesses that his initial title for the piece was ‘Living On – In Translation’ or even simply ‘Translations’ (pp. 166–8), which indicates the centrality of translation for Derrida’s discussion of afterlife. In the lecture on Benjamin’s essay that de Man gave on 4 March 1983 at Cornell, de Man also refers to Derrida’s seminar and additionally provides the information that Derrida then used Gandillac’s translation of ‘Die Aufgabe.’ Paul de Man, “Conclusions” on Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” Messenger Lecture, Cornell University, March 4, 1983’, *Yale French Studies*, 69 (1985), 25-46 (pp. 32-3); further references in text.
Hamacher’s ‘The Word Wolke – If it is One,’ another work which I will treat at length, employs such critical translation to develop a theory and practice of reading Benjamin’s language essays and his *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* [*Berlin Childhood around 1900*] between the German and French languages. Hamacher foregrounds the word *Entstellung*, [lit. dis-placement] which is a key term in Benjamin’s text. However, Hamacher’s use of the word not only cites Benjamin’s works, it also echoes de Man’s ‘Shelley Disfigured,’ which Jürgen Blasius translates as ‘Shelleys Entstellung.’ While Hamacher’s reading of Benjamin does not refer to Shelley, his practice of reading *Entstellung* as disfiguration (or, in Peter Fenves’s translation, ‘defiguration’) links his reading of Benjamin to de Man’s reading of Shelley. But it also shows that critical texts, no less than literary ones, live on as they are being translated into later readings. When I say that I concern myself with Shelley and Benjamin’s afterlives I also include the critical readings that their works have given rise to.

3. **Methodology.**

This thesis is written under the ‘Creative Critical Writing’ strand of the Comparative Literature PhD. I have interpreted the ‘creative critical’ in a methodological sense. I primarily take my bearings from Shelley’s and Benjamin’s afterlives in deconstructive theory and the dual translation sketched out above; i.e. Derrida’s translation of Shelley’s ‘Triumph of Life’ into Benjamin’s *Überleben* and Hamacher’s translation of Shelleyan disfiguration *pace* de Man into the *Entstellung* of Benjamin’s world. Deconstructive criticism offers a critical language in which this translation can take place, and, importantly, gives a face and a voice to the two authors in which they can engage in a conversation on equal terms. While Shelley wrote a lot of philosophical prose and Benjamin wrote and translated poetry, literary history has handed down Shelley as a poet and Benjamin as a theorist – a difference that not only regards classification, but also profoundly affects their critical reception. While you can find almost any ‘approach’ to Shelley in the critical literature – feminist, post-colonial, historicist, Freudian – Benjamin is most often read in the manner of Benjamin, applying his own theories to reading his work. My aim throughout has been to avoid a Benjaminian reading of Shelley (i.e. the application of Benjamin’s theoretical considerations to Shelley’s poetical writings). Instead I have worked in accordance with an idea that J. Hillis Miller expresses in a programmatic statement published alongside de Man’s and Derrida’s essays on Shelley. He concisely terms this location ‘the moment in a work of

32 The volume in question, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (1979), was intended to launch deconstruction in America.
literature when its own medium is put in question.' The medium of literature is, of course, language and so deconstructive reading foregrounds moments when literature begins to question its own language. In the first half of the thesis I work around such self-reflective moments in Shelley’s and Benjamin’s works. In spite of the obvious differences between Shelley and Benjamin – generic, historical, cultural, temperamental, thematic, theological, etc. – both have produced texts that are self-reflectively engaging with their own language. At the same time I acknowledge that these moments would be impossible to pinpoint without prior critics leading the way. That is, while deconstructive critics often voice a claim to immanent reading, I think there is an important sense in which their readings generate the deconstructive figures they proceed to deconstruct. For instance, if de Man can read Shelley’s ‘Shape all light’ as ‘the figure for the figurality of all signification’ that ‘is not naturally given or produced but [...] posited by an arbitrary act of language’ (p. 116) this reading is only possible because de Man himself has posited that light signifies language in the poem: de Man’s reading of disfiguration is in fact a reading of Shelley’s light imagery and it takes de Man’s critical intervention to connect the poem’s play of light with the workings of language. In the same way, it takes Hamacher to show that Benjamin’s word ‘Wolke’ is a ‘figure of disfiguration’ and to reveal the logic of disfiguration in Benjamin’s texts. It is deconstructive criticism’s combination of immanence and imposition that makes it a useful medium to study Shelley and Benjamin on equal terms.

At the outset of another programme for deconstruction, Criticism in the Wilderness, Geoffrey H. Hartman argues in favour of ‘suspending the a priori valuation of art over criticism, and reading even the critical work closely.’ This method of reading ‘acknowledges the intellectual element in art but reinvests criticism with creative potential. It opposes those who abstract creative power from the critical essay. It is not afraid to see criticism as contaminated creative thinking.’ (p. 8) Hartman’s manifesto-like statement provides the co-ordinates of my approach to the ‘Creative Critical Writing’ label: I also seek to bring forth the creative element of criticism by paying close attention to critical readings of my chosen authors. Therefore the adjectival ‘creative’ before ‘critical’ should not be taken an excuse for substituting critical rigour with a romantic effusion of creativity. On the contrary, I hope that my work can demonstrate that literary scholarship can retain its insights even when it acknowledges its ‘contamination’ by the literary. ‘It is not certain that there can be a science of literature,’ are the first words of Hamacher’s

essay on de Man. By the end of his investigation of de Man’s reading practice, Hamacher arrives at the conclusion that ‘only the disfiguration of literary scholarship itself could become the foundation of literary scholarship and the basis of a scientific study of literature.’ (p. 220) The notion that literary study is to be scientific may sound odd to an English ear, however, it is implied in the German term Literaturwissenschaft. But while the German language has not cordoned off the humanities from the natural sciences in the way that English has, there is still uncertainty about what constitutes the scientific nature of literary study. It is in this context that Hamacher asserts that literary scholarship is not merely scholarship on literature, but scholarship in a literary manner: scholarship that embodies the disfiguration it theorises. While he does not put it in these terms, Hamacher undermines the separation of form and content and lets the ‘creative potential’ of literary figuration ‘contaminate’ his critical language. In his work on Benjamin he not only describes Benjamin’s ideas about translation and non-sensuous similarities, his argument moves forward by translating non-sensuous similarities between words. A similar contamination is at play in Derrida’s discussion of living on as triumphant translation in Shelley and Benjamin as well as in de Man’s notion of prosopopoeia which gives himself a face and a voice alongside the face and voice he gives to Shelley.

Hartman’s suspension of ‘the a priori valuation of art over criticism’ (p. 6) has a second implication. It reverses the conventional hierarchy of creative labour, where criticism is seen as a handmaiden to literary genius although it is often criticism that canonises and thus makes genius recognisable as genius. Critical labour creates the literary tradition and grants poets the fame that constitutes their afterlives. After asserting that ‘no living poet ever arrived at the fulness of his fame,’ Shelley adds that ‘the jury which sits in judgment upon a poet, belonging as he does to all time, must be composed of his peers: it must be impanelled by Time from the selectest of the wise of many generations.’ (SPP, p. 516) By criticising Shelley’s work one, however presumptuously, positions oneself as member of this jury. For this reason one should heed Hartman’s warning, given à propos ‘The Triumph of Life’ and ‘Shelley Disfigured:’

As long as we practice what Nietzsche called monumental historiography – and this kind of history is presupposed by most interpretative criticism – we must also examine what is involved in our intensive care and even canonization of certain writers. Criticism is always valuation in this regard, even if it claims to suspend valuation. [...] It monumentalizes a dead man’s relics, turns them unto the icon of a power that continues to operate its

---

reversals and obliterations (what Shelley has named “thought’s empire over thought”) by means of the very act – criticism – being downgraded. (p. 103)

‘The Triumph of Life’ is a critique of monumental historiography yet when we write of it – even if only to emphasise its critique of monumentalism – we monumentalise it: enshrine is as heritage in the canon. Benjamin saw it as the critic’s task to rescue objects from such enshrinement. ‘Wovor werden die Phänomene gerettet?’ he rhetorically asks in the methodological convolute of Das Passagen-Werk. ‘Nicht nur, und nicht sowohl vor dem Verruf und der Mißachtung in die sie geraten sind als vor der Katastrophe wie eine bestimmte Art ihrer Überlieferung, ihre “Würdigung als Erbe” sie sehr oft darstellt.’ [N9,4]

Nonetheless, Benjamin himself has, like Shelley, become enshrined as a high-value commodity in the academic marketplace: ‘in the profession you are nobody unless you have said something about this text,’ as de Man said of ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers’ already in 1979 (‘Conclusions’, p. 26). Paying close attention to critical reading is thus not merely a question of granting the critic a share of the artistic accomplishment, it is also an imperative to keep in mind the contradiction inherent in canonising works, such as ‘The Triumph of Life’ or Benjamin’s reflections on history, whose primary thrust is directed against canonisation. This is another way to understand Hamacher’s prescription that literary scholarship must start out from its own disfiguration: it must maintain a critical skepsis to its own critical claims.

Etymologically both criticism and its primary tool, the critical citation, are related to judgment. To criticise is to pass judgment on something whereas to cite is to issue a summons to a juridical court. By means of citation, this work summons the writings of Benjamin and Shelley, with the aim of subjecting them to critical judgment. But if the present work apostrophises Shelley and Benjamin and in a certain sense allows them to speak back, it also serves to give face to me as a critic and claim a voice to address the academic community. As a doctoral thesis, any judgment that this work carries out only reflects the judgment it is itself subject to – not forgetting that it is written on two authors who were both dismissed from the academy.36 But, of course, both Shelley and Benjamin have been rectified by the whirligig of time. If Shelley was mostly ignored or vilified in the beginning of the twentieth century (‘There’s something dreadful about Shelley. Not human, not a man. A mixture between a fairy and a white slug,’ says Aldous Huxley’s cynic Mark Rampion in Point Counter Point [1928]37), by the century’s end he had an assured place in

---

36 Shelley for refusing to acknowledge authorship of a pamphlet called The Necessity of Atheism, Benjamin for refusing to submit to academic forms of argumentation in his habilitation thesis on the German baroque Trauerspiel.
the canon both as a political writer and as a philosophically complex lyricist. The bicentenary of his birthday was marked by several conferences and publications and his works have a given place among the romantic-era achievements celebrated by the Romantic Bicentennials initiative starting in 2016. Some 75 years after Benjamin’s suicide, his name has become so ubiquitous in the humanities that laments about the ‘Benjamin industry’ seem almost obligatory at the outset of any reading or conference organised in his name. The 2015 instalment of the International Walter Benjamin Society’s conference, hosted by the Universities of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, provokes a dissenting counter-conference organised in Ramallah, in protest against the ‘de facto cultural and academic boycott of Palestine,’ but also against the Benjamin industry itself. Under the heading ‘Why Benjamin in Palestine: Who owns Walter Benjamin?’ the initiative’s webpage states that:

There are countless international conferences celebrating his legacy. But can this academic appropriation of Benjamin’s thought do justice to his ‘critical life’ and to the ‘tradition of the oppressed’ that his writings invoke? Given the uncritical if not ideological role of the humanities in today’s neo-liberal capitalism, a merely academic discourse on Benjamin does violence to his thought.38

Apart from the irony that the organisers respond to this state of affairs by organising yet another international conference in Benjamin’s name, it also highlights a peculiar notion of fidelity often encountered in Benjamin criticism – it is otherwise rare that the charge of ‘violating the author’s intention’ serves to discredit a competing intellectual position. While it cannot be disregarded that Benjamin was a German Jew in the 1930s, in most other respects his biography shares more with the oppressors than the oppressed whom he wrote about. I am largely sceptical about the political efficacy ascribed to Shelley’s and Benjamin’s works and often, particularly in the case of Benjamin, claimed by their critics.39 While both Shelley and Benjamin were sincerely committed to alleviating the position of ‘the oppressed’ (a nomination both authors used), I do not think that there is any use pretending that sophisticated readings of their works will help the oppressed of today. I come closest to engaging with questions of politics in the second half of the thesis, where I discuss Benjamin’s reading of Shelley’s political lyrics as well as read Shelley’s The Cenci (1819) alongside Benjamin’s ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt’ ['Critique of Violence'] (1921), his essay on ‘Goethe’s Wahlverwandtschaften’ [Goethe’s Elective Affinities] (1924), and a series of essays and fragments on tragedy, theology, and violence written between 1918-21. While my discussion touches on political themes, I do not claim that it is a politically

39 Esther Leslie’s Overpowering Conformism (2000) would be an example of criticism that takes Benjamin’s critique of conformism as evidence of its own non-conformity even though Leslie’s argument, by and large, conforms to the direction taken by Benjamin’s Marxian reception.
effective discussion. Rather, I use the methodology that I develop in the first part of the thesis, based on deconstructive readings of Shelleyan and Benjaminian uses of language, to show how political questions intersect with problems of language. Since language is never a transparent medium or simple tool for communication, even emancipatory language risks turning into an instrument of oppression. The political lesson that I would draw in the final part of the thesis, then, is that political discourse must maintain a critical distance to its own emancipatory claims. Just as the study of literature is to be disfigured by its object of study, so the politics of literature must face its own disfiguration. My aim is to show how both Shelley and Benjamin testify to this necessity through the manner in which their works challenge their representational status. At the very end of the thesis, I suggest that the only political stance that Shelley as well as Benjamin unequivocally embrace is forgiveness.

4. The roads not taken.

Historically speaking, Shelley and Benjamin had very little to do with one another. Benjamin cites Shelley once in the enormous mass of citations that constitutes Das Passagen-Werk, and adds two comments that compare Shelley’s London to Baudelaire’s Paris. Shelley also receives a brief mention in Benjamin’s 1938 essay on Baudelaire. Benjamin came across Shelley’s work in Brecht’s translation and Brecht’s reception of the poet he would refer to as ‘Mein Bruder Shelley’ forms the context of Benjamin’s citations. Steven E. Jones, Robert Kaufman, and Mark Kipperman have studied Shelley’s reception in Benjamin’s circle, with particular attention to the political, interventionist aspects of Shelley’s verse and the Frankfurt School’s cultural critique. While I do comment on Benjamin’s reading of Shelley, my primary emphasis is not on examining Shelley’s afterlife in Benjamin’s work. Kathleen Kerr-Koch’s Romancing Fascism is closer to my research as it not only covers the same authors but also many of the same themes as I do. Romancing Fascism appeared two years into this project and follows a wholly different trajectory than the one I set myself. Kerr-Koch sets out her aims as follows:

This book asks two questions: first, what can a comparative study of allegory as it is developed in the works of Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man tell us about the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley and about criticism itself? Secondly, how is it possible to harness graphing performativity [i.e. allegorical modes of writing], which is also the performativity of technology, to human interests as against narrow political interests?41

As I have already indicated, I am not interested in a Benjamiinian reading of Shelley; in addition to asking what Benjamin’s works can tell us about Shelley’s poetry, I also want to know what Shelley’s poetry can tell us about Benjamin’s works. Kerr-Koch’s second question regards harnessing ‘graphing performativity’ to political ends. Graphing performativity is a concept that she develops from her reading of allegory in Benjamin and de Man and points to how language creates visual concepts. In my view, the political efficacy of this concept stands in an inverse relation to how easy it is to grasp what ‘graphic performativity’ means. I would also distance myself from Kerr-Koch’s historical outlook. She presents Shelley, Benjamin, and de Man as paradigmatic of three historical moments at the outset, height, and end of modernity as the latter passes into postmodernity. My aim in this comparative study has not been to demonstrate a historical development in which Shelley and Benjamin serve as stations on the road. My focus on their afterlives implies a certain simultaneity in their works – if only their presence in the present moment of reading. Roughly halfway through the thesis, in my discussion of Shelley’s ekphrastic poem ‘On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery’ and Benjamin’s ekphrastic ninth thesis on history (where Klee’s Angelus Novus becomes Benjamin’s angel of history) I address the difference between lived time and the time of artistic and historical representation. I argue that representation, insofar as it persists while living creatures die, has a different temporality. It is in relation to this ‘timeless’ time of representation that I understand the concept of literary afterlife.

Benjamin and Shelley are separated by the long nineteenth century – the site of the ‘pre-history of modernity’ according to Benjamin. Nonetheless, there are some touchstones: Shelley’s political thought has to overcome the French Revolution’s descent from emancipatory ideals into terror in order to maintain a commitment to emancipation from the old order. The French Revolution also continues to resonate in Benjamin’s most comprehensive account of the experience of modernity, Das Passagen-Werk, but Benjamin’s emancipatory politics also respond to the revolutionary movements of the nineteenth century, the First World War, and the rise of the National Socialism. Furthermore, Shelley’s age witnessed the ascent of industrial capitalism, some technical innovations, e.g. panoramas and phantasmagorias, as well as the emergence of a mass

market for literature that would over the century transform politics, art and social
relations and which Benjamin studied in his work on the Paris Arcades. Even if it is true
that Shelley’s London exhibited many of the features that Benjamin analyses in
Baudelaire’s Paris, Shelley’s own work rarely foregrounds the experience of the
metropolis, particularly not as well as some of his contemporaries: one need only think of
Wordsworth’s seventh book of The Prelude (on London), Charles Lamb’s or William
Hazlitt’s essays, or even Keats’s aestheticized rejection of aestheticism, which can be seen
as a precursor Baudelaire’s stance.

The changes that art and society undergo in the nineteenth century make Benjamin
conclude that an unbridled faith in the power of poetry, as seen, for instance, in Shelley’s
declaration of poets ‘the unacknowledged legislators of the World’ (‘Defence,’ SPP, p. 535)
becomes impossible in modernity. I read Benjamin’s literary-theoretical experimentation
as an attempt to create for his generation what poetry was for Shelley’s. His turn to new
media – photography, film, literary montage – are so many attempts at finding new forms
for the emancipatory potential that Shelley ascribed to poetry. This similarity in difference
can be compactly illustrated with Shelley’s and Benjamin’s use of the seed as metaphor for
the life of literature:

There is this difference between a story and a poem, that a story is a catalogue of detached
facts, which have no other bond of connexion than time, place, circumstance, cause and
effect; the other is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human
nature, as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds.
The one is partial, and applies only to a definite period of time, and a certain combination
of events which can never again recur; the other is universal, and contains within itself the
germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of
human nature. (SPP, p. 515)

Aus dieser Geschichte ist zu ersehen, wie es mit der wahren Erzählung steht. Die
Information hat ihren Lohn mit dem Augenblick dahin, in dem sie neu war. Sie lebt nur in
diesem Augenblick, sie muß sich gänzlich an ihn ausliefern und ohne Zeit zu verlieren sich
ihm erklären. Anders die Erzählung: sie verausgibt sich nicht. Sie bewahrt ihre Kraft
gesammelt und ist noch nach langer Zeit der Entfaltung fähig. [... ] Sie ähnelt den
Samenkörnern, die jahntausendelang luftdicht verschlossen in den Kammern der
Pyramiden gelegen und ihre Keimkraft bis auf den heutigen Tag bewahrt haben. (GS2, pp.
445-6)

The difference is clear: while Shelley distinguishes poetry from storytelling, Benjamin
emphasises precisely storytelling in contradistinction to information, by which he means
journalism. However, the underlying conception – captured in the seed metaphor – is
remarkably similar. Literature is a storehouse that continually regenerates itself in future
reading. Conceived as a seed coming to fruition, reading is the place where the life of literature resides, whereas a catalogue of detached facts, or information, is expanded in the moment it is transmitted. At the same time, Benjamin’s essay ‘Der Erzähler’ tells a story about the demise of storytelling – disguised in the form of an article on the Russian writer Nikolai Leskov. ‘Der Erzähler’ is both death knell and afterlife of the craft it pronounces dead. The more decisive difference, then, is that where Shelley believes in the universal verity of poetry, Benjamin continues writing stories when he no longer believes them to be possible.

A comparative reading that at every step underlines the differences between the two authors under comparison of course undermines its own grounds for existence. That Benjamin and Shelley differ is so self-evident that one hardly needs a comparative study to prove this point. Rather, the interest of this study is to reveal the common ground over which they differ: it is not that Shelley and Benjamin say different things, it is that they say different things on the same subjects. I take inspiration from the spirit in which Rainer Nägele notes the similarities between Kafka’s riddle-solving dog in ‘Investigations of a Dog’ and Sophocles’ Oedipus:

There is nothing, or little that allows us to assume that Kafka intended such correspondences. And yet their effect is there. If such correspondences have a power, it is rarely ever due to “influence” – direct influences are in most cases only superficially effective – but they owe their effects to objective constellations that emerge only from intensive immersion in the material.42

In like manner I have attempted to trace correspondences between Shelley and Benjamin by immersing myself in their works. The angle set by the comparison has determined the choice of texts – even though, in most cases, the texts under discussion are among the canonical ones. However, there are some important omissions from the corpora of both. I do not address several central Shelleyan poems, such as ‘Mont Blanc,’ Alastor, The Revolt of Islam, Epipsychidion, Julian and Maddalo,’ the late lyrics to Jane, Hellas, and I only skim over that central work Prometheus Unbound. The focus lies on his translation of the Homeric ‘Hymn to Mercury’ (1820), ‘The Triumph of Life’ (1822), ‘The Cloud’ (1819) ‘On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery’ (1819) and The Cenci (1819). I read these poems alongside Benjamin’s essays ‘Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen’ (1916) and ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers’ (1921) in addition to a series of fragments on political-theological themes that culminates in ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt’ (1921) and the essay on ‘Goethe’s Wahlverwandtschaften’ (1924). Of the early

work I also discuss the doctoral thesis on German romanticism but not Benjamin's student writings nor the experiments in Kantian thought. Several of the early motifs are reworked in the Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert and the accompanying essays 'Lehre vom Ähnlichen' ['Doctrine of the Similar'] and 'Über das Mimetische Vermögen' ['On the Mimetic Faculty'] (1932-33). They are also reintroduced in Benjamin's essays on Karl Kraus, Franz Kafka, and Marcel Proust and further developed in Benjamin's Passagen-Werk and Über den Begriff der Geschichte. In the former, I only engage with the Baudelaire Convoluted and 'N: Erkenntnistheoretisches, Theorie des Fortschritts.' I only dip into the Trauerspiel-book and pass over the works of the second half of the twenties: there is virtually no mention of Benjamin's work on new media ('Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit' ['The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility'] is the most canonical essay omitted) nor his interventions in the political landscape of his time (e.g. Einbahnstraße [One-way Street], 'Autor als Produzent' ['Author as Producer,'] Moskauer Tagebuch, [Moscow Diary]), his city writings or the bulk of Das Passagen-Werk, all of which engage with phenomena that have no counterpart in Shelley's life or work.

5. Outline.

The structure of the present work is an afterthought. It was constructed out of the material I had rather than written in accordance with a pre-conceived plan, and yet as I worked to bring together my notes into a single thesis, a certain coherence began to emerge. In the final stages of revision, this emergent structure began to dictate my choices about inclusion and exclusion as well as ordering. My main point of inspiration is in Adorno's Minima Moralia (1951) and the way in which the different fragments that the work consists of add up to a whole that remains fragmented. My aim has been for each section to throw light on a specific aspect of the present constellation of Shelley and Benjamin and to present these individual points of correspondence without enforcing a false appearance of commensurability. In most cases the name of a section is taken from the material discussed in it and is a citation or a paraphrase of its key terms. That there are now a hundred such sections is a coincidence without any particular significance, other than indicating an average length of 1,000 words per section. These are grouped into twenty 'chapters.' Again, the titles are mostly cited from the material discussed and serve to indicate the key issue. The primary point of the chapter division is to signal a certain conceptual unity between the sections grouped into it. That said, many strands of the argument run across several such groupings, and additionally, there is also a red thread that runs throughout the thesis. I here sketch out the main lines of development, whereas the more specific turns are signposted within the text and would be too detailed to cover here.
In the beginning was the name. Benjamin identifies the name with the divine logos and sees it as the primary building block of creation. Prompted by the importance that Benjamin grants to names, I explore Shelley’s translation of the Homeric ‘Hymn to Hermes.’ The hymn sings the birth of lyric poetry out of a χέλυς chelys, which in Greek means both shell and lyre. Since lyric poetry is named after the first lyre that Hermes fashioned out of a tortoise-shell, the shell becomes the allegorical emblem of the lyric art. But its English equivalent also sounds like Shelley’s proper name. I suggest that shells begin to function like Shelleyan signatures in his works. I also suggest that Benjamin found a comparable kind of signature by collating Klee’s picture Angelus Novus and a Talmudic legend about angels who are being born to sing their hymns before God. Returning to Shelley’s translation, I show that Shelley alters the original account of the birth of lyric poetry to accord with his poetics. For Shelley measure is the primary feature of poetic language, which is to say a certain ordering of sound. From there I turn to Benjamin’s essays on language to examine the role that sound plays in these. Where post-Saussurean convention has it that sound and signification are arbitrarily attached, Benjamin suggests that sound is the hallmark of the special status of human language, relating it to the divine logos.

Poetic nature. I then move to the romantic transformation of the lyre of lyric poetry into an Aeolian lyre. The Aeolian lyre introduces a concept of harmony: Shelley’s representation of man as an Aeolian lyre harks back to a conception of human nature present in the childhood of man which is now lost and which poetry seeks to revive. Benjamin’s later theory of language also subscribes to the ideal of the childhood of man as the source of poetic writing and I argue that his texts on his own childhood try to create a mode of writing that enlivens this primal power after lyric poetry – which was conventionally given this task – has become impossible in modernity.

Violets. From investigating childhood I turn to investigating translation, a turn prompted by a pun on two meanings of the word ‘violet’: firstly, Shelley’s assertion that translation is as vain as casting a violet in a crucible and, secondly, Hamacher’s translation and transformation of Walter Benjamin’s name into the colour violet. The fact that a single word can mean several things is a consequence of the fall of language, but it is also the precondition of poetic writing. In this context I examine Benjamin’s citation of Mallarmé in his essay on translation. I argue that Benjamin is inspired by Mallarmé’s poetics when he conceives of translation as a harmonious assemblage of fragments of language.

Two words. Hamacher reads Benjamin’s use of the colour violet as an example of the Entstellung that characterises the world of the child. Another such example is the word ‘Wolke,’ ‘cloud’ in Benjamin’s works. Hamacher calls Benjamin’s clouds ‘figures of
defiguration,’ a theoretical term that, I argue, is indebted to de Man’s essay ‘Shelley Disfigured.’ For de Man the ‘Shape all light’ that appears in ‘The Triumph of Life’ is a ‘figure for the figurality of all signification’ – and its disfiguration. de Man defines the disfiguration performed by the shape as a disarticulation of sense by metric measure and I go through a close reading of de Man’s argument.

A cloud that is not one. Prompted by Hamacher’s suggestion that clouds are figures of disfiguration, I look at Shelley’s figures of clouds. I follow Hamacher in reading clouds as self-reflective figures of language, whose shapeless morphology becomes representative of how words are equally shape-shifting. Sonic similarities between words mean that one word may as easily turn into another one as a cloud may resemble first one thing and then another.

Murmuring sounds. I return to Benjamin’s work and examine the sound of his writings on childhood and show that the kind of disfiguration of sense by metric measure that de Man diagnoses in Shelley is in play here too.

Strange distortion. The disfiguration of ‘Shelley Disfigured’ not only concerns Shelley's poetic figures but the disfiguration of human figures – paradigmatically Rousseau. Furthermore, de Man also refers to Shelley’s own figure – his disfigured corpse as it was washed up on the Italian shore. De Man uses the rhetorical trope of prosopopoeia to explain how literary and critical texts give face to the people they talk about. Prosopopoeia is also key in his discussion of autobiography and taking this as my cue I return to Benjamin's childhood writings and spot where Benjamin disfigures his own childhood face by presenting an ekphrasis on a photograph of Kafka as a self-portrait.

Slight adjustments. Still operating within the terms of de Man’s reading, I look at how disfiguration is a loss of face, or loss of human features. Drawing on the Lucretian idea of simulacra, Shelley lets ‘mask after mask’ fall off the participants in his procession, leaving them disfigured. Benjamin also evokes Lucretius in describing his childhood Denkbilder as simulacra. Disfiguration is coded negatively in Shelley, whereas the world in a state of distortion is an index of messianic hope in Benjamin; nonetheless, both writers use a Lucretian model to link the physical and moral distortion of the world. Furthermore, they suggest the adjustment that would set it right – as becomes evident when Benjamin is read together with the post-apocalyptic vision of Prometheus Unbound.

Speculations. In his childhood writings Benjamin brags that he never uses the word ‘I.’ I compare this to Shelley’s assertion, in his Speculations on Metaphysics and Morals, that personal pronouns are devoid of meaning. I compare Shelley’s epistemology to Benjamin’s
definition of the Reflexionsmedium of the early German romantics: in both cases the word ‘I’ is dissolved in a universal medium in which all things and minds participate.

Distorted reflections. For all the resemblance between Shelleyan and early Romantic epistemology as outlined by Benjamin, there is an important difference, namely that Shelley uses the word perception where Benjamin writes of reflection. Reflection, for Shelley, is rather connected with mirroring and I turn to Shelley’s translation of a passage from Goethe’s Faust to show how this text allows Shelley to encounter the threat of reflection. Additionally, I examine how Shelley’s translation practice grows out of his poetics and the way in which it differs from Benjamin’s thought on translation.

In the gallery. In this section I turn to Shelley’s ekphrastic poem ‘On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery.’ In this poem Medusa’s ‘characters’ are inscribed over the features of her onlooker even as they are the very ‘characters’ that make up the poem on the page. I focus on the ‘ever-shifting mirror’ that appears in Shelley’s last stanza but not on the painting he describes and argue that this is another self-reflective image. Finally, I discuss the poem’s interplay of gazes in light of Benjamin’s theory of aura.

Medusan gaze. Following Heffernan’s definition of ekphrasis as ‘the verbal representation of a visual representation’ that ultimately serves to represent representation itself, I turn to Benjamin’s ninth thesis on history where an ekphrasis on Paul Klee’s Angelus Novus becomes the angel of history. Reading it generically as a piece of ekphrasis I suggest that this particular representation of history is not meant to promote a particular vision of history as catastrophe (the way it is often read) but rather to represent the representation of history as such. To further develop this argument I look at the Medusan metaphors in Benjamin’s notes on Blanqui and Baudelaire in Das Passagen-Werk.

Benjamin reads Shelley. The Baudelaire convolute also contains Benjamin’s only citations of Shelley. Benjamin uses Shelley as a contrast to Baudelaire. In Benjamin’s three comments on him, Shelley is primarily what Baudelaire is not. Benjamin cites Shelley in Brecht’s translation and I contextualise his citations in Brecht’s commentary on Shelleyan allegory.

The final six chapters are devoted to The Cenci and Benjamin’s discussion of tragedy, myth, and violence in a series of essays and fragments written 1918-22. In Tragic circumstances I discuss how the two conceive of tragedy. Benjamin reads Goethe’s Wahlverwandtschaften as a mythic tragedy in modern costume and in Beatrice & Ottile I read Beatrice Cenci together with Goethe’s heroine Ottile. In Payback time I turn to the male relations in the play, which I read as an allegorical critique of capitalism. In Living on I examine the
relationship between Beatrice and Cenci and foreground their similarities. Rather than seeing Beatrice as an innocent victim, I suggest that she is her father’s equal and that father and daughter stage a critique of the auto-destructive nature of violence. Rebellion further develops the reading of the Cenci family violence with reference to Benjamin’s ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt.’ In Last line of resistance I argue that The Cenci does not comply with Benjamin’s dichotomy between mythic and divine violence; the violence in The Cenci is of a third kind, hinted at in ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt.’ Since Benjamin uses Prometheus as example, I term it Promethean violence. In Prometheus Unbound, Shelley’s Prometheus renounces precisely his Promethean violence. In the end I suggest that Benjamin and Shelley share the belief that forgiveness is a force stronger than any violence: as manifested in Prometheus’ recall of his curse and in the entsühnend, forgiving, essence of divine violence. This is a messianic moment that opens onto a future not fully conceivable within our inherited language and modes of representations since these have become vehicles to transmit oppression. In other words, a break with the history of oppression requires a break with history tout court. Arriving at this limit closes the narrative arch of the thesis: thus it begins with the name and the birth of song and ends with the a gesture towards ‘a different future.’
In the beginning was the name


The Homeric 'Hymn to Hermes' narrates the origin of lyric poetry; it sings the birth of Hermes, son to Zeus and the nymph Maia. On the morning of his first day alive, Hermes fashions a lyre out of the shell of a tortoise and as he begins to sing to its tune he invents the lyric art. Martin L. West, editor and translator of the Loeb edition of the Homeric hymns, notes that the Greek word χέλυς, chelys 'denotes both the tortoise and the lyre made from its shell' – the lyre gives lyric poetry its name whereas the shell becomes an allegorical emblem for the lyric art and its practitioners. After this feat, Hermes goes on to steal and sacrifice the oxen of his elder brother Apollo. Apollo is infuriated and complains to their father, who laughs at the story and orders the two brothers to reconcile. The reconciliation is symbolised by Hermes giving Apollo the lyre in exchange for Apollo’s oxen, friendship and a place at Mount Olympus for him and his mother Maia. As Jennifer Fraser points out, the account creates a peculiar displacement whereby Apollo does not fulfil his divine function as god of lyric poetry until he receives the lyre from his trickster brother. Only thenceforth is the lyre known as the Apollonian lyre, and often used to identify the god in sculptural and painterly representations. However, as the original Greek makes clear, the Apollonian lyre is at the same time a shell, a word whose English equivalent fortuitously resonates in the lyric poet Percy Bysshe Shelley’s name. The word χέλυς – at once shell and lyre but also the origin of poetry will serve as the starting point of my reading. Shelley translates the piece in early July 1820; ‘I have been translating the hymns of Homer, for want of spirit to invent – I have only finished one, the Hymn to Mercury, in ottava rima, which is infinitely comical –’ Shelley confides in a letter to Maria Gisborne (Letters 2, p. 218). While it was not uncommon to use the Latin equivalent name in translations of the Homeric Hymns addressed to the gods, Gary Farnell reads Shelley’s decision to re-address the hymn to Hermes as a hymn to Mercury as a veiled reference to Shelley’s own name: ‘it is surely not insignificant that “Mercury” was [...] one

---

44 “Intertextual Turnarounds: Joyce’s Use of the Homeric ‘Hymn to Hermes,’” James Joyce Quarterly, 36 (1999), 541–557
of the poet's many nicknames.' The more significant reference to Shelley's name is, however, found in the lyrical shell itself. That Shelley was playfully aware of the sound of the shell in his own name is evidenced by some of his other nicknames, such as the Nautilus and the Conchoid. At the same time, the shell was in Shelley's life-time sufficiently established as an emblem of the lyric art for Lord Byron (perhaps in this context not insignificantly a friend of Shelley's) to refer to poets as 'brethren of the Shell' and for William Wordsworth to use a shell to symbolise poetry in the visionary dream of The Prelude's 'Book V: Books.' Therefore it is perhaps not surprising that Shelley often places shells in central positions in his poetry. An oft-cited instance is the third act of Prometheus Unbound, where Shelley lets the music of a shell announce the post-apocalyptic restitution of the lyrical drama's fourth act. On his release, Prometheus instructs The Spirit of the Hour to

Go, borne over the cities of mankind
On whirlwind-footed coursers: once again
Outspeed the sun around the orbèd world;
And as thy chariot cleaves the kindling air,
Thou breathe into the many-folded shell,
Loosening its mighty music (III.iii.76-81)

In commenting on this passage, Peter Butter suggests that the shell 'contained the prophecy of Prometheus' victory. This prophecy having been fulfilled, the music of the shell can now be loosened over the cities of men,' whereas Earl J. Wasserman reads it 'as an analogue of the other caves of potentiality' found in Prometheus Unbound. G. Wilson Knight likewise believes that the Earth's awakening is brought about through the sounding of the shell, in a reading that foregrounds 'how with its mystic sea-music, itself ocean-born, it blends the aerial and the solid, time and space, its patterns perhaps suggesting a rainbow light, its curve the geometric harmony. All elements concrete and abstract blend in it, including art.' This sampling of interpretations indicates the metaphorical density of this shell: it is at the same time apocalyptic prophecy and the blast that heralds it, both metonym and metaphor for poetry (music of the shell), symbol of

---

political and epistemological potentiality – and it contains an echo of Shelley’s name. Following Farnell I want to suggest that Shelley’s use of shells is autobiographically tinged: his shells can be read as Shelleyan signatures where the poet introduces a disguised reference to himself into his works. Shelley’s translation of the Homeric ‘Hymn to Hermes’ can be said to narrate the birth of lyric poetry out of his own proper name. ‘A useful godsend are you to me now, [...] Welcome, you | Excellent plaything – where, sweet mountain beast, | Got you that speckled shell?’ (l. 33-7) are Mercury’s first words to the tortoise that he is about to fashion into the first lyre. But its shell is also a godsend for Shelley himself since the double meaning of the Greek χέλυς allows Shelley to introduce his own signature into this account of the origin of lyric poetry. Farnell argues that Shelley ‘claims the Hymn to Mercury as emblem of his own general project [...] he makes it look as if it is indeed Homer who is putting the shell in Shelley. Or to put it another way, the symbol is a Promethean gift, a godsend.’ (p. 637) Later on I will show how Shelley’s translation alters the original to reflect his own poetics, but first I want to note an affinity between Shelleyan shells and a comparable use of authorial signatures in Benjamin’s works.

7. The aura of being named.

Farnell reads Shelley’s shell imagery as an example of what Hartman has termed the ‘Romance of Being Named.’ Hartman coins the term in a quest for a linguistic equivalent to Lacan’s mirror phase in which a child ‘sees itself for the first time as a coordinated being and, triumphantly, jubilantly, assumes that image.’ Moving between Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derrida’s critique of transcendental signifiers, Hartman wonders whether it is ‘possible to discern a specular word, logos phase, or imago of the proper name in the development of the individual?’ (p. 101) This specular name would serve as a key to a hidden code disseminated throughout the author’s work: ‘the specular name or identity phrase [...] is reaffirmed in time by a textual mimicry, joyful, parodic, or derisory [...] The repetition of the specular name gives rise to texts that seem to be anagrammatic or to conceal an unknown-unknowable key, a “pure” signifier.’ (p. 102) It is along these lines that Farnell reads Shelley’s shells as disguised self-portraits. But Hartman’s own example of the romance of being named is Benjamin’s ‘Agesilaus Santander,’ a text in which Benjamin tells the story of his secret names: ‘Als ich geboren wurde, kam meinen Eltern der Gedanke, ich könnte vielleicht Schriftsteller werden. Dann sei es gut, wenn nicht gleich jeder merke, daß ich Jude sei. Darum gaben sie mir außer meinem Rufnamen noch zwei weitere, ausgefallene [Namen].’ (GS6, p. 521) In ‘Walter Benjamin und sein Engel,’ Benjamin’s close friend Gerschom Scholem reads ‘Agesilaus

Santander’ through the lens of Benjamin’s biography as well as Judaic angelology and suggests that ‘Agesilaus Santander’ is an anagram of ‘Der Angelus Satanas,’ and that this satanic angel is a veiled reference to Klee’s picture *Angelus Novus* (which Benjamin also mentions in this text).\(^{52}\) Scholem unravels the biographical associations that Klee’s image had for Benjamin, who acquired it while visiting Scholem in Munich in 1921 and left it together with his papers for George Bataille to keep during the Nazi occupation of France. For Scholem ‘Agesilaus Santander’ is a form of autobiographical portrait in which Benjamin disguises the story of his own love life. But however much Benjamin may have recognised the *Angelus* as an angelic counterpart, Scholem also underlines the theoretical insight Benjamin gained from studying it; already in 1922 Benjamin announced a journal to be called *Angelus Novus*, in reference to the Klee image and to a Talmudic legend that Benjamin associates with the picture:

> Werden doch sogar nach einer talmudischen Legende die Engel – neue jeden Augenblick in unzähligen Scharen – geschaffen, um, nachdem sie vor Gott ihren Hymnus gesungen, aufzuhören und in Nichts zu vergehen. Daß der Zeitschrift solche Aktualität zufalle, die allein wahr ist, möge ihr Name bedeuten. (GS2, p. 246)

Benjamin refers to this legend again in ‘Agesilaus Santander’ and both legend and picture are present in Benjamin’s essay on Karl Kraus (1931), written two years before ‘Agesilaus Santander.’ Benjamin will again reuse the image, this time without the legend, nearly another decade later when an ekphrastic depiction of Klee’s *Angelus Novus* becomes the basis for Benjamin’s ninth thesis on the philosophy of history. In other words, *Angelus Novus* has biographical as well as theoretical resonance in Benjamin’s works. For Hartman, Benjamin’s angel provides ‘a particularly revealing example of how autobiography is determined by the idea of a hidden – spectral or specular – name’ (p. 112) and Farnell argues that the same applies to Shelley’s self-conscious use of shells: in both cases we are dealing with disguised authorial signatures and these, Hartman asserts, points towards the aura of being named:

> What emerges with startling clarity is the *aura* of being named or imaged. Benjamin also said: “Things made of glass have no ‘aura’” [...] So the world he projects in his Romance of Being Named resists translucence or glassification. [...] However we unriddle it, “Agesilaus Santander” remains an abracadabra phrase that aims at reviving the aura of names, or of a naming with ritual and fixative power. (p. 113)

One of Benjamin’s words for such overdetermined ‘abracadabra’ figures is *Vexierbild*, picture puzzle: they are short texts loaded with multiple layers of meaning; another term

---

\(^{52}\) ‘Walter Benjamin und sein Engel’, in *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins*, ed. by Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), pp. 87–138 (pp. 102-9); further references in text.
is Denkbild, thought-image, and in his later work Benjamin will come to develop a concept of dialectical images that transfers this structure into the realm of historical time.\\footnote{53} Throughout the thesis I will study a number of such densely layered images in Shelley’s and Benjamin’s works, but here at the outset I want to emphasise the autobiographical element present in Benjamin’s angels and in Shelley’s shells. By associating himself with such a ‘useful godsend’ image, the author writes himself into the afterlife of his work; these images function as aural, abracadabra picture puzzles in which the author fleetingly enters his own image into his texts – as fleetingly as the angels appear to sing their praises to God before disappearing according to the Talmudic legend. Scholem testifies that it is precisely the fleeting nature of angels that attracted Benjamin:

> Unvergängliche Engel wie etwa der Erzengel oder der Satan […] waren für Benjamin wohl weniger wichtig als das talmudische Motiv von dem Entstehen und Vergehen der Engel vor Gott, von denen es in einem kabbalistischen Buche heißt, daß sie »hinschwinden wie der Funke auf der Kohle«. (p. 108)

The image that Scholem chooses to illustrate the Talmudic legend reads like Shelley’s image of the poetic process: ‘the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness.’ (SPP, p. 531). And thus transitorily do I seek to show moments when resemblances between Shelley’s and Benjamin’s works flash up only to disappear again in the mass of critical material that already exists on these two authors. I will have more to say about Benjamin’s ekphrasis on Klee’s Angelus Novus later, when I will put in in relation with Shelley’s ekphrasis ‘On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery,’ but for now I will return to the beginning of the lyric art narrated in Shelley’s translation of the Homeric ‘Hymn to Hermes.’ My aim is to show how Shelley’s treatment of the hymn provides a legend to the picture puzzle formed by Shelley’s shells as emblems of his own vocation – and what this emblem has to say about Shelley’s poetics overall.

8. A tortoise.

‘Sing, Muse, the son of Maia and of Jove’ (l. 1) Shelley’s rendition of the Homeric hymn opens in a conventional enough manner, yet the invocation is belied by one of the hymn’s

---

\\footnote{53}{For a discussion of this picture puzzle element of Benjamin’s works, see Michael W. Jennings, 
central scenes where Apollo, dazzled by Mercury's song, demands: 'What Muse, what skill, what unimagined use, | What exercise of subluest art has given | Thy songs such power?' (ll. 597-9) Apollo's request is the more remarkable coming from the god of poetry. 'And I, who speak this praise, am that Apollo | Whom the Olympian muses ever follow' he goes on (ll. 603-4). In this line Shelley departs from the original.⁵⁴ As the editors of the Longman edition of the hymn point out, the Greek text says 'For I too am a follower of the Olympian Muses.’ (PS3, p. 536, n. to ll. 603-4) Shelley’s alteration, which turns Apollo from a follower to the leader of the Muses, is not accidental: he drafted a note explaining that ‘The literal is – who ever follow or minister to, the Olympian Muses – but without regard to them the relation expressed by ὁμηδώς [adj. = following, accompanying] may be considered as a convertible term.’ (Cited in PS3, p. 536, n. to ll. 603-4) Even if we accept Shelley’s argument that the term is convertible, it is telling that Shelley decides to convert it: where the Greek has Apollo acknowledge both himself and Mercury as followers of the Muses, Shelley’s conversion places Mercury’s song in opposition to Apollo and his accompanying Muses. Since Apollo has just asserted that ‘such a strain of wondrous, strange, untired | And soul-awakening music sweet and strong | Yet did I never hear except from thee’ (ll. 593-5), Shelley’s alteration implies that the Muses in Apollo’s wake have never inspired such song as emanates from Mercury’s lyre: ’although he is the God of Poetry, when Apollo hears Hermes’s lyre, he hears poetic song for the first time.’ (Fraser, pp. 551-2) And in fact, already at the outset of the passage in which Mercury first stuns Apollo with his song, Shelley expands the original Greek to anticipate and enhance the effect of Mercury’s song on Apollo. After outlining how Mercury first tries to hide from Apollo’s wrath, the hymn reveals how he thinks of a better means of escape:

Sudden he changed his plan, and with strange skill
Subdued the strong Latonian by the might
Of winning music, to his mightier will;
His left hand held the lyre, and in his right
The plectrum struck the chords – unconquerable
Up from beneath his hand in circling flight
The gathering music rose (ll. 557-63)

Mercury’s will is mightier than Apollo’s wrath and it wields its unconquerable force by means of music. Apollo, however, while subdued nonetheless misunderstands the nature of Mercury’s ‘winning music’ (l. 559). The very question he poses to Mercury, ‘Whether the glorious power you now show forth | Was folded up within you at your birth, |’ Or whether

⁵⁴ In his detailed commentary on Shelley’s mistakes and deliberate variations in the ‘Hymn to Mercury,’ Webb suggests that the ‘remarkably faithful’ nature of this translation lends significance to every departure from the original, adding that ‘the most important [alterations] are the sections about poetry and song (more or less synonymous in this context)’ (p. 109).
mortal taught or God inspired | The power of unpremeditated song [?] (ll. 587-9) is based on a mistaken assumption about Mercury’s art: in Shelley’s version the power of Mercury’s song derives not from his inspiration, but from his instrument. Mercury answers Apollo’s question by handing him the lyre:

The lyre – be mine the glory giving it –
  Strike the sweet chords, and sing aloud, and wake
The joyous pleasure out of many a fit
Of trancèd sound – and with fleet fingers make
Thy liquid-voicèd comrade talk with thee,–
It can talk measured music eloquently. (ll. 639-44)

Rather than being inborn, ’mortal taught or God inspired,’ the song of Mercury lies entranced within the instrument and is awoken by playing it and it is the lyre itself that ’talk[s] measured music eloquently.’ Shelley figures this as a conversation: the lyre is no mere tool, but responds to the person playing it because it has its own song independent of the singer. ’I | Present thee with this music-flowing shell, | Knowing thou canst interrogate it well,’ (ll. 658-60) Mercury adds to complete his gift. The idea that the lyric power inheres in the shell and must be extracted from within it is anticipated in the slight adjustment that Shelley makes in the opening description of the tortoise out of whose shell Mercury will fashion the lyre. In the morning of the day he is born, Mercury creeps out of the cavern in which he is born and encounters the tortoise:

  Out of the lofty cavern wandering
  He found a tortoise, and cried out – ’a treasure!’
(For Mercury first made the tortoise sing)
  The beast before the portal at his leisure
  The flowery herbage was depasturing,
  Moving his feet in a deliberate measure
  Over the turf. (ll. 25-31)

Mercury may be the first to make the tortoise sing, but the basic elements of this song are already present in the ’deliberate measure’ with which the tortoise treads the ground – a measure still reverberating in the ’measure | Of the sweet lyre’ (ll. 568-9) that so impresses Apollo. Claudine T. Kahan notes that ’the tortoise which merely ”waddles along” in the original poem, moves ”his feet in deliberate measure” [sic] in his translation [...] and this precision, however slight, prepares the ground for the later description of the lyre.”

---

55 “Shelley’s ‘Hymn to Mercury’: Poetic Praxis and the Creation of Value,” *Studies in Romanticism*, 31 (1992) 147-169 (p. 154); further references in text. Kahan is primarily interested in the social function of Apollo’s song/speech and while I agree with her argument that the tortoise functions as a synecdoche for measure, I interpret the concept of ‘measure’ differently. Kahan reads Shelley’s
Kahan’s argument is supported by a juxtaposition of H. G. Evelyn-White’s and Shelley’s translations of Mercury’s address to Apollo as he hands him the lyre: ‘καλὰ καὶ εὖ κατὰ κόσμον ἐπιστάμενος ἁγορεύειν, kala kai eu kata kosmon epistamenos agoreuein’ (l. 479) – ‘you are skilled in good well-ordered utterance’ says Evelyn-White’s Hermes to Apollo; ‘It can talk measured music eloquently,’ says Shelley’s Mercury (l. 644). The Longman editors confirm the deviation: ‘S. mistranslates the original l. 479 [...] ”skilled at uttering beautifully and in good order,” which applies to Apollo, not the lyre.’ (PS3, n. to l. 644)

Kahan’s argument shows this change is not a mistranslation but a deliberate alteration of the original: Shelley purposefully underlines measure, token of beautifully ordered speech, as a property of the shell, rather than the person wielding it:

Where the Greek makes the mastery of social and orderly speech an attribute of Apollo, [...] Shelley makes it a predicate of the lyre. [...] The difference between “measured” and “unmeasured” speech in Shelley’s version, therefore, becomes a function no longer of Apollo’s social skills, as it is in the original poem, but of the lyre’s intrinsic power.

(pp. 150-1)

The measure that Shelley ascribes to the shell in this scene is an echo of the deliberate measure of the tortoise’s tread while still alive and thus an intrinsic property of the tortoise shell. But Kahan only notes in passing what I see as a much more remarkable departure from the original. ‘Agoreuein,’ she writes, ‘which Shelley translates as “measured music,” and rendered as “good, well-ordered utterance” by H. G. Evelyn-White, indeed refers to public speech.’ (p. 150) Her own footnote refers us to the entry for ἁγορεύειν, agoreuein in Liddell and Scott’s Greek Lexicon that gives ‘to speak in the assembly, to harangue.’ (p. 150, n.8) This means that Shelley transforms this beautifully well-ordered rhetorical performance fit for a public assembly (i.e. ἐπιστάμενος ἁγορεύειν, epistamenos agoreuein) into ‘measured music’ – regardless of whether the speech act is attributed to the god or to the lyre, Shelley turns public rhetoric into a poetic act for in Shelley’s poetics it is precisely measure that distinguishes poetic language: ‘It is necessary,’ he writes in the ‘Defence,’”to determine the distinction between measured and unmeasured language; for the popular division into prose and verse is inadmissible in accurate philosophy.’ (SPP, p. 514) Measure, rather than verse form, defines poetry for Shelley. In the passage that follows this definition of measure, Shelley turns to measure in philosophical works, offering the examples of Plato, Cicero, and Lord Bacon and concluding: ‘The parts of a composition may be poetical, without the composition as a whole being a poem. A single sentence may be considered as a whole though it may be found in the midst of a series of unassimilated portions; a single word even may be a spark

use of the word ‘measure’ as intimately related to ‘style’ and near-synonymous to mannered, genteel, with decorum (p.151, esp. n 9), whereas I focus on the musicality of (poetic) measure.
of inextinguishable thought.’ (SPP, p. 515) Prose works and even individual words are to be judged by their measure – and are to be classified as poetry only insofar as they are measured. As Jessica K. Quillin notes, since Shelley turns measure into the primary feature of poetic language ‘music becomes the sole identifying characteristic of a poet’ in his poetics. By altering public utterance into measured music, Shelley confirms the privilege he gives poets over rhetoricians or philosophers as drivers of civil life and ‘unacknowledged legislators of the World’ (‘Defence,’ SPP, p. 535). As Shelley translates the scene where Apollo receives the emblem of his craft, he makes his translation speak differently than its original in the very moment that – no longer Hermes’, but Shelley’s tortoise-shell lyre – stuns Apollo with its sweet measure. At the same time, Shelley is not simply referring to Apollo as the god of the lyric art, he also brings into play his status as the god of light, knowledge, and prophecy – all features that Shelley appropriates for the poet’s mission. Only when he receives the shell-lyre can Apollo fulfil all of his divine functions by uniting them under the aegis of measured language.


When Shelley turns the waddle of the Homeric tortoise into measured music, he subtly specifies that the tortoise is ‘[m]oving his feet in a deliberate measure’ (l. 30; my italics); the foot being the basic prosodic unit out of which poetic measure is woven. This opens up for a reading of the movement of feet that is repeatedly described in this hymn as a figure for the hymn’s own metric measure. As Mercury steals Apollo’s oxen,

He drove them wandering o’er the sandy way,
   But being ever mindful of his craft,
   Backward and forward drove he them astray
   So that the tracks which seemed before, were aft:
   His sandals then he threw to the Ocean spray
   And for each foot he wrought a kind of raft
   [...]  
   And on his feet he tied these sandals light,
   The trail of whose wide leaves might not betray
   His track (ll. 95-105)

56 Shelley and the Musico-Poetics of Romanticism (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), p. 40. Of course, the idea that poetry does something with sound is not unique to Shelley – Shelley’s originality lies rather in separating measure from verse form and asserting that prose texts can be more measured than many a work in verse.

57 i.e. ἀλλὸ ἀγορεύειν, allo agoreuein; the etymologic root of allegory literally means ‘speak differently’ – the rendition of ἀγορεύειν as ‘measured music’ is Shelley’s way of speaking allegorically in translating the allegorical origins of poetry.
The ploy is meant to confound Apollo when he discovers that his oxen are stolen, and it works a charm. "What wonder do mine eyes behold!" he exclaims when he discovers the tracks (l. 285):

‘Here are the footsteps of the hornèd herd

  Turned back towards their field of asphodel –

But these! – are not the tracks of beast or bird,

  Grey wolf or bear or lion of the dell

Or manèd Centaur – sand was never stirred

  By man or woman thus! – Inexplicable!

Who with unwearied feet could e’er impress

  The sand with such enormous vestiges? (ll. 286-93)

When Apollo later reports the theft to his father, he yet again emphasises his inability to comprehend the marks of Mercury’s passage:

‘The cattle’s track on the black dust, full well

  Is evident, as if they went towards

The place from which they came

[...]

His steps were most incomprehensible –

  I know not how I can describe in words

Those tracks – he could have gone along the sands

Neither upon his feet nor on his hands – (ll. 453-60)

If feet are a pun on metric feet, and treading is a synecdoche for lyric poetry’s musical measure, then Apollo’s consternation when faced with the traces of Mercury’s ‘unwearied feet’ is an analogue to Apollo’s stunned reaction the ‘measure | of the sweet lyre’ (ll. 568-9) as Mercury talks with his instrument. Mercury’s dazzling of his elder brother is further developed by Shelley’s use of light imagery. After the theft is accomplished, Mercury returns to his cave ‘with soft light feet – as if his tread | Fell not on earth, no sound their falling gave | Then to his cradle he crept quick’ (ll. 191-3). While Mercury’s movements are here soundless, they still invite comparison to the soft, light feet of Shelley’s ottava rima, especially as the description of Mercury in his cradle that follows anticipates imagery that Shelley will use to describe poetry in his ‘Defence of Poetry,’ written in the year following the translation of the ‘Hymn to Mercury.’ As Apollo comes looking for the culprit who is hiding in his cradle, we learn that

  Maia’s child

Perceived that he came angry, far aloof,

  About the cows of which he had been beguiled,

And over him the fine and fragrant woof
Of his ambrosial swaddling-clothes he piled –
As among fire-brands lies a burning spark
Covered, beneath the ashes cold and dark. (ll. 303-9)

This portrayal of Mercury as a spark is very close to Shelley’s description of Dante’s words in the ‘Defence:’ ‘His very words are instinct with spirit; each is as a spark, a burning atom of inextinguishable thought; and many yet lie covered in the ashes of their birth, and pregnant with a lightning which has yet found no conductor.’ (SPP, p. 528) Mercury in his cradle is like a word of poetry and the conceptualization of poetic words as sparks feeds into the image of poetic inspiration ‘as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness.’ (SPP, p. 531) Shelley’s handling of the hymn’s opposition of Mercury and Apollo presents the spark of light stirred by the poetic influence as distinct from the broad Apollonian sunlight with which Apollo descends into the cave. Coupled with Apollo’s lack of understanding of either the lyre as instrument or the measured treading it invokes, we see how Shelley continually pitches figures of his own poetics against the ancient god of poetry: Shelley’s translation of the Homeric hymn thus contests Apollo’s status as master of the lyric art.


The infant Mercury’s first words to the tortoise are ‘a treasure!’ followed by a speech where he calls it a ‘useful godsend’ and ‘[e]xcellent plaything’ (l. 26; l. 33). I have traced how this shell is as much of a godsend for Shelley as it is for Mercury, as Shelley employs this partial homophone of his proper name to bedazzle the ancient god of poetry with images of his own poetics. But there is a second double meaning at play in Mercury’s first address. When Mercury calls the tortoise an excellent plaything he does not refer to the shell as a playmate and companion. Although his address to the tortoise goes on with the

---

58The cave that Mercury resides in and the fragrant woof that he hides in are two further images that Shelley customarily uses to describe poetry. One may think of ‘the still cave of the witch Poesy’ first noted in ‘Mont Blanc’ and developed in ‘The Witch of Atlas,’ another playful ottava rima piece of 1820 for which the ‘Hymn to Mercury’ is often read as a rehearsal. In the latter poem we read:
All day the wizard lady sate aloof
Spelling out scrolls of dread antiquity
Under the cavern’s fountain-lighted roof;
Or brodering the pictured poesy
Of some high tale upon her growing woof (l. 249-53)

59Daniel Hughes and Forest Pyle have offered two separate takes on Shelley’s fire metaphors. Hughes ‘look[s] at one of the key Shelleyan words, a signature as significant as any of his much-discussed symbols, cave, dome, boat, star, etc. [...] the word kindle’ in ‘Kindling and Dwinding: The Poetic Process in Shelley’, Keats-Shelley Journal, 13 (1964), 13–28 (p. 14). Pyle is ‘interested in the ways in which ashes are a textual residue, the signs and traces of [...] a “radical aestheticism” which is “kindled” at certain critical instances in the poetry of both Shelley and Keats.’ ‘Kindling and Ash: Radical Aestheticism in Keats and Shelley’, Studies in Romanticism, 42 (2003), 427–459 (p. 428). The nearly forty years that separate the two articles are reflected in their respective critical vocabularies (e.g. symbol vs. sign and trace), nonetheless both critics deal with by and large the same thing: Shelley’s systematic use of kindling as a self-reflective figure for poetic creation.
flattering words: ‘King of the dance, companion of the feast, [...] You must come home with me and be my guest; | You will give joy to me, and I will do | All that is in my power to honour you’ (ll. 34-40). Mercury is deviously punning. If he invites the tortoise to play with it, it is because he knows that its shell will make an excellent instrument to play music upon. His best way of honouring the tortoise is therefore by fashioning it into a lyre – ‘and though it has been said | That you alive defend from magic power, | I know you will sing sweetly when you’re dead,’ Mercury closes his address (ll. 42-4). Reading this line Catherine Maxwell points out the violence inherent in his words:

> The lyre, from which we derive the word lyric, is the badge of the poet’s claim to the gift of song, but the creation of the lyre has its origins in an act of violence. Hermes the god of communication and the supposed inventor of the lyre, creates the instrument from tortoiseshell, sheepgut and cowhide. In order for there to be music, living creatures must first forfeit their lives. In Shelley’s translation of the Homeric ‘Hymn to Mercury’, the infant Hermes gleefully seizes the tortoise with the words: ‘I know you will sing sweetly when you’re dead.’

For the tortoise to truly become a plaything, it must first be slaughtered and Shelley expands the original Greek with plenty of detail:

> Then scooping with a chisel of grey steel
> He bored the life and soul out of the beast–
> No swifter a swift thought of woe or weal
> Darts through the tumult of a human breast
> Which thronging cares annoy, – not swifter wheel
> The flashes of its torture and unrest
> Out of the dizzy eyes – than Maia’s son
> All that he did devise hath feately done.

> And through the tortoise’s hard stony skin
> At proper distances small holes he made
> And fastened the cut stems of reed within,
> And with a piece of leather overlaid
> The open space, and fixed the cubits in,
> Fitting the bridge to both, and stretched o’er all
> Symphonious cords of sheep-gut rhythmical. (ll. 49-63)

Like with the ‘deliberate measure’ used to describe the tortoise’s tread, the adjective ‘rhythmical’ is Shelley’s addition to the Homeric Greek (Shelley’s draft also includes the rejected formulation ‘harmonious cords of sheep-gut musical’ [BSM 14, pp. 132-3]) – a

---

60 Catherine Maxwell, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 11-2; further references in text.
collocation that brings the modulation of sound in contact with the cadaverous image of ‘cords of sheep-gut.’ The extended description of Mercury’s scooping underlines the lethal violence that founds the lyric art – a violence thinly veiled by the playful tone in which it is related and which will be repeated as Shelley renders Mercury’s ritual slaughter of Apollo’s oxen. ‘And on the earth upon their backs he threw | The panting beasts, – and rolled them o’er and o’er | and bored their lives out.’ (ll.150-2) The slaughter and subsequent sacrifice of the oxen teaches Mercury ‘all the joys which in religion are’ (ll. 166) much like boring the life and soul out of the tortoise taught him the pleasure of song. In this light one can consider a further facet of the English word ‘shell,’ it finds a sonic counterpart not in a lyre but in a bombshell, a meaning reflected in the phenomenon of shell-shock. First coined in response to the experience of the trenches of the First World War, the word shell-shock also superimposes trauma onto this conventional allegorical emblem of lyric poetry: a kind of poetry, which for Benjamin, becomes impossible after the shell-shocks of modern experience, symbolised by the trenches of the First World War. In a passage from ‘Erfahrung und Armut’ [‘Experience and Poverty’] (1933) repeated verbatim in ‘Der Erzähler’ (1936) Benjamin writes:


This violence separates modern experience from the Arcadian romance presented in Shelley’s ‘Hymn to Mercury’ and violence, whose German equivalent, Gewalt, is a partial homonym of Walter Benjamin’s name, is a theme that Benjamin’s works centre around.61 Jochen Hörisch builds on Scholem’s reading of ‘Agesilaus Santander’ as the self-portrait of a satanic angel and notes the echo of Walter in Gewalt.62 In ‘Force of Law,’ Derrida cites Hörisch in the margins of his last page and gestures towards the notoriously difficult closing sentence of Benjamin’s ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt’:63 ‘Die göttliche Gewalt, welche Insignum und Siegel, niemals Mittel heiliger Vollstreckung ist, mag die waltende heissen’

61 The name Walter means ‘the ruler of an army’ and with the first part wald ‘rule’ being etymologically related to Gewalt.
Derrida's reading focuses on the intertwined themes of violence, theology, law, and political action, yet the sudden attention paid to the sound of Benjamin's first name introduces a sensuous, aesthetic element as foreign to the themes of political action as the violent slaughter of Apollo's oxen is foreign to the Homeric hymn's playful account of the birth of lyric song. Hamacher further works through the consonance between Walter and Gewalt by stringing together the words 'Walter, violation and Gewalt, theft, viol and vol,' in English and French. Benjamin's formulations of Gewalt emerge as self-reflective puns in translations akin to Shelley's adaptation of the shell of lyric poetry and thus repeat on the sonic level what Klee's Angelus does on the visual level: they are picture puzzle signatures that Benjamin enters into his writings.

11. Sense and non-sense.

Most contemporary language theory sees the connection between sound and sense as arbitrary. From this perspective, endowing the sonic correspondence between Walter and Gewalt or the coincidence that Shelley's name sounds like one of the possible translations of the Greek word χέλυς is nonsensical; despite the ease with which metonymic correspondences between shell, poetry, and poet come into play in Shelley's treatment of the Homeric hymn, or between Walter, and Gewalt, or the colour violet in the Berliner Kindheit, Shelley's name has, at best, only a coincidental, partially homonymic relation to the signifier, shell, that in its turn has an arbitrary relation to the shell it signifies – proven by the fact that a different context may render the Greek χέλυς as lyre in English. One may even speak about a certain degree of violence done to sense when the sounds of language take the over the semantic function so that what words sound like take precedence over what they mean. This, however, is exactly the kind of 'bürgerlichen Ansicht der Sprache,' 'bourgeois view of language,' that Benjamin pitches his theory against. For him the view

65 Cf. Thomas Schestag's commentary on Benjamin's citation of Julius Walter in his essay on Goethe's Wahlverwandtschaften. Schestag calls attention to the fact that Benjamin cites a man named Walter, furthermore he cites a passage that refers to an oceanide named Schönfließ, homophonic with Benjamin's middle name Schoenflies, which is also his mother's maiden name: 'In dem Zitat Walters aber zitiert Benjamin, und ruft – lautlos – das Wort beim Namen, den Mädchennamen der Mutter Walter Benjamins, Pauline Schoenflies. Und mehr als das. Denn Schoenflies ist, neben Benedix, dem Vornamen des väterlichen Großvaters, einer der beiden Vornamen, die Walter Benjamin trug, und genaue, „in sich ein[...]schloß.<" 'Lampen', in Übersetzen: Walter Benjamin, ed. by Christiaan L. Hart Nibbrig (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), pp. 38–79 (p. 75) The last formulation is a gesture towards the first version of 'Agesilaus Santander' where Benjamin says of his secret names that 'Anstatt die beiden vorsorglichen Namen mit seinen Schriften öffentlich zu machen, schloß er sie in sich ein.' (GS6, p. 520; cited in Schestag, pp. 75-76); Hörisch also points to this citation from Julius Walter in 'Der Satanische Engel und das Glück,' p. 41.
66 Metonymy, from μετα-ωνυμία | meta-onymia, lit. 'change of name' (OED). Although it could be argued that changing its name is precisely what Shelley does not do, as much as change the meaning of the name 'shell.'
that ‘entspricht, daß das Wort zur Sache sich zufällig verhalte, daß es ein durch irgendwelche Konvention gesetztes Zeichen der Dinge (oder ihrer Erkenntnis) sei’ is thoroughly fallacious: ‘Die Sprache gibt niemals bloße Zeichen.’ (GS2, p. 150) Instead of viewing language as mere signs, Benjamin asserts that human language sounds the Word with which God created the world. Benjamin terms this act a translation, however, unlike a usual translation that moves between two languages, this translation transfers the divine, creative Word into sound, and thereby fulfills language. ‘Die Übersetzung der Sprache der Dinge in die des Menschen ist nicht nur Übersetzung des Stummen in das Lauthafte, sie ist die Übersetzung des Namenlosen in den Namen. Das ist also die Übersetzung einer unvollkommenen Sprache in eine vollkommener.’ (GS2, p. 151) The translation of the nameless into the name is parallel to the translation of the soundless into sound, a dual translation that raises language onto a more fulfilled level as the name receives its sound. With the same paradoxical logic by which Hermes’ gift completes Apollo’s divine vocation, it is Adam’s voicing of the divine Word that completes God’s language of creation. Therefore sound forms the symbol of ‘das Unvergleichliche der menschlichen Sprache.’ (GS2, p. 147) However, as translator, the human name-sounder is not the arbiter of the names of things. The human word does not name creation freely (that is, arbitrarily) but rather sounds the name in which God created things: ‘Denn Gott hat die Dinge geschaffen, das schaffende Wort in ihnen ist der Keim des erkennenden Namens, wie Gott auch am Ende jedes Ding benannte, nachdem es geschaffen war.’ (GS2, p. 151) The creative Word of God is thus the seed that comes to fruition as Adam names creation. Adamic naming thus progresses in accordance with knowledge of this seed that God implanted in things at their creation. ‘Das heißt: Gott machte die Dinge in ihren Namen erkennbar. Der Mensch aber benennt sie maßen der Erkenntnis.’ (GS2, p. 148) The sole exception to this rule is the proper name, which we choose for ourselves: ‘Von allen Wesen ist der Mensch das einzige, das seinesgleichen selbst benennt, wie es denn das einzige ist, das Gott nicht benannt hat.’ (GS2, p. 149) Of course, no individual chooses his name freely, however the names we bear have no counterpart in the language with which God created the word. That is, all language voices the divine creative Word in human sounds, except for human names because we are the only creature that God has not named. In naming, therefore, we come closest to God’s creative use of language; ‘der Eigenname ist Wort Gottes in menschlichen Lauten’ Benjamin states and a few lines later adds ‘Der Eigenname ist die Gemeinschaft des Menschen mit dem schöpferischen Wort Gottes.’ (GS2, p. 150) The sound of one’s name thus has a dual significance: both sound and the human name are excluded from God’s creative Word, for which reason the sound of one’s proper name is token to a uniquely human linguistic creativity.
Poetic nature


The double meaning of the Homeric χέλυς as both shell and lyre and the sonic resemblance between the words ‘shell’ and ‘Shelley’ allow Shelley to appropriate the object as a signature in his own works. But the Apollonian shell-lyre also operates in another manner in romantic poetics, adding a further layer to Shelley’s use of the image. As M. H. Abrams points out, ‘the lyre of Apollo was often replaced in Romantic poetry by the Aeolian lyre, whose music is evoked not by art, human or divine, but by a force of nature.’ By collapsing the two lyres into one, the instrument conventionally seen as the symbol of poetry becomes an image of the poet’s ‘naturally’ creative mind – a point Abrams illustrates with a quotation from Shelley’s ‘Defence’: ‘Poetic man, in a statement by Shelley which had close parallels in Coleridge and Wordsworth, is an instrument subject to impressions “like the alterations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre, which move it by their motion to ever-changing melody.”’ (p. 38) While the Aeolian lyre is as a manmade artefact, the romantic generation emphasised the allegedly unmediated naturalness of the melody it produces: it is, ‘the harp from which the wind extracted the music of nature.’ The instrument that merely gives voice to harmonies inherent in nature also embodies a new conception of nature: nature is like a giant instrument waiting to be stirred to life by a breath of wind, metaphorically associated with divine inspiration.

Abrams delineates all the winds, breezes, breaths, respirations – in short, the ‘air-in-motion’ (p. 37) – that ventilates Romantic poetry and suggest that these stem out of a long tradition of identifying breath and spirit: the Latin spiritus as well as anima, the Greek pneuma, the Hebrew ruach, the Sanskrit atman, as well as the equivalent words in many other languages, some of them totally unrelated’ all signify wind and breath and soul (p. 44). Abrams concludes that:

When Shelley, for example, made the West Wind the breath of autumn’s being and a spirit, which became his breath and his spirit and blew, through him, the trumpet prophesying a universal resurrection, he may seem radically innovative. But from a philological point of view Shelley was reactionary. (p. 44)

In Abrams’s example, Shelley both identifies with the Aeolian/Apollonian lyre and infuses the image with the wind symbolism of his generation. Shelley’s demand of the West Wind can be read as a demand to become the χέλυς that his name translates:

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one! (ll. 57-62)

Here Shelley presents the forest, metonymic of all nature, as a giant Aeolian shell-lyre waiting to be stirred by the wind whose spirit Shelley seeks to become. I have noted Shelley’s placement of a shell as the instrument that will loosen ‘its mighty music’ to herald the post-apocalyptic age at the close of Prometheus Unbound. In the drama’s final act, this music is diffused throughout the world which in turn becomes like an Aeolian lyre: the unbound universe resonates with the ‘deep music of the rolling world, | Kindling within the strings of the waved air | Æolian modulations’ (IV.186-9). But if Shelley, in the ‘Ode to the West Wind,’ wishes to become such a lyre, he at the same time demands to be the wind that stirs it. By identifying with the wind, Shelley appropriates for his poetic vocation a force usually associated with God. Abrams cites the Pentecostal scene in Acts where ‘the spirit, or breath, or wind (ruach) of God’ (p. 45), appears as a ‘rushing mighty wind’:

And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. [...] And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? (Acts, 2:2-8)

The scene is often read as a reversal of Babel and the miracle of communication signals the divine approval of the mission to spread Christianity. Shelley’s evocation of the scene is less concerned with the Christian message than with the power of dissemination

---

69 Joshua M. Hall follows Abrams’s reading of ‘wind romanticism’ in a comparative study of Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind’ and the wind imagery of Marx’s The German Ideology, suggesting a poetic gesture at the core of Marx’s philosophy. ‘Prevailing Winds: Marx as Romantic Poet’, Philosophy and Literature, 37 (2013), 343–59

70 Shelley further complements his Aeolian image with one of mercurial illumination: his next demand of the wind is that it ‘Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth | Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!’ (ll. 66-7)
represented by this speech act: his demand is to become like the divine *ruach* that communicates to all of mankind at once.

13. Ruach.

The entry for *ruach* in Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann’s *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament* [*Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*] explains that ‘[d]ie Grundbedeutung von *rūḥ* ist zugleich »Wind« [...] und »Atem« [...] beides aber nicht als wesenhaft Vorhandenes, sondern als die im Atem und Windstoß begegnende Kraft, deren Woher und Wohin rätselhaft bleibt.’

*Ruach* is therefore the pure force of movement, the symbol of which is the wind which is as insubstantial as the air and yet has the power to set things in motion. Significantly, the authors of the entry alert us to the development that the word undergoes within the Old Testament: while in Genesis there is still a distinction between the *ruach* of God that moves upon the waters before creation (Gen 1:2) and the *neshamah* (breath) with which God breathes life into man (Gen 2:7), in the course of the Old Testament the word *ruach* comes to mean ‘*Lebensodem,*’ ‘breath of life’ (p. 736, in English: p. 1209) and takes on a range of associations including ‘der Vermittlung eines göttlichen Wortes,’ ‘the communication of a divine word’, *rūḥ Jhwḥ* (p. 746, p. 1215), and is finally identified with God himself in his manifestation as Holy Spirit, *rūḥ qādōš* (p. 752, p. 1219). Benjamin’s reading of Genesis in ‘Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen’ alights on the divine breath and places it at the heart of human language:

Das Unvergleichliche der menschlichen Sprache ist, daß ihre magische Gemeinschaft mit den Dingen immateriell und rein geistig ist, und dafür ist der Laut das Symbol. Dieses symbolische Faktum spricht die Bibel aus, indem sie sagt, daß Gott dem Menschen den Odem einblies: das ist zugleich Leben und Geist und Sprache. (GS2, p. 147)

The word *Odem* as used here corresponds to the *neshamah* of Genesis 2:7; however, the collocation of life and spirit suggests that Benjamin has the connotations of the more well-known Hebrew word *ruach* in mind. As we have seen, Benjamin argues that human words voice the name with which things were made. ‘Den Dingen ist das reine sprachliche Formprinzip – der Laut – versagt’, Benjamin writes about the language of nature and it is man’s task to sound the language constitutively inherent in things (GS2, p. 147). But sound is also a form of ‘air in motion,’ and by claiming that the symbolic nature of sound is expressed in the biblical image of the divine breath (*Odem; ruach*) Benjamin links the

---

71 R. Albertz and C. Westermann, “*רוח Geist,*” in *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament,* ed. by Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1976), pp. 725-54 (p. 728); further references in text.

72 The exact nature of the distinction between *ruach* and *neshamah* is, however, unclear. Albertz and Westermann reject Snaith’s division of ‘hard, strong, violent breathing’ (*ruach*) and ‘ordinary, quiet breathing’ (*neshamah*) and propose that the former stands for ‘dynamic vitality’ characteristic of God and the latter for the quotidian breath characteristic of human life (p. 735).
sounds of human language to the complex of meanings at work in the Hebrew ruach. The identification of the Odem that God breathes into man with ‘das reine sprachliche Formprinzip – der Laut’ also calls for a reinterpretation of Genesis: the ruach, breath or spirit or wind, of God that moved upon the waters before He created the world with the Word is precisely the ‘reine sprachliche Formprinzip,’ the harmonious recurrence or measuring out of sound, the precondition of articulation. The patterning of sound is an metonym for the order that God brings into existence as he creates the world with the Word. Accordingly, one of Benjamin’s designations for the fall is as the ‘Sündenfall des Sprachgeistes;’ the fall of the language spirit, the Odem with which God breathes language into man: in the Fall the sound of the word separates from the knowledge [Erkenntnis] of the name in which the thing was created and which Adam voiced in speaking the first human language.


When Shelley speaks of man as an Aeolian instrument he evokes the Apollonian lyre, but the image is further layered with another romantic notion about the nature of language, namely that the behaviour of children reflects the expressivity of primal languages. ‘In the youth of the world, men dance and sing and imitate natural objects, observing in these actions, as in all others, a certain rhythm or order’ Shelley writes at the outset of the ‘Defence of Poetry’ (SPP, p. 511). Throughout the piece he will seek to show how poetry evokes this original rhythm or order. However, already in the second paragraph Shelley interrupts his exposition of how ‘poetry is connate with the origin of man’ (SPP, p. 511) to present us with the following image:

A child at play by itself will express its delight by its voice and motions; and every inflexion of tone and every gesture will bear exact relation to a corresponding antitype in the pleasurable impression, which awakened it; it will be the reflected image of that impression; and as the lyre trembles and sounds after the wind has died away, so the child seeks, by prolonging in its voice and motions the duration of the effect, to prolong also a consciousness of the cause. (SPP, p. 511)

73 Albertz and Westermann note that ‘rūāḥ can also mean “storm” without further modification’ (p. 1204) and one may further speculate whether the storm that blows [weht] from Paradise in Benjamin’s ninth thesis on history is also informed by this divine wind. Furthermore, the fact that translation bears witness to the Wehen of language (that Zohn renders as birth pangs and de Man retranslates as death pangs) gains in resonance from the consideration that, as a verb, wehen means to blow about, to wave, to drift. When Benjamin writes of translation that ‘So weit ist sie entfernt, von zwei erstorbenen Sprachen die taube Gleichung zu sein, daß gerade unter allen Formen ihr als Eigenes es zufällt, auf jene Nachreife des fremden Wortes, auf die Wehen des eigenen zu merken’ (‘Die Aufgabe’ GS4, p. 13) one could also read the task of translation as hearing the echo of the foreign word as it blows through the language of translation, keeping the connotations of the Hebrew word ruach in mind.
The present-day child behaves in accordance with the ‘certain rhythm or order’ that defined the behaviour of man in ‘the youth of the world’ (SPP, pp. 511-2) and the poet is someone who has brought this childlike capacity into adulthood.74 Ann Wroe has linked this image to David Hartley’s theological-cum-scientific Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty and His Expectations.75 Hartley argues on physiological grounds to present a ‘Doctrine of Vibrations’ according to which everything in the world is in a state of vibration. All sense perception arises in the interference of external and internal vibrations – paradigmatically, a crying child’s trembling voice perpetuates the vibrations of the perception that made it cry. Shelley reverses this image so that the rhythm of the child’s play perpetuates the pleasurable vibration which caused it – and as long as this vibration is maintained, so is the pleasurable event that caused it present to the child. A focus on rhythmic correspondences erases the qualitative difference between mind and world since the rhythmic vibration in the mind has an identical frequency to the rhythmic vibration in the world that caused it and conversely, by perpetuating good vibrations, poetry makes a material difference to the world.

When Benjamin sets out to develop his linguistic theory in the early 1930s, he also begins with an image of child’s play:

Zunächst einmal sind Kinderspiele überall durchzogen von mimetischen
Verhaltungsweisen, und ihr Bereich ist keineswegs auf das beschränkt, was wohl ein
Mensch vom andern nachmacht. Das Kind spielt nicht nur Kaufmann oder Lehrer sondern
auch Windmühle und Eisenbahn. (‘Lehre vom Ähnlichen,’ GS2, p. 205)

Benjamin’s exposition of mimetic behaviour has nothing to do with vibrations or other forms of speculative physiology, nonetheless, he likewise turns to the behaviour of children to theorise a manner of writing. Benjamin is primarily interested in children’s ability to turn themselves into words – and the sounds of language are key to this transformation. Benjamin offers an example from his own childhood: the first time he heard the word Kupferstich, copper engraving, he understood it as Kopf-verstich, ‘head-stickout.’ The following day, he hid under a chair and stuck out his head from underneath it, thereby embodying the word ‘head-stickout.’ This is a form of sonic picture puzzle that Benjamin names an act of Entstellung, distortion or disfiguration or literally dis-

74 Cf. Shelley’s comment in ‘On Life’: ‘Let us recollect our sensations as children. What a distinct and intense apprehension had we of the world and of ourselves. [...] There are some persons who in this respect are always children. Those who are subject to the state called reverie feel as if their nature were dissolved into the surrounding universe, or as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into their being. They are conscious of no distinction. And these are states which precede or accompany or follow an unusually intense and vivid apprehension of life. As men grow up, this power commonly decays, and they become mechanical and habitual agents.’ (SPP, pp. 507-8)
75 ‘Shelley’s Good Vibrations: His Marginal Notes to Hartley’s Observations on Man,’ Wordsworth Circle, Literature Online, 41 (2010), 36–41
placement. While *Kupferstich/Kopf-verstich* is Benjamin’s only concrete example, the child’s playing at being a windmill or a train will most likely involve a sonic picture puzzle of the sound of these words. Benjamin’s biographical anecdote is part of an attempt to develop an ‘Auffassung’ of language which is ‘natürlich mystischen oder theologischen Sprachtheorien engstens verwandt, ohne darum jedoch empirischer Philologie fremd zu sein.’ (GS2, pp. 207-8) In other words, Benjamin seeks to develop his early theories of language in an empirical direction by examining children’s use of language. Heinz Brüggemann has situated Benjamin’s mimetic essays in the context of child psychology of his day, particularly Clara and William Stern’s book on the subject where they use Benjamin’s mishearing of *Kupferstich* as *Kopf-verstich* as an example of children’s use of language. ‘Das Beispiel ist eins unter vielen für solches kindliches Fehlverstehen bzw. Entstalten des ursprünglichen Wortes und sie alle lassen am Gemeinten gerade durch Rücknahme und Verfehlen des Signifikats eine gestisch-expressive Dimension vernehmbar werden.’

Benjamin’s attempt to integrate his early language theories with an empirical investigation of children’s language, and hence language overall, stretches from the theoretical pieces ‘Lehre vom Ähnlichen’ and ‘Über das mimetische Vermögen,’ via Benjamin’s biographical writings, to his theorisation of the ‘dialectical image’ as part of his methodology for historical study in *Das Passagen-Werk*. Regardless of their differences, both Shelley’s ‘Defence’ and Benjamin’s writings on mimesis are part of a tradition of theorising the childhood of man that can be said to originate in Giambattista Vico’s *New Science*, a work that reconfigured history around a series of postulates about primal man. Vico’s 37th axiom reads:

> The sublimest task of poetry is to attribute sense and emotion to insensate objects. It is characteristic of children to pick up inanimate objects and talk to them in their play as if they were living persons. This philosophical and philological axiom shows us that people living in the world’s childhood were by nature sublime poets.

The poetical nature of primal man is key to the whole philosophy of history that Vico develops. Most importantly in this context, Vico sets up an analogy between the childhood of man and the childhood of any individual man that has become a commonplace in

---

76 Walter Benjamin: *Über Spiel, Farbe und Phantasie* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2007), p. 84; further references in text. Thus Benjamin’s autobiographical anecdote serves as evidence in a scientific study. Benjamin also refers to the incident in an impersonal manner in a review of Tom Seidmann-Freud’s *Hurra, wir lessen! Hurra, wir schreiben!* (1930): ‘Ich kannte ein Kind, bei dem zu Hause viel von Kupferstichen die Rede war. Es wußte genau, was das war. Und wenn man es fragte, so steckte es den Kopf zwischen den Stuhlbeinen durch.’ (GS3, p. 271)

77 Sigrid Weigel argues that these essays are ‘eine psychoanalytische Reformulierung seiner frühen Sprachphilosophie’ and seeks to uncover Benjamin’s debt to Freud in his theorisation of childhood, dreaming, and the unconscious. *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit: Walter Benjamins Theoretische Schreibweise* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), p. 29; further references in text.

thinking about language. Shelley would be most familiar with it through Rousseau, whereas Hamann is Benjamin’s most direct source. Both Shelley and Benjamin echo this tradition by condensing the historical development of language into an individual life: ‘the savage is to ages what the child is to years’ (SPP, p. 511) Shelley writes, or, in Benjamin’s more abstruse formulation: ‘Dieses Vermögen aber hat eine Geschichte, und zwar im phylogenetischen so gut wie im ontogenetischen Sinne.’ (GS2, p. 204) The analogy between individual and humankind enables us to trace the remnant of our primordial mimetic faculty in the behaviour of children. That is, in both Shelley and Benjamin, the child’s linguistic development embodies a miniature history of language and their accounts of child’s play tell us less about the empirical psychology of children than about how to compose literary texts in accordance with mimetic rhythms or behaviour innate to human nature as such.

15. A certain rhythm or order.

Shelley’s claim that primitive man would ‘dance and sing and imitate natural objects, observing in these actions, as in all others, a certain rhythm or order’ is aimed at demonstrating that the contemporary poet must still observe this rhythm or order (SPP, pp. 511-2) – whether he works with dance, song, sculpture, or even the creation of social institutions. ‘Language, colour, form, and religious and civil habits of action are all the instruments and materials of poetry,’ Shelley asserts in his widest definition of the art. However, poetry in the more narrow sense is the superior expression of this rhythm because its mode of mimetic representation pertains to language alone:

But poetry in a more restricted sense expresses those arrangements of language, and especially metrical language which are created by the imperial faculty, whose throne is curtained within the invisible nature of man. And this springs from the nature itself of language, which is a more direct representation of the actions and passions of our internal being, and is susceptible of more various and delicate combinations, than colour, form or motion, and is more plastic and obedient to the controul of that faculty of which it is the creation. (SPP, p. 513)

While the other arts are hindered by the material medium in which they are expressed, poetry operates in a wholly flexible medium: the measure of metrical language. Rather than seeing prosody as a constraint, Shelley views the measuring out of sound as free precisely because it conforms to nothing but the mimetic rhythms innate to man. When he goes on to assert that ‘language is arbitrarily produced by the Imagination and has relation to thoughts alone’ (SPP, p. 513), he does not anticipate de Saussure’s description of the arbitrariness of language. Rather he is interested in language’s independence from the physical constraints that burden the other arts. (Shelley does not consider language’s
dependence on the human speech organs when he makes measure the necessary condition of poetry, nor does he consider whether the need to measure language can in itself operate as a constraint.) But since the certain rhythm or order Shelley describes pertains to all aspects of life, the poetic task gains a political importance far beyond the narrow sphere of art. Like most accounts of original man, Shelley's comments in the 'Defence' form the basis of a political programme. If the Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes* promotes a neo-liberalist individual fighting for survival on the free market and the Rousseauvian noble savage myth conducts to a primitivist anarchism, so Shelley's definition of man at the youth of the world serves to prescribe a form of social organisation in which poets are the 'unacknowledged legislators of the World.' They are necessarily so because their creations accord with the 'certain rhythm or order' natural to man and thus conductive to a harmonious social life. This is why Shelley can say that the 'true poetry of Rome lived in its institutions; for whatever of beautiful, true and majestic they contained could have sprung only from the faculty which creates the order in which they consist' (SPP, p. 523) – the faculty in question being the imagination.

16. **Flash of similarities.**

Benjamin's work on the mimetic faculty likewise mediates between a poetic and a political programme: some of the insights he derives from his postulates on childhood perception are channelled into his work on the dialectical image which stands at the heart of his historical method. For instance, both mimetic similarities and dialectical images flash up: 'So ist der Sinnzusammenhang, der in den Lauten des Satzes steckt, der Fundus aus dem erst blitzartig Ähnliches mit einem Nu aus einem Klang zum Vorschein kommen kann' (GS2, p. 208), Benjamin writes in the 'Lehre vom Ähnlichen,' whereas in Konvolut N of *Das Passagen-Werk* Benjamin describes the dialectical image as 'dasjenige, worin das Gewesene mit dem Jetzt blitzhaft zu einer Konstellation zusammentritt. [...] Nur dialektische Bilder sind echte (d.h.: nicht archaische) Bilder; und der Ort, an dem man sie antrifft, ist die Sprache.' [N2a,3] The second half of the quote indicates the other peculiarity that the dialectical image shares with the perception of similarities: both are linguistic phenomena that Benjamin insists on calling images. The parallel between the mimetic image and the dialectical image also indicates a certain similarity between the structure of historical time and the structure of language: both can give rise to similarity relations that flash up in the now. Just as language is not a collection of empty signs, so history does not consist of empty time: 'Die Geschichte ist Gegenstand einer Konstruktion, deren Ort nicht die homogene und leere Zeit sondern die von Jetztzeit erfüllte bildet.' (‘Über den Begriff der Geschichte,’ XIV, GS1, p. 701) Like Shelley, Benjamin privileges language as ‘die höchste Verwendung des mimetischen Vermögens,’ ‘the highest application of the mimetic faculty’ (GS2, p. 209, SW2, p. 697). Nonetheless, the mimetic
essays mark a contradiction within Benjamin's thought that they do not manage to resolve. The mimetic play draws on the discrepancy between sound and meaning. The words Kupferstich and Kopf-verstich sound the same, but they mean very different things and the child's mimetic faculty allows the child to supplant the meaning of one word by acting out its homophone. This means that the perception of similarities relies on what words mean, precisely that communicating element in language that Benjamin's early language theory rejected as alien to language properly understood:

Alles Mimetische der Sprache ist vielmehr eine fundierte Intention, die überhaupt nur an etwas Fremden, eben dem Semiotischen, Mitteilenden der Sprache als ihrem Fundus in Erscheinung treten kann. So ist der buchstäblicher Text der Schrift der Fundus, in dem einzind und alein sich das Vexierbild formen kann. (GS2, pp. 208-9)

The homonymic picture puzzle is reliant on a buchstäblich, literal, 'embodiment' of figurative language that reflects what words sound like they might mean as opposed to what they actually mean – but the phenomenon can only arise when focusing on the meaning of words which Benjamin forbids us to do. This may explain why Benjamin, even though he continues to talk of dialectical images as images in language, focuses on the eidetic rather than linguistic nature of their construction in his later works.

17. Imagination.

Shelley's own posterity did not live up to the promise of his 'Defence.' As I mentioned in the introduction, during the the nineteenth century the visionary and the political sides of Shelley's verse separated. However, at the turn of the last century, Francis Thompson,79 a poet virtually forgotten by posterity, offered an image of Shelley that does not conform to the established division of Shelley as either revolutionist or as ineffectual angel:

Coming to Shelley's poetry, we peep over the wild mask of revolutionary metaphysics, and we see the winsome face of the child. Perhaps none of his poems is more purely and typically Shelleian than The Cloud, and it is interesting to note how essentially it springs from the faculty of make-believe. [...] it is the child's faculty of make-believe raised to the nth power.80

Thompson's Shelley is an 'enchanted child' and it is the faculty of make-believe, or imagination, that attests to this fact. However, while imagination occupies a prominent

80 'Shelley', in The Works of Francis Thompson (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1925), iii, pp. 1-37 (pp. 17-8); further references in text.
role in Shelley’s thought and poetics, Thompson’s understanding of it radically differs from Shelley’s. For Shelley imagination is ‘that imperial faculty, whose throne is curtained within the invisible nature of man’ (SPP, p. 513). By the time Thompson comes to write his essay on the Shelleyan imagination, the imperial faculty is reduced to child’s play. ‘He is still at play,’ he writes, ‘save only that his play is such as manhood stops to watch, and his playthings are those which the gods give their children. The universe is his box of toys.’ (p. 18) While Thompson’s identification of imagination and childhood does not denigrate imagination – after all, it plays with the universe – he suggests that modern childhood has lost the faculty. ‘We, of this self-conscious, incredulous generation, sentimentalize our children, analyse our children […] we play at being children. And the result is that we are not more child-like, but our children are less child-like.’ (p. 7) Thompson’s paean to Shelley is at the same time a veiled lament for Thompson himself as well as for his own time: ‘We are self-conscious to the finger-tips; and this inherent quality, entailing on our poetry the inevitable loss of spontaneity, ensures that whatever poets […] may be born to us from the Shelleyan stock, its founder’s spirit can take among us no reincarnation. An age that is ceasing to produce child-like children cannot produce a Shelley.’ (pp. 6-7) Shelley’s childlike imagination is no longer accessible to adults at the dawn of the twentieth century, which is also the date given for Benjamin’s childhood writings – and one may wonder, pace Thompson, how childlike the child Benjamin really is in these pieces. However, Benjamin is, as ever, less concerned with the past the was it really was and more with what it means for the present. In the preface to the 1938 edition he writes that

...[I habe mich] bemüht, der Bilder habhaft zu werden, in denen die Erfahrung der Großstadt in einem Kinde der Bürgerklasse sich niederschlägt. Ich halte es für möglich, daß solchen Bilder ein eigenes Schicksal vorbehalten ist. Ihr harren noch keine geprägten Formen, wie sie im Naturgefühl seit Jahrhunderten den Erinnerungen an eine auf dem Lande verbrachte Kindheit zu Gebote stehen. (GS7, p. 385)

The picture puzzles of Benjamin’s Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert thus seek to update the pastoral models on offer to previous writers on childhood. While Thompson’s Shelley essay is written in a wholly other context than Benjamin’s Berlin writings, both stem from the sense that a certain experience of childhood, along with the childlike imagination, have been lost during the nineteenth century. Benjamin’s mimetic essays can therefore also be read as a defence of the poetic imagination, when poetry is no longer possible.81 ‘Das bildschaffende Medium in uns [...] zu erziehen,’ is an imperative that Benjamin will cite from Rudolf Borchardt in his methodology for history [N18], and the

81 That is, Benjamin defends the epistemological and social importance of the imagination by the connections found between his Berliner Kindheit, his essays on language, and his historiographical method. In this perspective, Benjamin’s conception covers much of the same ground that poetry does in Shelley’s ‘Defence.’
image-making medium is precisely the imagination. The thinking in images that Benjamin develops in his *Berliner Kindheit* would constitute precisely such an education. Hence the imagistic precision of his depictions, hence the prosodic density of the prose, and hence the expectation that any reader will recognise himself in Benjamin's images. In short, Benjamin's ambition is to create a lyric I for a generation that grew up in the metropolis.
Violets

18. The violet in the crucible.

It is somewhat ironic that Shelley’s picture puzzle allegory of the birth of lyric poetry takes place in a translation – an art of which Shelley himself said that ‘it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet’ (SPP, p. 514). For Shelley translation can only be redeemed from its derivative status when it simultaneously becomes poetic creation. Webb’s study of Shelley’s translation theory and practice notes exactly the originary quality in Shelley’s translations: ‘At times, indeed, Shelley’s translations are quite obviously variations on a theme. Whether deliberately or not, Shelley uses the framework of the original as a trellis round which to wrap some of his own images and ideas.’ (p. 99) I have shown some of the ways in which Shelley does this in his translation of the ‘Hymn to Mercury.’ Such a practice runs against the grain of Benjamin’s careful delineation of the translator’s task, which privileges a literal reproduction of the syntax, as in Hölderlin’s Sophocles translations. Nonetheless, as I will show in the present section, the presuppositions that underlie Shelley’s and Benjamin’s divergent views are in fact quite similar. First it should be noted that ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers’ is an attempt to represent translation as a form of art distinct from poetic creation. ‘Wie nämlich die Übersetzung eine eigene Form ist, so läßt sich auch die Aufgabe des Übersetzers als seine eigene fassen und genau von der des Dichters unterscheiden.’ (GS4, p. 16) Since Benjamin seeks to show the artistic specificity of translation, the essay’s first sentence offers a general statement on the autonomy of art. ‘Nirgends erweist sich einem Kunstwerk oder einer Kunstform gegenüber die Rücksicht auf den Aufnehmenden für deren Erkenntnis fruchtbar.’ (GS4, p. 9) Since works of art do not primarily communicate a content, so translation, when viewed as an art form, should not limit itself to communicating the content of a literary work in another language. The purpose of translation is not to facilitate information exchange between people who do not speak the same language; it is to be sought in a different sphere:

Leben und Zweckmäßigheit – ihr scheinbar handgreiflicher und doch fast der Erkenntnis sich entziehender Zusammenhang schließt sich nur, wo jener Zweck, auf den alle einzelnen Zweckmäßigkeiten des Lebens hinwirken, nicht wiederum in dessen eigener Sphäre, sondern in einer höheren gesucht wird. […] So ist die Übersetzung zuletzt zweckmäßig für den Ausdruck des innersten Verhältnisses der Sprachen zueinander. (GS4, pp. 11-2)

Translation in its artistic form should not aim to transfer communicable content between languages but to manifest the relations between them. In their totality such relations
encompass all of language as such, which Benjamin terms ‘pure language.’ The theological dimension of this term is well known and often poses a problem for Benjamin’s secular readers. Not denying the theology underlying Benjamin’s ideas on language, I will emphasise how his theory of translation is developed in sustained opposition to the poet’s task. But the view of the poet thus contoured is one recognisable to literary scholars unfamiliar with Benjamin’s theology and opens a perspective from which Benjamin’s work can speak to Shelley’s. This discussion of poetry and translation serves as groundwork for the reading of disfiguration in Shelley and Benjamin in the following section.

In the introduction I noted how both Shelley and Benjamin speak of seeds to conceptualise the life of literary works. This similarity in difference is present also in their writing on translation. Shelley’s violet in the crucible metaphor leads to the conclusion that ‘[t]he plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower’ (p. 514) whereas Benjamin describes the Zweck, purpose, of translation as manifesting or bringing to fruition the interrelations of languages: ‘Sie kann dieses verborgene Verhältnis selbst unmöglich offenbaren, unmöglich herstellen; aber darstellen, indem sie es keimhaft oder intensiv verwirklicht, kann sie es:’ (GS4, p. 12) But here too the shared seed metaphor is also a point of divergence. Shelley insists on the simultaneity of translation and original: they spring from the same seed. His own translation of the ‘Hymn to Mercury,’ for instance, uses the hymn as a way to challenge the god of lyric poetry and punningly inscribe Shelley’s own poetic signature into the classical account of the origin of lyric poetry. For Benjamin, on the contrary, the seed metaphor is a way to place the translation in a belated relation to its original:

So wie die Äußerungen des Lebens innigst mit dem Lebendigen zusammenhängen, ohne ihm etwas zu bedeuten, geht die Übersetzung aus dem Original hervor. Zwar nicht aus seinem Leben so sehr denn aus seinem »Überleben«. Ist doch die Übersetzung später als das Original und bezeichnet sie doch bei den bedeutenden Werken, die da ihre erwählten Übersetzer niemals im Zeitalter ihrer Entstehung finden, das Stadium ihres Fortlebens. (GS4, pp. 10-11)

Rather than springing from the same source, the Benjaminian translation grows out of (and at the same time constitutes) the afterlife of the translated work. Nonetheless, what is at stake in both cases is a formulation of a kind of life that resides in language. For Shelley poetic language lives on through re-enacting ‘a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound’ that echoes the ‘certain rhythm or order’ that characterizes primal man. Consequently, his translation is fashioned in accordance with the deliberate measure of poetic feet, so named after the mnemonic practice of stamping out the rhythm of a work which Shelley’s translation thematises in its figures of treading. The life of language for
Shelley, then, is felt in the poem’s metrical effects. For Benjamin, on contrast, the life of language is posthumous: it begins with the death of the living Word in the Fall. This means that all languages are genealogically related to the Word: Benjamin writes of an ‘eigentümlichen Konvergenz’ between them. This convergence consists in the fact ‘daß die Sprachen einander nicht fremd, sondern apriori und von allen historischen Beziehungen abgesehen einander in dem verwandt sind, was sie sagen wollen.’ (GS4, p. 12) It is this relation that translation ought to mark by marking the changes that languages have undergone since their Fall from their shared origin in the language of God. This convergence is not shown by saying the same thing twice, but by showing how the other language says it. Benjamin introduces a distinction between the meant, das Gemeinte, and the manner of meaning, Art des Meinens (GS4, p. 14). Translation is to show the manner of meaning of the original, not what is meant in it. In Shelleyan poetics measure constitutes the manner of meaning: words must be put into a musical sequence and prosody is commonly mentioned in distinguishing how language means from what it means.

Benjamin, however, does not mention musicality in his discussion of the manner of meaning. One reason why the musical elements of language do not enter his theory of translation is found in his comments on music in the ‘Allegory and Trauerspiel’ section of the Trauerspiel-book. In a discussion of the romantic physicist Johann Wilhelm Ritter’s theory of sound, Benjamin refers to ‘der letzten Sprache aller Menschen nach dem Turmbau,’ the ‘last remaining universal language since the tower of Babel’ (GS1, p. 388; Trauerspiel, p. 214) – this language is music. The sentiment is repeated almost ten years later, in a fragment on ‘La Traduction – Le pour et le contre’ ['Translation: For and Against'] (1935/36) where Benjamin defines the limit of translation: ‘Grenze: Übersetzungsunbedürftigkeit der Musik. Lyrik: der Musik am nächsten – größte Übersetzungsschwierigkeiten.’ (GS6, p. 159)\(^2\) Through its musicality, lyric poetry participates in a language that is already universal and hence requires no translation: on the one hand, the sounds of the original are available to a person who does not speak the language without translation, on the other hand a translation that reproduces the sounds

---

\(^2\) Benjamin is no musicologist and his assertion about the universality of music is more of a commonplace a philosophical position which would have to account for different musical languages. Tamara Tagliacozzo has studied Benjamin’s references to music in the Trauerspiel-book and related writings from a Judaic perspective in ‘Walter Benjamin und die Musik’, Jewish Studies Quarterly, 13 (2006), 278–92. Eli Friedlander approaches much of the same material but foregrounds opera and reads Benjamin’s comments on music as ripostes to Nietzsche’s promotion of Wagner, ‘On the Musical Gathering of Echoes of Voices: Walter Benjamin on Opera and the Trauerspiel’, The Opera Quarterly, 21 (2005), 631–46. Elio Matassi’s treatment of Benjamin’s interest in music contextualises it in its time, ‘Die Musikphilosophie bei Walter Benjamin und Günter Anders’, in Theologie und Politik: Walter Benjamin und ein Paradigma der Moderne, ed. by Bernd Witte and Mario Ponzi (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2005), pp. 212–222 and more recently Thomas Robert Klein has edited a collection of essays on the theme based on a research project on Benjamin and music hosted by Zentrum für Literaturforschung in Berlin, Klang und Musik bei Walter Benjamin (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2013)
of the original is no translation but a repetition of the original. Thus, paradoxically, the superfluity of translating musical language renders it untranslatable – which is exactly why Shelley asserts the vanity of translation.\textsuperscript{83} The violet passage in full reads:

\begin{quote}
Hence the language of poets has ever affected a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound, without which it were not poetry, and which is scarcely less indispensable to the communication of its influence, than the words themselves, without reference to that peculiar order. Hence the vanity of translation; it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed or it will bear no flower – and this is the burthen of the curse of Babel. (SPP, p. 514)
\end{quote}

Since a poem’s particular combination of sound and sense cannot be reproduced in another language, Shelley concludes that the translator must fashion a new poem out of the same seed as the original sprung, all in accordance with the ‘certain rhythm or order’ that governs our imagination. By making ‘the distinction between measured and unmeasured language’ the primary characteristic not only of the poet, but also of the translator, Shelley grants equal importance to the relations between sounds as to the relations between concepts: ‘Sounds as well as thoughts have relations, both between each other and towards that which they represent’ (SPP, p. 514). Both modes of relation must be balanced in a poetic work. Arguably it is precisely because Benjamin acknowledges the irreducible role of musicality in poetic language that his defence of translation seeks to distinguish the poet’s task from the translator’s. In other words, it is precisely because the sonic structure that characterises lyric poetry neither can be nor requires to be translated that the Benjaminian translator should focus on something else: showing how the other language means syntactically, not sonically. Importantly, measure only becomes audible in sequence: a single tone or word is insufficient to make melody perceptible. In language that foregrounds musicality, the manner of meaning of a word is not completed in isolation in each word but partially resides in the phonic structure in which it occurs. This is a deferral that can be thought with Derrida’s term \textit{différence}. As words are collected into a sentence, the sounds of these words enter into a differential relation with one another so that meaning is never found in a single word but constantly deferred until the sound of the

\textsuperscript{83} When Benjamin calls the measured language of lyrical poetry untranslatable, the designation brings it into proximity with the only other untranslatable language that Benjamin mentions: the language of translation itself. The language of translation is untranslatable because it participates in pure language. Of course, pure language is not musicality, but musicality, like pure language, is an element which is universal in a work.
next word is heard.\footnote{This is true for all linguistic utterances. ‘What sort of a line that would be which would \textit{not scan} at all I cannot say’ as T.S. Eliot put it. The question is therefore not whether a particular utterance is measured, for all articulation is measured speech, but rather how melodic this measure is.} Benjamin himself uses an architectonic metaphor to describe how the words that form a sentence hang together: ‘das Wort, nicht den Satz [ist] das Urelement des Übersetzers. Denn der Satz ist die Mauer vor der Sprache des Originals, Wörtlichkeit die Arkade,’ (‘Die Aufgabe’ GS4, p. 18). To stay within the terms of the metaphor, one can say that the wall of language is formed by the differential relations between words. When faced with such a wall of words, the translator’s primary objective is to parse loose the individual words out of this sonic structure: disregarding the sound and meaning of the sentence, the translator should literally translate word by word – thereby foregrounding the individual words that are the building blocks of language. Therefore, when Benjamin speaks of the manner of meaning that is relevant for translation, he foregrounds syntax over sound: the aims of translation are best achieved by ‘Wörtlichkeit in der Übertragung der Syntax,’ a ‘literal rendition of the syntax’ (GS4, p. 18; SW1, p. 260). But it also means that insofar as Benjamin’s theory of translation is a poetics, it is one that has little to do with the mimetic faculty that is the source of poetic language or the musical measure that characterises lyric poetry; the harmony that emerges out of Benjamin’s essay on translation is not one that can be heard in the rhythm of the line. Nägele has termed this a ‘komplementäre Sprachharmonie’ that ‘phantomenal nicht faßbar [ist]’\footnote{‘Echolalie,’ in \textit{Übersetzen: Walter Benjamin}, ed. by Christiaan L. Hart Nibbrig (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), pp. 17–37 (p. 23, n.11)} precisely because this language harmony is not audible. According to Benjamin, Hölderlin’s literal Sophocles translations are paragons of such harmony. In them, Benjamin writes, ‘ist die Harmonie der Sprachen so tief, daß der Sinn nur noch wie eine Äolsharfe vom Winde von der Sprache berührt wird.’ (GS4, p. 21) Benjamin’s variation on this paradigmatically romantic image of the poetic mind reverses the natural expressivity usually associated with it. This Aeolian lyre does not come alive with the sounds of nature, but on the contrary borders on silence. These translations run the risk


daß die Tore einer so erweiterten und durchwalteten Sprache zufallen und den Übersetzer ins Schweigen schließen. Die Sophokles-Übersetzungen waren Hölderlins letztes Werk. In ihnen stürzt der Sinn von Abgrund zu Abgrund, bis er droht in bodenlosen Sprachtiefen sich zu verlieren. (GS4, p. 21)

As the different manners of meaning of the two languages of a translation are set against one another, what is lost is precisely meaning itself. As semantic meaning is extinguished, the structures of the Ancient Greek language become perceptible within Hölderlin’s German, thereby revealing how both languages are fragments of the one language first
voiced by Adam. Thus the Aeolian harmony of Hölderlin’s Sophocles is not found in the metrical modulation of his sentences, but in his splicing of German and Greek.

19. Shattered and assembled.
In the Fall, the divine logos as manifested in the Name is shattered and the resulting shards are the translator’s materials: his task is to assemble them into a harmonious whole.

Benjamin’s image of this is that of the shattered vessel:

Wie nämlich Scherben eines Gefäßes, um sich zusammenfügen zu lassen, in den kleinsten Einzelheiten einander zu folgen, doch nicht so zu gleichen haben, so muß, anstatt dem Sinn des Originals sich ähnlich zu machen, die Übersetzung liebend vielmehr und bis ins Einzelne hinein dessen Art des Meinens in der eigenen Sprache sich anbilden, um so beide wie Scherben als Bruchstück eines Gefäßes, als Bruchstück einer größeren Sprache erkennbar zu machen. (‘Die Aufgabe,’ GS4, p. 18)

This image is commonly read as a reference to the biblical shattering of the vessels and the Lurianic concept of Tikkun, the mending of the vessels. Carol Jacobs’s reading of Benjamin’s vessel simile shows that in ‘the joining together of translation and original, language remains a Bruchstück.’86 That is, whether Benjamin is referring to Tikkun or not, for him translation does not ultimately mend or restore the language that was fractured in the Fall. Rather, translation must allow different ways of meaning to supplement one another without fusing into one language: ‘das große Motiv’ of translation is ‘einer Integration der vielen Sprachen zur einen wahren [Sprache] […] in welcher jedoch die Sprachen selbst miteinander, ergänzt und versöhnt in der Art ihres Meinens, übereinkommen.’ (GS4, p. 16). Since Benjamin posits that all language are a priori related in their origin, all languages are developmental variations of the one language. ‘Vielmehr beruht alle überhistorische Verwandtschaft der Sprachen darin, daß in ihrer jeder als ganzer jeweils eines und zwar dasselbe gemeint ist, das dennoch keiner einzelnen von ihnen, sondern nur der Allheit ihrer einander ergänzenden Intentionen erreichbar ist: die reine Sprache.’ (GS4, p. 13) That is to say, all languages stand in a supplemental relation to one another in contouring that one shattered language. Taking the example of bread in German and French, Benjamin notes that the two words pain and Brot mean the same thing, but mean it differently: ‘Während dergestalt die Art des Meinens in diesen beiden Wörtern einander widerstrebt, ergänzt sie sich in den beiden Sprachen, denen sie entstammen. Und zwar ergänzt sich in ihnen die Art des Meinens zum Gemeintein.’ (GS4, p. 14) Pain and Brot, no less than the English word bread, supplement one another in meaning bread in a way that is not exhausted by these three words for it. Only a

86 ‘The Monstrosity of Translation,’ MLN, 90 (1975), 755–766 (p. 762); Jacobs highlights the tension between the ultimately fragmented nature of translation and the organic metaphors of life and ripening that also appear in the essay.
translation that would simultaneously include all the manners of meaning bread in all the world’s languages would fulfill the pure language, but even then it would denote but a single word in this language. While it can be argued that Benjamin projects such a completed language into the messianic realm, in this world which is translation lets the vernaculars be ergänzt und versöhnt, supplemented and reconciled, but not erlöst, redeemed; that is, the Word is not made whole. Not restitution, but supplementation, in all its forms, reverberates throughout Benjamin’s discussion of bringing languages together: as verb sich ergänzen (appears thrice on p. 14), as noun Ergänzung (twice on p. 18), as adjectival coupling ergänzt/unergänzt (once on p. 14 and p. 16, respectively). Thus the harmony at stake in translation emerges as the fragments of language supplement one another in delivering the meaning that has been vacated from the Word in the fall:

Bei den einzelnen, den unergänzten Sprachen nämlich ist ihr Gemeintes niemals in relativer Selbständigkeit anzutreffen, wie bei den einzelnen Wörtern oder Sätzen, sondern vielmehr in stetem Wandel begriffen, bis es aus der Harmonie all jener Arten des Meinens als die reine Sprache herauszutreten vermag. (GS4, p. 14)

Pure language is not itself a language, but the harmonious integration of fragmentary languages. Irving Wohlfarth describes these fragments as parts of the ‘prästabilisierte Harmonie aller Sprachsphären unter einander.’ However, I do not agree with Wohlfarth’s concurrent identification of the ‘pure language’ of the translation essay with the divine language that Benjamin discussed in the 1916 essay ‘Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen’ suggested by Wohlfrath’s use of the term, überhaupt, as such: ‘Die Harmonie, die aus dem Zusammenspiel zweier Sprachen herauszuhören ist, ist die der »Sprache überhaupt«.’ (p. 111) The language as such of the earlier essay is precisely what is shattered in the Fall. Benjamin’s translation essay substitutes it with a pure language, which consists of a harmonious assemblage of languages but that does not, in the end, make them whole. Although Wohlfarth acknowledges that the language of translation remains a Bruchstück, and the translator ‘ein Grenzgänger. Er folgt der Bruchlinie, die zwei Sprachen miteinander teilen und die sie voneinander teilt,’ (p. 116) he nonetheless represents the translator’s task as a nostalgic and restitutive one: ‘Der Übersetzer muß darauf zielen, die Richtung des Sündenfalls – das Auseinanderfallen der Sprache(n) in eine unerlose Weite, ihren Abfall in eine abgründige Tiefe – umzukehren.’ (p. 105) The concept of Umkehr comes from Benjamin’s Kafka essay and in Wohlfarth’s

87 ‘Das Medium der Übersetzung’, in Übersetzen: Walter Benjamin, ed. by Christiaan L. Hart Nibbrig (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), pp. 80–130 (p. 95); further references in text.
88 Wohlfarth would probably approve of rendering Umkehr as re-volution in its double meaning (political and gestural) as his reading crosses the alienation of the word in Benjamin with the alienation of labour in Marx: ‘Motive des jüdischen Messianismus und Elemente einer antibürgerlichen Sprach- und Gesellschaftskritik gehen auch an dieser Stelle ineinander über. Zwar
adaptation it would reverse the Fall in which profane signs replace auratic names. ‘Profane Zeichen, deren Vielheit ein Zuviel ist, verdrängen die auratischen Namen,’ he writes, thereby pinpointing the process that need to be reversed, umgekehrt (p. 101). However, this in itself constitutes a reversal of Benjamin’s discussion of aura. In his essays on ‘Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit’ and ‘Erfahrung und Armut,’ Benjamin re-evaluates the seemingly negative terms of loss and poverty: the stripping away of aura and the impoverishment of experience enable a new a politically effective artistic practice. In the latter essay, where Benjamin discusses the impoverishment of experience in the wake of the First World War, he writes: ‘Diese Erfahrungsarmut ist Armut nicht nur an privaten sondern an Menschheitserfahrungen überhaupt. Und damit eine Art von neuem Barbarentum.’ (GS2, p. 215) But Benjamin in fact embraces this new species of barbarism:


Since no amount of nostalgia can restore what has been lost in the trenches, one has to make do with the shattered fragments at hand. Benjamin’s approach reflects Brecht’s adage: ‘Nicht an das Gute Alte anknüpfen, sondern an das schlechte Neue’ but it also echoes in one of the methodological notes for Das Passagen-Werk:

Gebiete urbar zu machen, auf denen bisher nur der Wahnsinn wuchert. Vordringen mit der geschliffenen Axt der Vernunft und ohne rechts noch links zu sehen, um nicht dem Grauen anheimzufallen, das aus der Tiefe des Urwalds lockt. [N1,4]

I will return to the destructive fervour of this passage when I talk about Benjamin’s ‘Der Destructive Charakter’ ['The Destructive Character'], for now I would merely suggest that Benjamin’s thought on translation follows a similar logic. The task of translation should not be understood as an attempt to make good the Fall of language by restituting the auratic word. Rather, the Fall of language at the same time unbinds words from their rarefication in the Name, saving us from ‘the terror in which everything said is one with meaning and everything meant is one with its effects’ as Hamacher says of a ‘universal language’ in a slightly different context (‘Lectio,’ p. 216). The Fall of language, furthermore,
by releasing the Word from full meaning gives us the double gift of both poetry and translation – two arts that arise from the misalignment of sound and sense. Along these lines Jeanne-Marie Gagnebin reads Benjamin’s stress on the supplementary harmony of multiple languages as ‘die radikale Erklärung der Vielzahl der Sprachen, das heißt die Anerkennung des unreduzierbaren Anders-Seins der fremden Sprache.’

Like Wohlfrath, Gagnebin sees the task of translation as a reversal of Babel, but turning to Pentecost (Acts, 2:1-8), in her words, ‘die umgekehrte und Babel erlösende Figur,’ allows Gagnebin to affirm the multiplicity of languages. As I have noted, in this scene the ruach of God enters the apostles who begin to speak in tongues – each apostle speaking in his own language, but understood by each auditor in his own. Gagnebin writes that this vision of a universally comprehensible language ‘ist nicht die Rückkehr zu einem Eden der einzigen adamitischen Sprache, sondern die Vervielfältigung und das volle Verstehen alle Sprache.’ (p. 35) The miracle at Pentecost is a language that is universally comprehensible without renouncing its multiplicity and therefore a potential allegory for the supplemental harmony of languages which adds up to ‘pure language’ but does not fuse into one language. That is, ‘pure language’ does not restitute the one language but traces its fracture into the myriad manners of meaning found in the vernaculars. While the word ruach links the Pentecostal scene to the Odem that Benjamin viewed as ‘zugleich Leben und Geist und Sprache’ (Über Sprache, GS2, p. 147) the Hebrew word itself remains fractured between these two instances since the ‘Winde von der Sprache’ (GS4, p. 21) that blows through Benjamin’s theory of translation is not the same as the breath which endows man with life and spirit and language.

20. Philosophical supplement.

But if the multiplicity of languages is the central problem of translation, it is also one for poetry. ‘Languages imperfect insofar as they are many; the absolute one is lacking,’ Stéphane Mallarmé writes in a passage of ‘Crisis of Verse’ that Benjamin cites in ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers.’ Without an absolute language, words cannot mean absolutely. Which is to say that the Fall of language not only brought about a multiplicity of languages but also a multiplicity of meanings in a single word, and since words do not mean singly,

---

90 Geschichte und Erzählung bei Walter Benjamin, trans. by Judith Klein (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2001), p. 33; further references in text.
91 Gagnebin justifies her turn to the Pentecostal scene, with its Christian celebration of God’s covenant with the Apostles via Franz Rosenzweig’s reference to it in his Der Stern der Erlösung [Star of Redemption] (p. 35, n. 63). Rosenzweig’s theory of language is remarkably close to Benjamin’s although it is hard to establish the extent of any potential influence between the two thinkers. For an in-depth reading of the connections between Benjamin and Rosenzweig, see Stéphane Môses, Der Engel der Geschichte: Franz Rosenzweig – Walter Benjamin – Gerschom Scholem.  
they appear to mean arbitrarily – or how else could a single word mean several things? ‘– Only, be aware,’ Mallarmé continues, ‘that verse would not exist:’ had it not been for such variability of meaning, ‘it, philosophically, makes up for language’s deficiencies, as a superior supplement.’ (pp. 205-6) Only because language is fallen do we have poetry to supplement its incomplete meaning. For Mallarmé the supplementation performed by poetic language revolves around its musical measure. ‘What a strange mystery: and, from no lesser intentions [than supplementing language’s deficiency], metrics appeared, during incubatory times.’ (p. 206) Here Mallarmé subtly shifts the commonplace notion that language originates in song (i.e. metrics) – on his account the song that poetry is born from is not a language of plenitude, but a supplement to this language’s originary lack of plenitude. Therefore, in addition to the multiplicity of languages, the Fall is also manifest in discrepancies within a single language, such as the one between the sensuous feel of words and their meaning: ‘discourse fails to express objects by touches corresponding to them in shading or bearing, since they do exist among the many languages, and sometimes in one,’ Mallarmé complains in a paragraph that Benjamin cites (‘Crisis of Verse,’ p. 206). As example Mallarmé mentions the ‘perversity’ of the contradiction between the ‘dark’ sound of jour, day, and the ‘light’ sound of nuit, night. According to Mallarmé, prosody supplements such discrepancies between meaning and sonic shading – an alignment that Benjamin, in the paragraph following the Mallarmé citation, calls the ‘Gefühlston,’ the ‘tone of feeling’ with which das Gemeinte binds itself to the Art des Meinens in a particular word. On Mallarmé’s model, metrics, i.e. poetically measured language, makes up for the imperfections of fallen language by combining words and letting their sounds supplement one another to create a line whose sonic shading (expressed in its metric measure) corresponds to the tone of feeling that the poet wishes to express. Therefore the arrangement of words into a metric line better transmits Gefühlstöne than an individual word does. As I have argued, such sonic effects are not present in Benjamin’s discussion of linguistic supplementation, nonetheless, ‘Crisis of Verse’ offers a model in which supplementation of fragments assembles into a harmonious whole that remains fragmented. In books of verse, Mallarmé writes, ‘any cry possesses an echo – motifs of the same type balance each other, stabilizing each other at a distance [...] an arrangement of fragments, adding up to a total rhythm, which would be the poem stilled, in the blanks.’ (p. 208-9) Mallarmé’s supplementary arrangement of fragments adds up to a total rhythm

93 In ‘Echolalie’ Nägele offers a different poetic source for Benjamin’s Gefühlston in Hölderlin’s ‘Poetik der Töne und des Tonwechsels’ (p. 25). If we read Gefühlston as containing this double reference to Mallarmé and Hölderlin, then Mallarmé’s discussion of sonic shading is itself a supplement to Hölderlin’s poetics and underlines the affinities between Benjamin’s theory of translation and theories of poetry. The German word ‘Ton,’ like the English tone, has two meanings that can be said to supplement each other in this discussion: shade (as in colour) and note (as in music).
that is silence, a silence that can also be heard in Benjamin’s depiction of the Aeolian harmony of Hölderlin’s Sophocles translations where ‘die Harmonie der Sprachen so tief [ist], daß der Sinn nur noch wie eine Aolsharfe vom Winde von der Sprache berührt wird. […] Eben darum wohnt in ihnen vor andern die ungeheure und ursprüngliche Gefahr aller Übersetzung: daß die Tore einer so erweiterten und durchwalteten Sprache zufallen und den Übersetzer ins Schweigen schließen.’ (GS4, p. 21)

21. A flower absent from every bouquet.
Both Mallarmé’s books of verse and Benjamin’s pure language are supplemental phenomena and can therefore be considered through the lens offered by Derrida’s discussion of the logic of the supplement. Derrida argues that the supplement, rather than being a mere addition, is constitutively riveted to the interior of what it supplements and thereby reveals its inner incompleteness. As supplement, metrics arise out of the imperfection of language to perfect it, but their very existence attests to the imperfection of language. Benjamin states that the divine creative Name requires to be voiced in human sounds to be completed in a higher sphere. This sonic supplementation suggests an imperfection in the divine Word: the divine soundless logos is incapable of a phenomenon that Mallarmé highlights and places at the heart of poetry:

I say: A flower! And, out of the oblivion where my voice casts every contour, insofar as it is something other than the known bloom, there arises, musically, the very idea in its mellowness; in other words, what is absent from every bouquet. (p. 210)

This flower that is absent from every bouquet is present only in the sounds of the word, and only to the extent that this word does not overlap with ‘the known bloom.’ Mallarmé’s ‘known bloom’ bears comparison to what Benjamin terms the ‘linguistic being’ of flower – its erkennender Name in the creative language of God. As I have shown, on Benjamin’s reading of Genesis, God created the world with the Word and implanted each thing that he created with the knowledge of its Name. Benjamin represents this knowledge as a seed that comes to fruition as Adam names the things in the world in accordance with their known name. But in the Fall this magic communion between sound and thing is shattered. Whereas Adam voices the name with which God has created creation, the poet working in a fallen language voices ‘something other than the known bloom.’

22. The colour violet.
The theological dimension of Benjamin’s theory of language and of translation asks us to read every word in the language as a fractured remnant of the one Word, but I have also

---

94 As I discussed above, Benjamin explicitly states that ‘[die] Übersetzung des Stummen in das Lauthafte,’ is the same as ‘die Übersetzung des Namenlosen in den Namen’ which amounts to ‘die Übersetzung einer unvollkommenen Sprache in eine vollkommenere.’ (‘Über Sprache,’ GS2, p. 151)
sketched Benjamin’s reliance on theories of poetic language in order to define the translator’s task. In ‘Lehre vom Ähnlchen’ Benjamin returns to the question of language and yet again combines a poietological programme with his theological conception of language. Echoing the idea that all languages are genealogically related in what they want to say (‘Die Aufgabe,’ GS4, p. 12), he writes: ‘Ordnet man Wörter den verschiedenen Sprachen, die ein gleiches bedeuten, um jenes Bedeutete als ihren Mittelpunkt, so wäre zu erforschen, wie sie alle – die miteinander oft nicht die geringste Ähnlichkeit besitzen – ähnlich jenem Bedeuteten in ihrer Mitte sind.’ (‘Lehre,’ GS2, p. 207) All words at some level resemble the Word whose broken fragments they are. In his reading of Benjamin’s mimetic writings, Hamacher argues that the similarities between words that Benjamin refers to ‘only present themselves in the medium of translation among various languages, between levels and segments of the text and word fragments of one or another of its languages.’ (‘The Word Wolke,’ p. 154) Hamacher’s piece in fact extends Benjamin’s programme: he not only traces how words in different languages are united by meaning the same thing, but also how sonic relations between words supplement their meaning. I have already mentioned that Hamacher mobilises rhyme relations between words in German and French in ‘a complex play of translations between and within the French and German languages’ that links “Walter, violation and Gewalt, theft, viol and vol” (p. 151). The elements brought together through this process of translations become supplementary in adding up to the meaning of a single text that incorporates multiple languages. Moreover, all the words in Hamacher’s text are conceptually – if not rather visually – tied to the appearance of the colour violet in different passages of the *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*. The colour violet thus becomes the Gefühlston that organises Hamacher’s reading of the text (in both the musical and the visual senses of the word ‘tone’). In naming this section ‘Violets,’ I further supplement Hamacher’s study of the word violet in Benjamin’s texts with the violet that Shelley throws into a crucible to describe the impossibility of translating the sounds of poetic language – a sonic flower that is conceptually related to the flower absent from Mallarmé’s bouquet. And thus one could go on to trace the appearances of this flower or this colour in Shelley’s and Benjamin’s texts or in texts growing out of their afterlives seemingly indefinitely.\(^{95}\) Perhaps for this reason Hamacher places a limit on the reach of similarities; this limit is the Word itself. Only an integral, paradisial Word would fully correspond to itself:

However much a word may be like another or even like all others, it is never like itself. And only insofar as the word does not correspond to itself, all others can correspond in it. [...]

---

\(^{95}\) For instance, by talking of Shelley’s use of the colour ‘violacerus’ as discussed by Stuart Peterfreund in ‘The Color Violaceous, Or, Chemistry and the Romance of Dematerialization: The Subliming of Iodine and Shelley’s “Adonais”, *Studies in Romanticism*, 42 (2003), 45–54
For in every one of them there is a place – itself – on which it resists translation, lacks mimetic capacity, is unable to be supplemented to that whole which would be the WORD, logos, in which language would be reason and common ground. (pp. 166-7)

Fallen language can be visualised as a Venn diagram where no word has an exclusive referential range, nor is fully adequate to what it means. This incompleteness of meaning allows words to turn into one another by means of sonic or semantic resemblances, and any word in the language could eventually turn into any other – except for itself. Despite the similarities between words, not a single one of them resembles itself, for they all miss the absolute, pure word at their core that could guarantee self-identity, what Mallarmé called the absolute word that is missing. This absence causes an underdetermination in language which continually destabilises meaning: it is because the word rose is not fully a flower that it can also name a woman, a colour, or the sun’s appearance on the eastern horizon yesterday. Poetic uses of language emphasise these multiple layers of meaning, uncovering elements in words and the world that usually go unnoticed: ‘It creates anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration,’ as Shelley puts it (‘Defence,’ p. 533). The task of poetry, therefore, is to make ‘familiar objects be as if they were not familiar’ (‘Defence,’ p. 517) – such as they are to children, for instance the child Benjamin who mishears the word Kupferstich as Kopf-verstich and becomes the word by sticking out his head from under a chair.
Two words

23. Disfiguration/Entstellung.

Jürgen Blasius translates de Man's essay 'Shelley Disfigured' as Shelleys Entstellung96 thereby naming de Man's reading of Shelley with a word, Entstellung, that is central in Benjamin's childhood writings, not least in the section called 'Die Mummerehlen' which Benjamin intended to put at the head of his sequence:


The child Benjamin is entstellt, disfigured, and gemummt, disguised, in words, which are, eigentlich, actually, clouds. It is precisely the sonic similarities between words that allow the child Benjamin to disguise and disfigure himself in them that constitutes their cloudiness – itself heard in the similarity between the German words Worte and Wolke, words and clouds. Hamacher starts out from this passage in his reading of Benjamin's childhood writings, which he sees as 'the impetus as well as the explication, extrapolation and fulfillment of the program' that is formulated in 'Lehre vom Ähnlichen' and 'Über das mimetische Vermögen' composed a year before the Berliner Chronik was begun.97 The essay in question, 'The Word Wolke – If It Is One,' opens with a dash: ‘– belongs in Walter Benjamin's texts to those who are determined in the language of intentions to designate its intention toward "language."' (p. 147) Following Benjamin's lead, Hamacher searches for language itself by following the non-sensuous similarities found between words in the translation and transposition of words into one another, for instance in the child Benjamin's translation of Kupferstich into a Kopf-verstich or in the sonic chain that leads from the name Walter to Gewalt. But rather than closely following in the steps of Hamacher's reading of Benjamin's Entstellungen, I will here examine a correspondence

96 in Die Ideologie des Ästhetischen, ed. by Christoph Menke, trans. by Jürgen Blasius (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), pp. 147-182
97 'The Word Wolke,' p. 166. In a letter to Scholem of 28th February 1933 Benjamin reports on 'eine neue [...] Sprachtheorie [...] Bemerken will ich nur, daß sie bei Studien zum ersten Stücke der "Berliner Kindheit" fixiert wurde.' Briefe, p. 563. Benjamin refers to the 1932 Berliner Chronik which he was then revising into the Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert, completed in 1934 and again revised in 1937. 'Die Mummerehlen' incorporates citations from Benjamin's essays and drafts for the mimetic reformulation of his theory of language.
that remains unnamed within his essay: that between ‘The Word Wolke – If It Is One’ and Paul de Man’s ‘Shelley Disfigured,’ or Shelleys Entstellung, a work that Hamacher elsewhere calls ‘de Man’s most radical text’ (‘LECTIO,’ p. 213).\(^{98}\) I trace how Hamacher’s reading of Benjaminian Entstellung is philosophically supplemented, to use Mallarmé’s phrase, by the concept of disfiguration that de Man develops in ‘Shelley Disfigured:’ just like Kupferstich and Kopf-verstich supplement one another to form an entstellt picture puzzle in Benjamin’s text, so Benjamin’s term Entstellung and de Man’s term disfiguration supplement one another and form a picture puzzle in the critical vocabulary of Hamacher’s essay. In ‘Shelley Disfigured,’ de Man argues that the Shape all light that appears in Shelley’s ‘The Triumph of Life’ is a figure that reveals the ‘repetitive erasures by which language performs the erasure of its own positions’ – and he terms this process of erasure disfiguration (p. 119). Throughout his essay on the word Wolke Hamacher refers to it as a ‘figure of defiguration’ and links it to forgetting or erasure:

For in the Worte, “word,” due to its likeness to Wolke, “cloud,” language stands on the threshold of forgetting everything that may be meant in it. Cloud – but not this single word, for it is disfigured; not the thing, which is never one and never assumes a lasting form; not the vague representation or idea, for what is an idea, if it is vague? – “cloud” is, in a certain sense, the forgetting of ascertained meaning, of linguistic convention and everything that can enter into its space. (p. 147; my emphasis)

As a representative for forgetting and disfiguration, the word ‘Wolke’ – cloud – that Hamacher singles out in his reading of Benjamin’s Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert takes the position that the Shape all Light occupies in de Man’s reading of Shelley’s ‘The Triumph of Life.’ Therefore, to understand what Hamacher means when he reads Benjamin’s word ‘cloud’ as disfigured, I shall turn to de Man’s reading of Shelley.

---

\(^{98}\) Hamacher does not relate de Man’s and Benjamin’s work nor does he explicitly discuss the thematic affinities between his own essays on Benjamin and on de Man, but these can be perceived in the conceptual overlay of both pieces which I hope to bring out in what follows. ‘The Word Wolke – If It Is One’ is first published in Studies in Twentieth Century Literature, 11.1 Fall, 1986, reprinted in Benjamin’s Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin, ed. by Rainer Nägele (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), pp. 147-175. According to a footnote at the close of ‘LECTIO: De Man’s Imperative’, the essay was written in April 1985 (n. 21, p. 221), that is little more than a year before the appearance of ‘The Word Wolke’ which places their dates of composition in close proximity to one another. ‘LECTIO’ first appears in Reading de Man Reading ed. by Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). A revised version is published in Entferntes Verstehen: Studien zu Philosophie und Literatur von Kant bis Celan (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), pp. 151-194; and translated into English in Premises: Essays on Philosophy and Literature from Kant to Celan, trans. by Peter Fenves (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 181-221. In German Hamacher uses the three words ‘Defiguration,’ ‘Disfiguration,’ and ‘Entstellung,’ which Peter Fenves’s translation of ‘LECTIO’ renders with the English ‘defiguration,’ (translating Defiguration twice, p. 195; p. 196; p. 197), ‘disfiguration,’ (translating Disfiguration, p. 192) and ‘distortion’ (translating Entstellung p. 210).
24. *The Shape all light.*

The Shape all light of Shelley’s ‘The Triumph of Life’ appears in a vision narrated by Rousseau. Explaining how he found himself in a cavern at dawn, Rousseau says to the poem’s narrator:

“And, as I looked the bright omnipresence
   Of morning through the orient cavern flowed,
   And the Sun’s image radiantly intense

“Burned on the waters of the well that glowed
   Like gold, and threaded all the forest’s maze
   With winding paths of emerald fire – there stood

“Amid the sun, as he amid the blaze
   Of his own glory, on the vibrating
   Floor of the fountain, paved with flashing rays,

“A shape all light (ll. 343-52)

If we strip the scene of its metric measure we get the Shape all light standing on the floor of a fountain. This is a surface paved with flashing rays in the midst of which the Shape all light appears in likeness to the sun’s appearance amid the blaze of his own glory. It is an image of light contoured against light. But since the flashing rays in whose midst the Shape appears are themselves the reflections of the sun’s blaze, the structure of the simile is uneven: the sun stands in the blaze of his own glory, the Shape all light stands in the sun’s reflected blaze *like* the sun stands in the blaze of his own glory. The simile lacks a term of comparison: light is like light. The only shaping that makes possible a distinction between these layers of light is generated by the reflection on the ‘vibrating’ Floor of the fountain’ as this separates reflected from unreflected rays and thereby gives a minimal outline of light against light that may be termed a Shape all light. But, de Man notes, neither light nor water have shape on their own: *Water, which has no shape of itself, is moulded into shape by its contact with the earth [...] it generates the very possibility of structure, pattern, form or shape by way of the disappearance of shape into shapelessness.* (p. 107) and similarly *‘light, the necessary condition for shape, is itself, like water, without shape.’* (p. 109) Both water and light are stretching the boundaries for what we may term shape. In making the reflection of light in water into the central image of Rousseau’s vision, Shelley gives us precious little to visualise – in de Man’s words the Shape all light is ‘referentially meaningless’ (p. 109). Thus blinded by the scene’s imagery, Shelley’s readers have to become attuned to listening to the river’s flow. *‘The property of the river that the poem singles out is its sound; the oblivious spell emanates from the repetitive rhythm of the water, which articulates a random noise into a definite pattern.’* (p. 107) Only when the
Shape all light begins her descent down the river do we gain a sense of material relief from the scene's layering of light:

– the fierce splendour
Fell from her as she moved under the mass

"Of the deep cavern, and with palms so tender
Their tread broke not the mirror of its billow,
Glide along the river
[...]

To wondrous music, so this shape might seem

"Partly to tread the waves with feet which kist
The dancing foam, partly to glide along
The airs that roughened the moist amethyst,
[...]

And her feet, ever to the ceaseless song

"Of leaves and winds and waves and birds and bees
And falling drops moved in a measure new... (l. 359-77)

The Shape all light’s movement down the river is simultaneous with the fall of ‘the fierce splendour’ – a Wordsworthian term that Shelley repeatedly associates with light in this poem (cf. l. 3; l. 87; l. 413; l. 444). The fall of splendour coincides with the introduction of a ‘wondrous music’ which accompanies the Shape all light’s tread down the river. Thus the dancing feet of the referentially meaningless Shape all light carry the reader out of the blinding glare and down the melodious stream along which we will encounter the song of ‘winds and waves and birds and bees’ – all familiarly romantic images. The Shape of light is therefore a point of transition, from light to music. ‘The birth of form as the interference of light and water,’ de Man writes, ‘passes through the mediation of sound.’ (p. 107) The form being born here is the prosodic form given to a poem by the measure of its feet. The scene is thus a variation on the birth of lyric poetry presented in the Homeric hymn, where Shelley also punned on foot to mean both metric unit and a body part. Here, the Shape all light’s descent down the river performs a shift from the visual to the audible and sets up a complementary relation between the poem’s sound and its shapeless imagery – the metric regularity is the most concrete feature in a scene where the imagery consists of glaring light on light. But if the appearance of the Shape's feet comes with a sense of material relief in an otherwise shapeless scene, the materiality in question is that of the sonic features of the poem's language. In other words, the shapeless imagery is held in shape by the poem's strict terza rima. The movement of the Shape all light's feet over water is both a reflection
Life after Life

of light in water and a self-reflective image of the formal principle that holds together the poem's disparate and ever-mutable content. Thus, this image combines the figurative as well as the literal meanings of the word 'foot' with the sounds articulated in Shelley's use of metric feet, a combination that merges the visual, conceptual, and prosodic elements of a word. This accords with Shelley's definition of metaphor as marking the 'before unapprehended relations of things' (‘Defence,’ SPP p. 512), thoughts, and sounds (p. 514), but it also means that the Shape can be understood as referentially meaningless in an additional sense: it is not a figure for any semantic content expressible in language, be it abstract or material, but for the sonic dimension through which language is expressed. That language sounds is the precondition of linguistic articulation and thus signification but the mere fact of articulation does not in itself signify any definite conceptual meaning. The Shape all light's movement down the stream signals its transformation from a figure of light to a figure of measure and as she treads over the waves, her motion encompasses the visual, conceptual, and prosodic features of words. But the dance of her feet also sets off the process of disfiguration that gives de Man's essay its name:

The “tread” of this dancer [i.e. the Shape all Light] is no longer melodious but reduces music to the mere measure of repeated articulations. It singles out from music the accentual or tonal punctuation which is also present in spoken diction. The scene could be said to narrate the birth of music out of the spirit of language, since the determining property is an articulation distinctive of verbal sound prior to its signifying function.

Sonic articulation happens in time, and it is precisely the inflections of temporality that clash in de Man’s reading. The tread of the Shape all light returns ‘verbal sound’ to a state ‘prior to its signifying function’ by singling out ‘the accentual and tonal punctuation’ that language shares with music. That is, de Man pares both language and music down to their lowest common denominator: the repetitive pattern that distinguishes ordered sound from random noise. This is a language that is ‘no longer melodious’ and a music that is reduced to ‘the mere measure of repeated articulations.’ However, de Man immediately insists that scene narrates the birth of music out of the spirit of (a ‘no longer melodious’) language: the birth of music, in other words, out of a language pared down to the minimal repetitive pattern that it shares with music. Just like the structure of Shelley’s Shape all light, this image lacks a term of comparison: music is here born out of a language that is ‘no longer melodious’ because it has ‘single[d] out from music’ the elements it shares with music, which would make music anterior to the no longer melodious language out of

99 It should be clear that the problem of measure alone ‘does not suffice’ (p. 114) to bring about what de Man sees as disfiguration in its fullness, which requires paying attention to ‘iconic’ or ‘sensory’ elements in language (e.g. metaphor, synecdoche, etc.) as well as non-iconic tropes (‘grammar and syntax’; p. 115) in order to span ‘the figurality of all signification’ (p. 116).
which it is born. If Shelley's Shape all light is 'referentially meaningless' because it is an image of light against light reflected in water, de Man's juxtaposition of music and language is likewise 'referentially meaningless:' it presents neither the origin of music nor of language but their interference through one another. The medium of this interference is measure, a word that according to de Man 'actively reintroduces music' into the poem even as he immediately adds: 'Measure is articulated sound, that is to say language. Language rather than music, in the traditional sense of harmony and melody.' (p. 112) That is, the articulation of sound introduces music into language, but the (linguistic) articulation of sound reduces music to mere repetition. What is left is the thump of a metre equally devoid of harmony, melody, and semantic meaning. Thus de Man can say that the poem 'rhythmically articulates what is in fact a disarticulation' (p. 107) and invite us to read the Shape's feet – the poem's self-reflective figures for its own metric measure – as figures for its own disfiguration.

25. *Thread, tread, trample.*

In the first appearance of the feet of the Shape all light we learn that their tread is so gentle that it does not even break the river's surface: 'with palms so tender | Their tread broke not the mirror of its billow, | [the Shape all light] Glided along the river' (ll. 361-3). Yet, as de Man points out, by 'the end of the section, we have moved from “thread” to “tread” to “trample,” in a movement of increased violence.' (p. 111) The passage in question runs as follows:

"As one enamoured is upborne in dream
   O'er lily-paven lakes mid silver mist
To wondrous music, so this shape might seem

"Partly to tread the waves with feet which kist
The dancing foam, partly to glide along
   The airs that roughened the moist amethyst,
[...]

"And still her feet, no less than the sweet tune
To which they moved, seemed as they moved, to blot
   The thoughts of him who gazed on them, and soon

"All that was seemed as if it had been not –
   As if the gazer's mind was strewn beneath
Her feet like embers, and she, thought by thought,

"Trampled its fires into the dust of death
As Day upon the threshold of the east
   Treads out the lamps of night (ll. 367-90)
The feet that self-reflectively served to figure the poem’s measure are now become embers that trample the fires of Rousseau’s thought into the dust of death. Again, the figuration of light against light borders on the shapeless: feet like embers are stamping out the fires of thought in analogy to how the dawn engulfs the stars – light is extinguished by more light. Conventionally we would expect the night to carry the analogy to death but here the sun treads out the stars making the illumined daytime sky an image for ‘the dust of death.’ But, crucially, the feet of the Shape all light that just stood for the poem’s measured language are now the embers that extinguish Rousseau’s thought. No wonder de Man reads Shelleyan measure as menace. Ross Woodman’s reading of ‘Shelley Disfigured’ highlights where de Man’s essay departs from Shelley’s poetics and practice, “a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound” […] governs, for Shelley, poetic thought. Without it, thought would be dead. For de Man, on the other hand, recurrence of sound induces oblivion […] rather than living thought.’\textsuperscript{100} While de Man himself does not mention Shelley’s central distinction between measured and unmeasured language, his reading implies that Shelley’s characterisation of poetry as measured language turns the poetic art tout court into a perpetual destruction of sense by metrics:

\begin{quote}
Since measure is any principle of linguistic organization, not only as rhyme and meter but as any syntactical or grammatical scansion, one can read ‘feet’ not just as the poetic meter that is so conspicuously evident in the terza rima of the poem, but as any principle of signification. Yet it is precisely these “feet” which extinguish and bury the poetic and philosophical light. (p. 113)
\end{quote}

As the Shape all Light, with ‘feet like embers’ tramples Rousseau’s thought ‘into the dust of death,’ so does ‘poetic meter’ or indeed ‘any principle of signification’ trample out the poetic and philosophic light in any linguistic organisation. The Shape’s feet, first a figure for the poem’s measure, then a figure for its disfiguration, are become a figure of forgetting, erasure, disarticulation continually threatening all articulated sense.

\textsuperscript{100} ‘Figuring Disfiguration: Reading Shelley after de Man’, \textit{Studies in Romanticism}, 40 (2001), 253-88 (p. 259, n. 7); further references in text.
A cloud that is not one

I have outlined de Man’s reading of linguistic disfiguration in ‘Shelley Disfigured’ that enters Hamacher’s reading of Benjamin’s use of the word Wolke, cloud, as a figure of forgetting and disfiguration even as both forgetting and disfiguration are critical terms already present in Benjamin’s theory of language. When Benjamin writes that ‘Das Mißverstehen verstellte mir die Welt’ and that this Verstellung taught him the Enstellung of himself and of words (GS4, pp. 260-1), this acoustic distortion is an erasure of linguistic positions: words turn into other words and in the process disguise the world. Hamacher’s translation and transformation of these critical terms places Benjamin’s understanding of language as Enstellung and de Man’s discussion of disfiguration in a supplemental harmony without harmonising them. That is, although he operates with the critical vocabulary of de Man and Benjamin, Hamacher does not reconcile their dissimilarities. The most important such difference regards the role of sound in language: where for Benjamin sound signals the special status of human language, for de Man – like in post-structuralist linguistics more generally – the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary. The latent polarity implied in all classical theories of the sign allows for the relative independence of the signifier and for its free play in relation to its signifying function,’ he writes in ‘Shelley Disfigured’ (p. 114) whereas Benjamin condemns linguistic theories that claim ‘daß das Wort zur Sache sich zufällig verhalte, daß es ein durch irgendwelche Konvention gesetztes Zeichen der Dinge (oder ihrer Erkenntnis) sei’ (‘Über Sprache’ GS2, p. 150). Instead Benjamin endows the sonic dimension of words with the promise of a particular kind of insight only conveyable by the sounds of language, paradigmatically heard in the homophony between Kupferstich and Kopf-verstich that allows the child Benjamin to disfigure and disguise himself in the word. In Hamacher’s reading, the word Wolke becomes the figure of this insight as he goes through a series of cloudlike transformations that show that the word Wolke is not one: it is neither one singular word, nor is it even a word. That is, already in Hamacher’s title, ‘The Word Wolke – If It Is One,’ the meaning of the word ‘one’ is double – which in turn suspends the meaning of the word ‘Wolke’ in a state of not-being-one that Hamacher labels ‘disfigured:’ ‘Cloud – but not this single word, for it is disfigured.’ (p.147) However, unlike in de Man’s reading of Shelley, this species of disfiguration does not serve to ‘extinguish and bury the poetic and philosophical light’ (p. 113), but opens onto a higher language: it is precisely because the answer to the title’s question is negative – the word Wolke is not one – that it turns out to be one of the words that reveal an intention towards language in the language of Walter Benjamin. While the idea that disfiguration is essential to language is present in
de Man too, de Man views it as a menace whereas Benjamin celebrates a language in which every word resembles a cloud which 'is never one and never assumes a lasting form.' ('The Word Wolke,' p. 147) As this nod to the morphology of clouds testifies, Hamacher’s reading is not a mere affair of words. In addition to the supplementary relation between Entstellung and disfiguration, Hamacher mobilises the morphology of real life clouds to visualise Benjamin’s comparison of words and clouds. Just as the cloud is not a substantial something, so, strictly speaking, the word 'cloud' does not denote anything. 'That means: neither snow nor clouds are to be taken here as metaphors at all, for they do not mean something else that could be said more appropriately, and they are not sensuous images of a noumenal content: rather, they mean that they do not mean, and indeed do mean this “not.”' (p. 163) There are therefore at least three ways in which the word Wolke means in Hamacher’s text and all of them supplement one another to designate an intention towards language. In this Hamacher’s procedure resembles the manner in which Shelley uses the word 'feet' as a literal, figurative, and prosodic trope at once.\footnote{That is, Shelley literally talks of the ‘feet’ of the Shape all light, but these feet also figuratively represent the poem’s metric measure, and they are themselves metric feet within Shelley’s terza rima.} Hamacher combines the morphological, metaphorical, and phonetic features of the word: the phonetic similarity between the words Wolke and Worte, Benjamin’s own use of clouds as metaphor for words ('Worte, die eigentlich Wolken waren'; GS4, p. 261) as well as the fact that clouds are ‘the various appearances of water suspended in the Atmosphere’ as Luke Howard defines them, whose On the Modifications of Clouds (1803) introduced the modern system of classifying clouds and sparked a craze in cloud-gazing.\footnote{On the Modifications of Clouds (London: J. Taylor, 1803 [repr. 1969]), p. 3} Howard’s essay is one source of Shelley’s cloud imagery but his definition of clouds as the suspension of water in the atmosphere also serendipitously supplements Hamacher’s figurations of clouds because suspension is a key term in his own critical vocabulary – as will become evident when I turn to his reading of de Man in ‘LECTIO: de Man’s Imperative.’ However, before doing that I would like to confirm the affinity between Hamacher’s reading of Benjamin and de Man’s reading of Shelley not by going through these step by step, but by examining Shelley’s clouds.

27. Hover.

In his reading of ‘The Triumph of Life,’ de Man notes that neither water nor light have shape unless reflected in, refracted through, or contoured against something else. The Shape all light takes form in the ‘referentially meaningless’ shaping of light against light reflected in water and only gains material shape with the appearance of her treading feet, metonymic of the poem’s own metrical measure and heard in the ‘repetitive rhythm of the water’ (p. 107). In this manner, the poem’s metrical pattern becomes the minimal shaping
in which the barely shapeable images of light and water are contained in a ‘near-
miraculous suspension between these two different forces [i.e. light and sound] whose
interaction gives to the figure the hovering motion which may well be the mode of being of
all figures’ (pp. 108-9). The crux of de Man’s reading is how, in Shelley’s poem, water is the
source of both the reflection of light and the modulation of sound: ‘The water of the
original river here fulfills a double and not necessarily complementary action, as it
combines with the light to form, on the one hand, Iris’s scarf or rainbow and, on the other
hand, the “silver music” of oblivion.’ (p. 108) Given his extended meditation on light and
water in their mutual suspension it is almost surprising that de Man does not alight on the
example of a cloud, a phenomenon that is little more than the reflection of light through
water vapour and whose appearance may well be the most minimal kind of visual shaping
imaginable. From Howard’s essay Shelley would know that clouds are formed by the
evaporation of water, and he had a good enough grasp of natural science to know that
evaporation is accelerated by warmth. In the scene where the Shape all light appears the
radiant heat of the sun is burning on the waters of a well – a phenomenon that would
produce a mist, in other words a terrestrial modification of cloud, that would be
illuminated by the same sun whose warmth generates it. The Shape all light, then, is a form
of cloud. The assumption is confirmed by tracing the genealogy of Rousseau’s vision
within Shelley’s oeuvre. Rousseau’s visionary encounter with the Shape all light echoes the
visionary language of Laon and Cythna: or, The Revolution of the Golden City: A Vision of the
Nineteenth Century (1817). In the poem’s framing narrative, the narrator encounters a
woman who

---

103 The rainbow and silver music that de Man refers to appears as the Shape all light

"…with one hand did fling
Dew on the earth, as if she were the Dawn
Whose invisible rain forever seemed to sing

"A silver music on the mossy lawn
And still before her on the dusky grass
Iris her many coloured scarf had drawn. (ll. 352-7; cited by de Man, p. 108)
de Man’s reading of this bifurcation of light and music performed by the shape can be contrasted
with Fred L. Milne’s reading, which identifies the Shape all light with the rainbow: ‘The “Shape all
light,” who appears amid the sun’s reflected image, is the embodiment of the sun’s diffused light
which becomes divided into a rainbow-like spectrum of colors as it emanates from the sun’s white
radiance.’ “The Eclipsed Imagination in Shelley’s “The Triumph of Life,”” Studies in English Literature,
1500-1900, 21 (1981), 681–702 (p. 698); for Milne, the ‘Shape’ is Shelley’s image of imagination
and thus he reads it as a positive force where for de Man the light in this poem is a menace.

104 The subtitle ‘A Vision of the Nineteenth Century’ reflects Shelley’s prophetic ambitions in this
poetic depiction of a revolution while the poem’s many dream visions anticipate Shelley’s use of the
form in ‘The Triumph of Life.’ In the latter poem, however, the vision of Life’s triumphal chariot is
shown to crush the living and their revolutionary ambitions, not excluding the kind of ambitions
embodied in an earlier work like Laon and Cythna. But it also calls across the terrain of said century
to Benjamin’s work, which treats the Zeitraum, period, of the nineteenth century as a Zeit-traum,
time-dream, from which it is the task of the historian to awake. ‘Die neue dialektische Methode der
...spake in language whose strange melody  
Might not belong to earth. I heard alone,  
What made its music more melodious be,  
The pity and the love of every tone (ll. 289-93)

This woman takes the narrator on a journey in her 'boat of rare device, which had no sail | But its own curved prow of thin moonstone, | Wrought like a web of texture fine and frail' (ll. 325-7). During the journey she gives him an account of human history, from the 'earliest dweller of the world' (l. 352) until the French Revolution. At the moment when the Revolution's initial promise turns into Terror, the woman's account is interrupted by a 'Deep slumber' in which the woman falls in love with the Morning Star. The following night 'methought in dream | A shape of speechless beauty did appear: | It stood like light on a careering stream | Of golden clouds which shook the atmosphere' (ll. 496-9). This shape of speechless beauty stands like light amid a stream of golden clouds, just like the Shape all light will later stand 'Amid the sun, as he amid the blaze | Of his own glory, on the vibrating | Floor of the fountain' ('The Triumph of Life,' ll. 349-51). Later in the poem, Laon describes the appearance of Cythna in words that both anticipate Rousseau's description of the Shape all light and name this female shape a cloud:

She moved upon this earth a shape of brightness,  
A power, that from its objects scarcely drew  
One impulse of her being – in her lightness  
Moist like some radiant cloud of morning dew,  
Which wanders through the waste air's pathless blue,  
To nourish some far desert; she did seem  
Beside me, gathering beauty as she grew,  
Like the bright shade of some immortal dream  
Which walks, when tempest sleeps, the wave of life's dark stream. (ll. 865-73)

Here is a 'shape of brightness' that 'like some radiant cloud of morning dew' is subject to the same hovering between shape and shapelessness as the later Shape all light. Here too emphasis is placed on her light tread: she 'wanders' through the air, and 'walks ...] the wave of life's dark stream.' The word 'seem' signals the same kind of epistemic uncertainty present in Rousseau's vision scene, where the 'shape might seem | Partly to tread the waves with feet which kist' (ll. 369-70). Laon and Cythna is written in 1817, five years before 'The Triumph of Life,' which suggests that – like with shells – Shelley's shaping of clouds is deliberate and deliberated. Determining what clouds look like is a time-worm children's game but it is also makes evident the power of imagination to shape something

Historik präsentiert sich als die Kunst, die Gegenwart als Wachwelt zu erfahren, auf die sich jener Traum, den wir Gewesenes nennen, in Wahrheit bezieht.' [K1,3]
innately shapeless. In *Laon and Cythna* it becomes a way to represent Cythna’s speechless beauty and the description of light among golden clouds stands in for a depiction of what she actually looks like – she radiates a speechless beauty that literally eludes words.

28. Glimmer.

If the shape of Cythna primarily figures inexpressible beauty, by the time Shelley comes to write ‘The Triumph of Life’ his shapeless shape of light has also gained resonance as a figure for the poetic medium. This linguistic dimension of Shelley’s figuration of clouds is developed in two poems written roughly halfway between *Laon and Cythna* and ‘The Triumph of Life:’ the ‘Ode to Liberty’ and ‘The Cloud’ both published in the 1820 *Prometheus Unbound* volume. The ‘Ode to Liberty’ is written in response to the Revolution in Spain and presents a history of the progress of Liberty across Europe. Towards the end of the Ode, Shelley sets out a list of demands that would speed the return of Liberty, one of which being that religion wane away:

That the pale name of PRIEST might shrink and dwindle
Into the hell from which it first was hurled,

[...]

Till human thoughts might kneel alone
Each before the judgment-throne

Of its own aweless soul, or of the power unknown! (ll. 228-33)

This deprecation of priestly language becomes the occasion for a more general reflection on the inadequacy of words:

O, that the words which make the thoughts obscure
From which they spring, as clouds of glimmering dew
From a white lake blot heaven’s blue portraiture,
Were stripped of their thin masks and various hue
And frowns and smiles and splendours not their own,
Till in the nakedness of false and true
They stand before their Lord, each to receive its due. (ll. 234-40)

The relation between individual words and thought is thus parallel to the relation between the individual human and the divine ‘power unknown.’ The ‘Lord’ of l. 240 is not

---

105 Seeing the semblance of something in a cloud is an effect of the perceiver’s imagination, in conjunction with his position and the time of day. In this it resembles the appearance of a stellar constellation: both rely on a form of triangulation between observer, the shapeless phenomenon observed, and the time at which the two align. James McFarland explores the constellation as a critical concept in twentieth century and contemporary theory, not least in the work of Benjamin. ‘Sailing by the Stars: Constellations in the Space of Thought’ *MLN*, 126 (2011), 471–485.
God, but Imagination, which, according to Shelley, is the source of language but also related to the unknown power that animates all of life. But the passage overall suggests that words are to be taken to task by the power which created them. The comparison of ‘words' to ‘clouds of glimmering dew' emphasises their ephemeral and shapeshifting nature (‘thin masks and various hue') suggesting that all these are embellishments (‘frowns and smiles and splendours not their own') that do not belong to the meaning that they communicate, ‘the nakedness of false and true.' Therefore, the mutable features of language ‘blot' the clear meaning that language would communicate like clouds ‘blot' the skies (a surprisingly strong word for something which is thin and of various hue). The ‘Ode to Liberty' is a politically minded work, which may explain its call for words to be transparent and not obscure the thoughts they express. When used for political means, language is at most effective when reduced to the bare simplicity of ‘false and true.' Shelley's strongest expression of this frustration with words may be in his essay ‘On Love' where, failing to formulate his point, he exclaims in a footnote: ‘These words are inefficient and metaphorical – Most words so – No help –' (SPP, p. 504). However, Shelley's ‘Defence of Poetry’ is by and large a defence of precisely the metaphorical features of language. Against the wish to strip words of their glimmering cloudiness, the ‘Ode to Liberty's companion ‘The Cloud' revels in the glimmering nature of words. The poem consists of six stanzas, where 'each stanza portrays an individual state of a cloud according to the best meteorology of Shelley's day,'106 which is to say Howard's On the Modifications of Clouds.107 Since the poem's various stanzas in fact depict distinct meteorological phenomena, Shelley's cloud cannot be said to be one cloud but rather consists of a series of clouds that appear under differing atmospheric conditions; only the first person narration, or, more precisely, the name 'The Cloud' unites the different modifications of cloud into one coherent figure. I will not follow Shelley's cloud in all its transformations, but focus on the stanza in which it begins to glimmer:

That orbèd maiden with white fire laden
  Whom mortals call the moon,
Gildes glimmering o'er my fleecelike floor,
  By the midnight breezes strewn;
And wherever the beat of her unseen feet,

107 Desmond King-Hele situates the poem's imagery in the context of Shelley’s scientific interest in Shelley: The Man and the Poet, ed. by Thomas Yoseloff (New York, 1960), pp. 219-27. Goethe was also attracted to Howard's work which inspired him to write a series of cloud journals in 1818-20. His poem, ‘Hüthers Ehrendächtnis – über die Wölken,' is uncannily close to Shelley's as it too uses Howard’s newest meteorology to depict the life of a cloud in its various phases. In his contextual reading of Benjamin's sources for his images of clouds, Brüggeman includes Goethe's cloud poem and the Wolkendiarien (Walter Benjamin: Über Spiel, Farbe, und Phantasie, pp. 223-4).
Which only angels hear,
May have broken the woof of my tent’s thin roof,
The stars peep behind her, and peer; (ll. 45-52)

Since the Moon is laden with ‘white fire’ (l. 44), her passage over the cloud is – like that of Cythna in Laon’s vision or the ‘Shape all Light’ in Rousseau’s – a movement of light over evaporated water. Furthermore, like in the ‘Hymn to Mercury’ and ‘The Triumph of Life,’ ‘feet’ can here be read as a self-reflective pun on the poem’s own metric measure. The unseen – because heard – feet of the moon tread over the cloud with a ‘beat’ (l. 49) so delicately light that it is described as ‘gliding,’ a word that Shelley will re-use in describing the Shape all light’s movement over the stream (l. 363; l. 371). Lucy Neely McLane’s analysis of ‘The Cloud’s sonic effects in terms of its ‘sound values’ beautifully captures the phonetic texture of this glimmering woof: ‘For her [the moon’s] sake the fire of i’s is distilled with the dew of I’s and m’s, the pearl-roundness of o’s is confined by the etherealizing force of b’s and r’s, the invisible spirit of motion is caught in a net of e’s tied with monosyllables and rimmed by I’s..’108 As McLane’s focus on assonance and consonance suggests, poetic measure is not merely stamped out by a repetitive rhythm, it is also woven out of the texture of the words themselves. Such a reading partially refutes de Man’s claim that the Shape’s tread as a figure for musical measure ‘reduces music to the mere measure of repeated articulations.’ (‘Shelley Disfigured,’ p. 113) When Shelley speaks of poetic measure he does not merely denote the repetitive rhythmic patterns of a poem, but also how the sounds of words are interlaced through rhyme relations to form a glimmering ‘woof’ of language. Woof is a word that Shelley commonly uses to describe poetry, for instance in ‘The Witch of Atlas’ where ‘the wizard lady sat aloof […] broidering the pictured poesy | Of some high tale upon her growing woof’ (ll. 249-53). ‘The Cloud’ does not, however, contradict de Man’s conclusion that the gliding movement of poetic feet is one of ‘increased violence that erases the initial tenderness.’ (p. 111) It is the Moon’s glimmering gliding that, after all, tears a rent in the cloud’s woof (ll. 49-51). Thus, on the one hand, as the glimmering woof on which the beat of metric feet is imprinted, the cloud represents the language of poetry. But, on the other hand, it is also the metric feet, the measure that defines the language of poetry, that tear it apart. In Miller’s phrase, this is ‘the moment in a work of literature when its own medium is put in question’ (‘The Critic as Host,’ p. 250):109 an image of poetic language destroys another image of poetic language.

108 ‘Sound Values in “The Cloud”’, The English Journal, 22 (1933), 412–414 (p. 413)
109 I quoted this formulation in the methodology section of my introduction as indicative of why I am choosing a deconstructive approach to Shelley and Benjamin: it allows me to locate the moments in their texts that are self-reflective and in which their works resemble one another. Their figurations of clouds constitute one such moment.
However, this destruction opens onto the vision of the skies denied in the 'Ode to Liberty.' The fourth stanza concludes:

    When I widen the rent in my wind-built tent,
    Till the calm rivers, lakes, and seas,
    Like strips of the sky fallen through me on high,
    Are each paved with the moon and these. (ll. 55-8)

The rent in the cloud’s surface, which has been broken open by the moon’s poetic feet, allows the skies to be mirrored in the ‘calm rivers, lakes, and seas.’ If the cloud – a glimmering woof – is the medium of poetry, then it is also the work of poetry that tears it apart so that the heavens can be mirrored in terrestrial waters. At this very point Shelley stretches the poem’s grammar to accommodate this reflection within the poem’s ottava rima stanza. The end-rhyme ‘these’ (l. 58) which awkwardly refers to the ‘stars’ of l. 52 offers a compact illustration of de Man’s point that sound patterning threatens semantic meaning. When words are chosen for how they sound and not what they mean, the signifying function suffers. While de Man here writes about Rousseau’s vision, the point also applies to measured language more generally:

    If, for instance, compelling rhyme schemes such as “billow,” “willow,” “pillow,” or transformations such as “thread” to “tread” or “seed” to “deed” occur at crucial moments in the text, then the question arises whether these particularly meaningful movements or events are not being generated by random and superficial properties of the signifier rather than by the constraints of meaning. The obliteration of thought by “measure” would then have to be interpreted as the loss of semantic depth... (p. 114)

De Man worries that by foregrounding the sonic dimension – which is but arbitrarily connected to the meaning of words – the poem demolishes its semantic content. Shelley, on the contrary, states that the relations between sounds are inseparable from the relations between thoughts and guarantee that the poem ‘reproduces all that it represents’ (‘Defence,’ SPP, p. 517); that is, it sounds like what it treats of. Therefore, in the case of ‘The Cloud,’ it is perfectly appropriate that grammar is being stretched to accommodate the poem’s prosodic pattern just as Shelley describes a rent caused by the moon’s unseen feet, i.e. the poem’s metric measure in ll. 49-51. These feet tear apart the woof of language on the poem’s literal, figurative, and prosodic levels at once (as trampling feet, as figures for measure, as grammatical distortion). Shelley’s poetics does not deny that paying attention to measure may stretch received language usage, but rather than seeing this as a threat to meaning, it is essential to poetry’s task of ‘making the familiar appear as if it were not familiar.’ (‘Defence,’ SPP, p. 517)
29. Veil.

As a woof over which the moon’s white fire-feet glimmer, the cloud resembles one of Shelley’s most common self-reflective figures of poetry: the ‘figured curtain’ that poetry ‘spreads’ over reality according to the ‘Defence’ (SPP, p. 533). But just as often as Shelley likens poetry to a figured curtain or glimmering veil, he insists that poetry is that which removes the veil that obscures our perception: ‘Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world’ (‘Defence,’ SPP p. 517) or ‘it strips the veil of familiarity from the world’ and ‘purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being’ (‘Defence,’ SPP, p. 533). This explains why, in ‘The Cloud’ and in Rousseau’s vision, poetic feet trample and tear the glimmering created by poetic measure. Poetry tears the veil that poetry itself is. This curtain is also figured in the proem to ‘The Triumph of Life’ where yet again the word ‘glimmer’ is key. The poem opens at dawn, when the narrator falls into a trance whose shade ‘Was so transparent that the scene came through | As clear as when a veil of light is drawn | O’er evening hills they glimmer’ (ll. 30-3) – it is on this veil that the vision of ‘The Triumph of Life’ is projected. ‘So the Poet’s trance is described as having the transparency of a veil of light through which a line of hills is seen to glimmer,’ Michael O’Neill notes, ‘[t]he language itself brightens and glimmers with the promise of some revelation.’ Since the glimmering veil is an image of poetic language, the glimmer of Shelley’s language and the glimmer described by his language are in fact one glimmering. The veil is thus the interference of one through the other: figures for language refracted in and by the language in which they are figured. But, most importantly, ‘Veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed’ (‘Defence,’ SPP, p. 528). The self-unravelling play of figures does not open onto the beauty of the truth, which will never be exposed because it does not exist apart from the process of veiling and unveiling – ‘ Denn weder die Hülle noch der verhüllte Gegenstand ist das Schöne, sondern dies ist der Gegenstand in seiner Hülle,’ as Benjamin describes beauty in his essay on Goethe’s Wahlverwandtschaften (GS1, p. 196). The cloud’s glimmering refraction of light through water is one of Shelley’s figures for a comparable process of veiling. And it is precisely because the language of poetry both casts a veil over reality and destroys this veil that it is the closest we get to a truth whose meaning cannot be exposed.

Murmuring sounds

30. The lamp.

I have traced how Shelley uses clouds to figure the workings of poetic language and in the present section I will show the affinity between Shelley’s clouds and the cloudy place in Benjamin’s childhood writings that Hamacher’s describes in his reading of *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*. However, I would like to begin not with *Wolke*, but with another of Benjamin’s words that, in Hamacher’s phrase, ‘designate[s] its intention towards “language”:’ the lamp (‘The Word *Wolke*’, p. 147). In ‘Über Sprache’ Benjamin writes that:

> Die Sprache teilt das sprachliche Wesen der Dinge mit. Dessen klarste Erscheinung ist aber die Sprache selbst. Die Antwort auf die Frage: was teilt die Sprache mit? lautet also: *Jede Sprache teilt sich selbst mit.* Die Sprache dieser Lampe z. B. teilt nicht die Lampe mit (denn das geistige Wesen der Lampe, sofern es *mitteilbar* ist, ist durchaus nicht die Lampe selbst), sondern: die Sprach-Lampe, die Lampe in der Mitte lung, die Lampe im Ausdruck. (GS2, p. 142)

Benjamin’s example of the language lamp may be less illuminating than a real lamp, nonetheless, he chooses ‘Zur Lampe’ [‘The Lamp’] as title for one of the essays in which he began to re-formulate his language theory in the early 1930s. Here the lamp becomes one of the objects that embody *die schmale Merkwelt* governed by the mimetic faculty:

> Und das verschollene Vermögen, ähnlich zu werden, reichte weit hinaus über die schmale Merkwelt, in der wir noch Ähnlichkeit zu sehen im stande sind. [...] Und irre ich mich, wenn ich meine, daß sie sich in mir den Stühlen, Treppenhäusern, Schränken, Stores, ja einer Lampe angebildet haben, wie meine Kinderzeit sie um sich hatte. (‘Zur Lampe,’ GS7, p. 792)

As Benjamin goes on to clarify, the lamp that he remembers from his childhood is the by-then obsolete oil lamp. Unlike the electric lamps of his adulthood, the oil lamp he remembers from childhood could be carried around the house. In Benjamin’s text it also becomes the carrier of his reminiscences of the nineteenth century:

> Hier steht die Lampe fest. Doch sie war tragbar. Und ungleich unsern auf Drähte, Schnüre und Kontakte angewiesenen Beleuchtungsmitteln konnte man mit ihr sich durch die ganze Wohnung hinbewegen, begleitet immer von dem Klorren des Zylinders in der Scheide und der Glocke auf ihrem Blechreif und dieses Scheppern gehört dem dunklen Lied der Brandung an, das in der Mühsal des Jahrhunderts schläft. Wenn ich sie meinen Ohren

---

111 Thomas Schestag has investigated various aspects of Benjamin’s lamps in ‘Lampen,’ in *Übersetzen: Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Christiaan L. Hart Nibbrig (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), pp. 38–79
nähere, höre ich nicht den Lärm von Feldgeschützen oder die Klänge offenbachers Ballmusik... (‘Zur Lampe,’ GS7, pp. 792-3)

When Benjamin holds the lamp to his ear, he hears his childhood echo in it. Echoing the folkloristic notion that one can hear the remembered murmur of the sea if one holds a seashell to one’s ear, Benjamin presents the image of the nineteenth century as an empty shell in which he can hear the murmur of the century’s sounds. Therefore rather than describing the oil-lamp’s light, Benjamin recalls the Klirren des Zylinders that accompanied the child as he carried the lamp through the apartment. Already in the first version of the childhood memoir, Berliner Chronik, Benjamin considers the relation between sound and memory:


(GS6, p. 518) ¹¹²

A Denkbild like ‘Die Mummerehlen’ reflects this suggestion and presents memory as a sonic phenomenon. When Benjamin reuses the just-cited passage from ‘Zur Lampe’ in ‘Die Mummerehlen,’ the lamp has disappeared and only the shell remains. Benjamin tells us that ‘Ich hauste so wie ein Weichtier in der Muschel haust im neunzehnten Jahrhundert, das nun hohl wie eine leere Muschel vor mir liegt. Ich halte sie ans Ohr. Was höre ich? Ich höre nicht den Lärm von Feldgeschützen oder von offenbachers Ballmusik...’ (GS4, p. 261) In both versions what is heard in the shell is by and large the same – but in the shift from lamp to shell, light to sound, Benjamin replaces the lamp that is an emblem in his early theory of language with the shell that is a conventional allegorical emblem of lyric poetry. ¹¹³ This shift is also carried out on the thematic level: whereas Benjamin’s early

¹¹² The passage is repeated in ‘Eine Todesnachricht’ [‘News of a Death’] in the 1932-4 version of the Berliner Kindheit, GS4, pp. 251-2; SW3, pp. 389-90. It is edited out in the 1938 version.

¹¹³ This is not to say that illumination becomes irrelevant. On the contrary, Benjamin uses images of light to theorise the act of remembering – both the individual’s recollections of his past as well as in the collective memory of a society. As I have noted in ‘Flash of similarities’ above, the lightning flash
Language essays are interested in translation, the later ones are more concerned with the poet’s task. The difference can be illustrated with an image from ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers’ where Benjamin describes language as a forest:

Hierin liegt ein vom Dichtwerk durchaus unterscheidender Zug der Übersetzung, weil dessen Intention niemals auf die Sprache als solche, ihre Totalität, geht, sondern allein unmittelbar auf bestimmte sprachliche Gehaltszusammenhänge. Die Übersetzung aber sieht sich nicht wie die Dichtung gleichsam im innern Bergwald der Sprache selbst, sondern außerhalb desselben, ihm gegenüber und ohne ihn zu betreten ruft sie das Original hinein, an demjenigen einzig Orte hinein, wo jeweils das Echo in der eigenen den Widerhall eines Werkes der fremden Sprache zu geben vermag. Ihre Intention geht nicht allein auf etwas anderes als die der Dichtung, nämlich auf eine Sprache im ganzen von einem einzelnen Kunstwerk in einer fremden aus, sondern sie ist auch selbst eine andere: die des Dichters ist naive, erste, anschauliche, die des Übersetzers abgeleitete, letzte, ideenhafte Intention. (GS4, p. 16)

The poet stands in the centre of the language forest and his intention is directed ‘auf bestimmte sprachliche Gehaltszusammenhänge,’ ‘specific linguistic contextual aspects.’ The translator, on contrast, stands at its edge and his intention is directed at ‘eine Sprache im ganzen,’ ‘a language as a whole,’ as it is configured in a foreign language work of art. As I have argued, the translator’s task is to reveal the supplementary relations between languages that, taken together, constitute pure language. The mimetic essays of the early 1930s trespass on the bounds of this dichotomy: they form an attempt to discover an intention towards language from within the ‘bestimmte sprachliche Gehaltszusammenhänge’ manifested in individual words. To keep within the terms of Benjamin’s forest metaphor: rather than calling into the forest of a foreign language to locate where it gives back an echo in one’s own, Benjamin calls into the language of his childhood to record its echoes.

31. **Muhme Rehlen, Mummerreelen, Mißverstehen.**

Benjamin’s revises the passage where he speaks about the past echoing within a shell at least twice: the ‘Zur Lampe’ (undated) becomes the 1934 ‘Die Mummerreelen’ and is again revised in 1937. Throughout the text’s revisions Benjamin distinguishes the audible Mummerreelen from the nursery rhyme character Muhme Rehlen through which Benjamin first encounters it. ‘In einem alten Kinderverse kommt die Muhme Rehlen vor. Weil mir nun »Muhme« nichts sagte, wurde dies Geschöpf für mich zu einem Geist: der Mummerreelen. Das Mißverstehen verstellte mir die Welt. Jedoch auf gute Art; es wies die

---

occupies a prominent position in his theorisation of the mimetic faculty, as well as of the dialectical image. Eduardo Cadava emphasises the photographic element of the dialectical image in ‘Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History, *Diacritics*, 22 (1992), 84–114.
Wege, die in ihr Inneres führten.’ (GS4, pp. 260-1) *Mummerehlen* is a *Mißverstehen*, a distorted sonic impression that leads into the interior – an metaphor that recalls the poet’s position at the interior of the language forest. Benjamin places the entire *entstellte*, disfigured, world of childhood in the interior of language: ‘Das Verschen ist entstellt; doch hat die ganze entstellte Welt der Kindheit darin Platz.’ (GS4, p. 262) However, while ‘Die Mummerehlen’ is littered with things from the world of Benjamin’s childhood, the actual act of reminiscence is not carried out among these things, but among their sounds. Benjamin seeks to recall the ability to disfigure words the way in which the child disfigures *Muhme Rehlen* into *Mummerehlen* – and this ability is precisely what is lost among Benjamin’s recollections. ‘Die Muhme Rehlen, die einst in ihm saß, war schon verschollen als ich es zuerst gesagt bekam. Die Mummerehlen aber war noch schwerer aufzuspüren.’ (GS4, p. 262) *Muhme Rehlen* as nursery-rhyme character fades from view, or rather echoes out, she ‘war schon verschollen,’ as soon as the child ‘es [das Verschen] zuerst gesagt bekam.’ (GS4, p. 262). Instead, Benjamin is interested in her audible counterpart, the *Mummerehlen* which only exists as a distorted sound, a *Mißverstehen*. This is a figure that cannot be visualised any more than Shelley’s ‘referentially meaningless’ Shape all light. Here too the impossibility of visualising the central figure shifts attention towards the sonic dimension of language; Benjamin does not simply describe the sounds he remembers, but reproduces them by means of his word choices. Just like poetry evokes its content in the rhythm of the line, so Benjamin’s prose prosodically echoes its subject matter. What is heard in the shell of the nineteenth century is the following:

> Ich höre nicht den Lärm von Feldgeschützen oder von Offenbachscher Ballmusik, auch nicht das Heulen der Fabriksirenen oder das Geschrei, das mittags durch die Börsensäle gellt, nicht einmal Pferdetrappeln auf dem Pflaster oder die Marschmusik der Wachtparade. Nein, was ich höre, ist das kurze Rasseln des Anthrazits, der aus dem Blechbehälter in einen Eisenofen niederfällt, es ist der dumpfe *Knall*, mit dem die Flamme des Gasstrumpfes sich entzündet, und das *Klirren* der *Lampenglocke* auf dem Messingreifen, wenn auf der Straße ein Gefährt vorbeikommt. Noch andere Geräusche, wie das Scheppern des *Schlüsselkorbs*, die beiden *Klingeln* an der Vorder- und der Hintertreppe; endlich ist auch ein *kleiner* Kindervers dabei. »Ich will dir was erzählen von der Mummerehlen.« (GS4, p. 262)¹¹⁴

The sounds that Benjamin presents eschew the great stage of city life in favour of the sounds of a household – sounds like those that the *déjà vu*-passage called ‘ein Wort, ein Klopfen oder Rauschen, welchem die magische Gewalt verliehen ist, mit einem Male uns in die kühle Gruft des Einst zu bannen.’ (GS6, p. 518) The words that Benjamin chooses

---

¹¹⁴ I have placed emphasis on the words that stand in a sonic relation to one another.
reinforce the sounds depicted in his narrative. Hamacher names this the ‘tonal world’ of Benjamin's childhood writings – a world that emerges in ‘the clap and clatter of the lamp clock, in the tattle of the lock cord, in the kling and the clipped children’s verse and finally in the slack and flaking of the small glass sphere: Knall, Khrren, Lampenglocke, Schlüsselkorb, Klängeln, kleinen, Lockeren, Flockigen, kleinen Glaskugeln.’ (p. 164) Robert G. Ryder has further added to Hamacher's list of phonetic correspondences in this passage:

...the "z" of kurz and the "ra-" of Rasseln are echoed in the German pronunciation for the word, Anthrazits. ... the syllables that reverberate between “der dumpf Knall” and “die Flamme des Gasstrumpfs” ... the phrase “das Klrren der Lampenglocke” ... the alliteration of “das Scheppern des Schlüsselkorbs” ... the last two syllables of the words, 'er-zählen' and 'Mummer-ehlen'.

This web of consonance can also be described with the term ‘sound values’ that Neely McLane employs to describe similar effects in Shelley’s ‘The Cloud.’ Which is to say that ‘Die Mummerehlen’ is an example of measured language, even if it is not cast in verse. The process of reproducing echoes of long-lost sounds by means of linguistic sound values accompanies the thematised attempt to capture die Mummerehlen, the creature that is nothing more than a disfigured sound. Benjamin’s mimetic search for her is a form of translation of the silence of memory into the sounds of language. A translation, moreover, performed by the very sounds in which the sentence is housed. The remembering author will not find die Mummerehlen among the objects remembered from his childhood, but he will present her to his readers by means of his language. Benjamin rounds off his description of die Mummerehlen by concluding that she was ‘das Stumme, Lockere, Flockige, das gleich dem Schneegestöber in den kleinen Glaskugeln sich im Kern der Dinge wölkt’ (GS4, p. 262; my emphasis). Mummerehlen wölkt, clouds, and thereby continually eludes Benjamin’s search for her. And it is when he picks up the clouding associated with die Mummerehlen that Hamacher calls her a ‘figure of defiguration,’ a figure that is, akin to Shelley’s Shape all light. Hamacher notes that Benjamin sought for die Mummerehlen ‘under clouds or waves:’

But clouds or waves here, as everywhere else, of language. Like so many other words that are closely related in Benjamin's texts – like Marmarameer and Marmelade, like Murmelspiel and Marmorbelag – Mummerehlen is a figure of murmuring, of inarticulate and mummed speech, a figure of defiguration, and so it can never be grasped in an entirely determined place and never in a completely determined sense. (p. 163)

115 'Walter Benjamin’s Shell-Shock,' New Review of Film and Television Studies, 5 (2007), 135–155 (p. 149); further references in text.
**Mummerehlen** gains shape in language alone and therefore has a closer resemblance to similarly sounding words like *Marmarameer, Marmelade,* and *Murmelspiel* than to the character in the nursery rhyme. *Mummerehlen* only exists as a figure of sound at the same time as it denotes language as medium and, as a sonic figure for language, *Mummerehlen* calls attention to how language sounds. It is, after all, the *Verstellung* of *Muhme Rehlen* into *Mummerehlen,* later repeated in that of *Kupferstich* into *Kopf-verstich,* that teaches the child Benjamin the *Entstellung* of words and thereby leads him into the interior of the world. Thus, *Mummerehlen* suspends the boundary between sound and signification much like Shelley’s ‘compelling rhyme schemes’ do according to de Man’s reading (p. 114). Since de Man sees signification as arbitrarily connected to sound, he worries that these rhyme schemes trample the poem’s semantic content. Benjamin, on contrast, asserts that there are no mere signs, which also means that there are no mere sonic signs. Ryder puts it well when he concludes that the words that make up *Die Mummerellen* are ‘chosen by Benjamin not for the sound they mean but for the very sound the word is:’ (p. 149) In a translation that however unintentionally supplements the nonsensuous similarities between Shelley’s and Benjamin’s figures of language, Ryder develops Hamacher’s reading of *Die Mummerehlen*’s sonic relations by adding the *Muschel,* shell, to the *Denkbild*’s stream of murmured sounds. With reference to Hamacher’s reading of Mummerehlen as a ‘figure of murmuring, of inarticulate and mummmed speech’ Ryder notes that murmuring, in German, is *muscheln,* a verb related to *Muschel,* shell (p. 146), making it doubly appropriate that the sounds emerging from the shell that the child Benjamin holds to his ear are murmured and mummmed:

> While Hamacher refers specifically to neither the conch shell nor the word ‘Muschel’ (shell), the word connotes an act of murmuring and inarticulation, and even means a murmuring thing: the resounding shell. [...] Textually, the *Muschel* is a kind of object in which the word ‘Muschel’ enters, but as disassembled from its object. In this way, the word ‘Muschel’ is not a *Muskehl.* Put another way, the word ‘Muschel’ is the very exteriority of the shell, a kind of shell of the shell, which is itself nothing but an empty house or mere exterior. (p. 147)

The acoustic distortion that resonates in the murmuring of a shell is precisely that which teaches Benjamin the art of disfiguration as a disguise in words. *Mummerehlen* will not be found no matter how intensely the child may search for her. She cannot be found because she is nothing but an acoustic mistake, itself echoed in the German word for mistake: *Mißverstehen.* But however inarticulate or misunderstood, Benjamin’s *Mummerehlen* is an

---

116 Ryder insists on translating *Muschel* as a ‘conch shell’ since his main concern is to develop a notion of an acoustical unconscious that complements Benjamin’s theory of the optical unconscious in the *Kunstwerk*-essay. Or ‘un-conch-ious’ as Ryder puts it in another example of a non-sensuous similarity that only emerges in translation (p. 144).
instance of deliberately measured language: *mummeln, muscheln, mummen*: to mumble, to murmur, to disguise.

32. The mimetic imperative.

Benjamin’s *Mummerehlen* illustrates what he describes as ‘des ehemals gewaltigen Zwangs, Ähnlich zu werden und sich zu verhalten.’ This compulsion is at the heart of Benjamin’s later theory of language, and a variation on this sentence is repeated in all of its formulations: ‘Zur Lampe’ GS7, p. 792, SW2, p. 691; ‘Lehre vom Ähnlichen: Zusatz’ GS2, p. 210, SW2, p. 698; ‘Über das mimetische Vermögen,’ GS2, p. 210, SW2, p. 720; ‘Die Mummerehlen’ [1934] GS4, p. 261, SW3, pp. 390-1; ‘Die Mummerehlen’ [1938] GS7, p. 417, SW3, p. 374. It is this compulsion that Hamacher turns into an imperative:

The compulsion, the imperative: to become like and to correspond to the conventions of language and behavior; this imperative appears as itself disassembled. It cannot be fulfilled, answered, and, above all, understood, because only its disfiguration, its lapsus and its promise, its *Versprechen* – never, of course, a contradiction – leads into the interior of this imperative of mimesis. In order to correspond to the imperative of correspondence, I myself must turn into a lapsus, a promise. (The Word *Wolke,* p. 162)

The coda to Hamacher’s somewhat esoteric collocation of terms: disfiguration, lapsus, promise, and *Versprechen* at the interior of the mimetic imperative, is found in Hamacher’s reading of de Man in ‘LECTIO: de Man’s Imperative.’ There Hamacher writes that the ‘imperative of language, of reading, considered as an act directed toward the future, contains the promise of a future language.’ (‘LECTIO,’ p. 217) To begin with, then, the linguistic imperative is performative, it promises a future language in which what is said in the present will be fully understood. In de Man’s reading of ‘The Triumph of Life’ the performative power of language is represented by the Sun of the poem’s opening lines:

Swift as a spirit hastening to his task  
Of glory and of good, the Sun sprang forth  
Rejoicing in his splendour (ll. 1-3)

De Man notes how abrupt this ‘springing forth’ is compared to the more gradual experience of dawn and suggests that this violence figuratively represents the constitution of language: or put more precisely, the constitution of the poem’s language which over the course of the poem will become a figure of language as such (pp. 116-7). This metaphor is carried over into the poem’s later figurations of light and the Shape all light is a figure for the very medium – poetic language – in which the shape itself is figured. In an expansion of this reading, Hamacher argues that ‘the first meaning we connect with the arbitrary acts of an absolutely positing language is the constitution of meaningful language itself.’
(‘LECTIO,’ p. 213) However, if the imperative pertains to the constitution of language it must come before language, but since the imperative is expressed in language it must come after the constitution of language:

And since no imperative, least of all the categorical imperative that (one) language has to be, can come out without the metaleptical suggestion that there is an already constituted language, every imperative is an epistemological parapraxis. The “ground” of language, of understanding, of literary scholarship is – a lapsus. (‘LECTIO,’ p. 219)

Each positing of a language of communication already presupposes a language in which it is communicated. The citation from ‘Shelley Disfigured’ that Hamacher singles out for its radicality is telling: ‘language posits and language means (since it articulates) but language cannot posit meaning; it can only reiterate (or reflect) it in its reconfirmed falsehood.’ (Shelley Disfigured,’ pp. 117-8; cited in ‘LECTIO,’ p. 213) This aporia captures the suspension between positing the constitution of a language and the already constituted language that such a positing requires. Without a constituted language, the positing cannot make sense. Without a positing, language cannot be constituted. The interference of one through the other is a minimal necessary condition much like the cloud, i.e. the reflection of light in water, is the minimal necessary condition for shape. In a word borrowed from Shelley’s poem, de Man calls this figurative constitution of language an *imposition*. (p. 117) This imposition is countered by disfiguration, which de-posit this initial positing. And, given that language inevitably disfigures its own positions, its promise of future understanding will be broken – language will never open onto full, transparent understanding. ‘Die Sprache verspricht (sich)’ as de Man puts it in a wordplay that Hamacher cites: language promises (*die Sprache verspricht*) and exposes itself (*verspricht sich*). Paradoxically, this contradiction does not undermine, but rather reinforces the power of the imperative to read. Operating along the lines of Derrida’s logic of the supplement, the promise of understanding reveals that we do not understand. The imperative to read is a demand for understanding and, simultaneously, a demand that the

117 de Man reads this imposition as ‘the emphatic mode of positing’ although reading the passage where it is taken from presents a temporal succession that seems to undermine his point about the ‘violent “springing forth” of a sun detached from all antecedents’ (p. 116):

And in succession due, did Continent,

Isle, Ocean, and all things that in them wear
The form and character of mortal mould
Rise as the Sun their father rose, to bear

Their portion of the toil which he of old
Took as his own and then imposed on them (ll. 15-20)

Not only is the awakening of nature successive, the task imposed by the Sun was imposed ‘of old’ which points to a notion of tradition and inheritance incompatible with the interruptive violence that de Man insists on in his reading (esp. pp. 116-8).
necessary conditions to meet this demand be met, namely, that there be a language in which to understand: 'The imperative commands, before all "real" language, that there ought to be (one) language – (one) meaning, (one) interpretation.' ('LECTIO,' p. 214) But this demand is impossible to meet and, consequently, the imperative command is a parataxis, a lapsus, a Fall; it posits the foundation of language in the language that it finds and by its very existence testifies to language not being one but at least two: positing and posited. This self-suspending interchange of forces is captured in Hamacher’s coinage of the word ‘afformative’ to describe a 'condition of formation and as de-formation, as a pure positing and as a depositing, ex-position – as affirmative in every possible sense of the neologism.' (LECTIO,’ p. 218, n. 18) The affirmative force is that power of language which, in one stroke, imposes and suspends its meaning: figure and its simultaneous disfiguration. Thus we can return to the key terms of the Hamacher citation that opened this section:

The compulsion, the imperative: to become like and to correspond to the conventions of language and behavior; this imperative appears as itself disassembled. It cannot be fulfilled, answered, and, above all, understood, because only its disfiguration, its lapsus and its promise, its Versprechen – never, of course, a contradiction – leads into the interior of this imperative of mimesis. In order to correspond to the imperative of correspondence, I myself must turn into a lapsus, a promise. (The Word Wolke,' p. 162)

Hamacher rewrites Benjamin’s derivation of language from ‘des ehemals gewaltigen Zwangs, Ähnlich zu werden und sich zu verhalten’ (GS4, p. 261) as a mimetic imperative to correspond to language. But since language is a promise that verspricht sich, an afformation that forms and deforms, an imposition that posits and deposits, that is, since language is a lapsus, the mimetic imperative is the imperative to enter the interior of this lapsus – to fall into the abyss of language. In his commendation of Hölderlin’s Sophocles, Benjamin states that the ideal translator falls ‘von Abgrund zu Abgrund, bis er droht in Bodenlosen Sprachtiefen sich zu verlieren.’ (GS4, p. 21) His own poetic experiments, in which he attempts to reconstruct the language of his childhood, appear to be subject to the same vertiginous ideal.

---

118 This further adds to the significance of the word Wolke not being one.
119 ‘The concept of ‘afformative’ is developed in Hamacher’s essay on Benjamin’s Zur Kritik der Gewalt: ‘Affermative, Strike.’ I will return to it in my reading of this essay below.
Strange distortion

33. Prosopopoeia.

I have unpacked de Man’s reading of the Shape all light as a figure of disfiguration and how Hamacher develops de Man’s model in his formulation of the concept of ‘afformation.’ While de Man speaks about how language disfigures its own positions, Hamacher emphasises the double movement whereby constitution and de-constitution of figures exist in a state of mutual suspension. But if disfiguration and afforman are two words that denote a passage between form and formlessness, I have so far completely passed over the simple meaning of disfiguration. The Oxford English Dictionary refers us to the entry for disfigurement, which it in turn defines as ‘The action of disfiguring; the fact or condition of being disfigured; defacement, deformity.’ In other words, disfiguration is a physiognomic word: it describes a body out of joint. And it is this meaning of the word that I will explore in the present section as I focus on the human figures in Shelley’s ‘The Triumph of Life’ and Benjamin’s Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert.

‘The Triumph of Life’ opens at dawn when its narrator falls into a trance which is cast over his mind like a glimmering veil. The appearance of the veil – a self-reflective image of the poem we are about to read – brings the proem to a close with the words ‘And then a Vision on my brain was rolled . . .’ (l. 40). The poem proper begins with the promise to share this glimmering vision with the reader: ‘As in that trance of wondrous thought I lay | This was the tenour of my waking dream’ (ll. 41-2). However, as the poem unfolds vision gives way to vision without the narrator being able to comprehend to which end it all tends. The narrator’s incomprehension is further underlined by the fact that the content of the various visions is by and large the same: they all feature the triumphal procession of Life. ‘Methought I sate beside a public way | Thick strewn with summer dust, and a great stream | Of people there was hurry ing to and fro,’ (ll. 43-5) the narrator begins the first of many descriptions of this crowd and in a sense, these words exhaust the poem’s subject matter. Yet even as the poem repeatedly described a vision of a crowd gathered around the triumphal procession of Life, none of its many descriptions seems adequate to the descriptive task: the triumphal procession of Life keeps eluding the narrator’s words. Thus the initial promise of presenting the ‘tenour’ of this dream is continually suspended – the first such suspension of the narrative comes as the narrator is interrupted in his musings by an unexpected voice:

Half to myself I said, “And what is this?
Whose shape is that within the car? & why?” –
I would have added – “is all here amiss?”

But a voice answered.. “Life”.. I turned and knew

(O Heaven have mercy on such wretchedness!)

That what I thought was an old root which grew

To strange distortion out of the hill side

Was indeed one of that deluded crew,

And that the grass which methought hung so wide

And white, was but his thin discoloured hair,

And that the holes it vainly sought to hide

Were or had been eyes. (ll. 177-88)

Only when the narrator’s musing on the scene in front of him, ‘And what is this?,’ is met with the unsolicited reply ‘Life,’ does he realise that what he thought to be an old root growing out of the wayside is in fact a face, and soon we will learn that this face belongs to the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Since his face is a state of ‘strange distortion’ it is only his voice, that is, his ability to articulate sound, that guarantees Rousseau’s humanity. It is in de Man’s reading of this initial encounter between the narrator and Rousseau that the process of disfiguration begins. Citing this passage at the outset of ‘Shelley Disfigured,’ de Man comments: ‘The erasure or effacement is indeed the loss of a face, in French figure. Rousseau no longer, or hardly [...] has a face. [...] he is disfigured, défuiré, defaced. [...] to be disfigured means primarily the loss of the eyes, turned to "stony orbs" or to empty holes.’ (p. 100) But however closely de Man’s description of Rousseau’s disfigured face follows the scene of encounter, it also echoes his essay on Wordsworth’s Essay on Epitaphs, ‘Autobiography as De-Facement,’ published just before ‘Shelley Disfigured’ in The Rhetoric of Romanticism. ‘Voice assumes mouth, eye, and finally face,’ de Man writes in that work, and this is also what happens in the narrator’s encounter with Rousseau. While ‘Autobiography as De-Facement,’ has a different focus, its suggestion that face-giving begins with ‘the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply and confers upon it the power of speech’ applies to Shelley’s scene as well (pp. 75-6). In both the essay on Wordsworth and the one on Shelley, the work of disfiguration begins with a voice that has the power to confer a face, a power that de Man links to the rhetorical trope of prosopopoeia:

Voice assumes mouth, eye, and finally face, a chain that is manifest in the etymology of the trope’s name, prosopon poien, to confer a mask of a face (prosopon). Prosopopeia [sic] is the

---

trope of autobiography, by which one’s name [...] is made as intelligible and memorable as a face. Our topic deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, figure, figuration and disfiguration. (‘Autobiography,’ p. 76)

Thus disfiguration is not merely the self-reflective tearing apart or trampling of poetic figures, it is also linked to how language conjures up images of faces when it describes people, paradigmatically in autobiographical texts that give face to the person writing them – as for instance in Benjamin’s miniature self-portraits in Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert. De Man’s reading of autobiography as disfiguration begins by positing that the genre has a referential relation to reality. ‘Autobiography seems to depend on actual and potentially verifiable events in a less ambivalent way than fiction does. It seems to belong to a simpler mode of referentiality, of representation, and of diegesis.’ (‘Autobiography,’ p. 68) Being ‘less ambivalent’ than fiction, an autobiographical story unfolds in accordance with events that have taken place in the world, and not in accordance with the figurative play of language. However, de Man has barely made this claim before he unsettles it. As a literary genre, autobiography cannot escape the vagaries of figuration and de Man begins to wonder whether ‘the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture, and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium?’ (‘Autobiography,’ p. 69) The technical demands of the medium are the figurative demands of writing – the need to tell a story. Although the word ‘I’ in an autobiographical text supposedly refers to a living person rather than to a fictional narrator, there is no guarantee that the person described in an autobiographical text is not a fictional persona, and that the facts about a life recounted therein are not in fact invented; a point that I will illustrate by yet again turning to ‘Die Mummerehlen.’

34. In the photographer’s studio.

Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert is not merely an autobiographical text, it at the same time stakes a claim at writing the autobiography of Benjamin’s generation: the metropolitan childhood it evokes is staged in explicit opposition to the generic markers of a countryside childhood. ‘Man weiß, daß Proust nicht ein Leben wie es gewesen ist in seinem Werke beschrieben hat, sondern ein Leben, so wie der, der’s erlebt hat, dieses Leben erinnert,’ Benjamin writes in his essay on Marcel Proust (‘Zum Bilde Prousts,’ GS2, p. 311). The sentence can be adapted to Benjamin’s own work: he does not describe his childhood the way it really was but as it is remembered by an adult. But it also undermines the referential status of autobiographical writing. There is no guarantee that the way something is remembered is an accurate reflection of what actually took place. The self-portrait that Benjamin offers in ‘Die Mummerehlen’ offers a striking example of the gap
between historical document and autobiographical writing. The portrait in question is an ekphrastic description of a photograph of Benjamin as a child, which first appears in a text predating the childhood writings and also, as a magazine article, generically distinct from them, the 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie' published in the September/October 1931 issue of *Die Literarische Welt*. The image re-appears in 'Zur Lampe',121 'Die Mummerehlen’ of the first version of *Berliner Kindheit* (1932-4), and in Benjamin's essay on Franz Kafka (1934) – which is to say that it migrates between the genres of newspaper reportage, autobiography, theoretical speculation and a literary critical essay on an author that Benjamin saw as one of his greatest contemporaries. But it is also a prosopopoeic text: Benjamin describes this photograph in order to gives face to a young boy who is intended as a representative of a certain kind of historical experience. In the 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie' it appears in a section when Benjamin is commenting on nineteenth century photographic albums:

An den frostigsten Stellen der Wohnung, auf Konsolen oder Gueridons im Besuchszimmer, fanden sie sich am liebsten: Lederschwarten mit abstößenden Metallbeschlägen und den fingerdicken goldumrandeten Blättern, auf denen nährisch drapierte oder verschnürte Figuren – Onkel Alex und Tante Riekchen, Trudchen wie sie noch klein war, Papa im ersten Semester – verteilt waren und endlich, um die Schande voll zu machen, wir selbst: als Salontiroler, jodelnd, den Hut gegen gepinselte Firnen schwingend, oder als adretter Matrose, Standbein und Spielbein, wie es sich gehört, gegen einen polierten Pfosten gelehnt. (GS2, p. 375)122

The 'wir selbst' refers to no one but Benjamin himself and the picture where he appears as a Salontiroler is still in existence [Figure 1]. The child is dressed up and surrounded by the props of a photographer’s studio: the artificial and out-of-place landscapes that are supposed to give an air of reality to the studio but rather serve to suck all life out of it. After a brief excursus into the history of photographic studios and their paraphernalia, Benjamin presents us with another image of a child, this time the young Kafka [Figure 2]:

121 Several of the ideas in 'Zur Lampe' were later reworked into the mimetic essays of 1933 while two of its central thought-images entered 'Die Mummerehlen:’ the shell in which the nineteenth century is housed (discussed above), and this depiction of a child photograph.
122 In this and the following series of quotes I have added emphases to show where the descriptions overlap.

The comical picture of Benjamin as Salontiroler is contrasted with and surpassed by the sadness of the picture of Kafka. In the next appearance of the photographic ekphrasis, in the undated theoretical experiment ‘Zur Lampe’ and the autobiographical ‘Die Mummerehlen’ there is no longer any reference to Kafka. However, in these two miniature self-portraits Benjamin reproduces both the Wintergartenlandschaft in which the photograph of Kafka is taken as well as the little boy's clothing and the large hat that he holds in his hand:


The first portrait of der kleine Älpler matches the Salontiroler we met in the ‘Kleine Geschichte der Photographie.’ Benjamin also reproduces the ‘Kleine Geschichte’s contrast between Benjamin’s ‘we’ in describing the boy masquerading as an Alpine climber (in fact,
Benjamin himself) and the image of a solitary boy. However, when we come to this second portrait, which in the ‘Kleine Geschichte’ was named as an ekphrasis on a photograph of Kafka as a child, we are faced with Benjamin again: ‘Ich stehe barhaupt da,’ Benjamin says as he describes the boy who stands there, bareheaded, with his sad face shaded by the potted palms and holding a big straw hat in his hand. The jacket laden with marine emblems that Benjamin claims to have worn matches the one that Kafka wears on the photograph, as well as the dress of the mother, who appears for the first time in this version. In his rewriting of the passage, Benjamin himself takes the place of the young Kafka and even adds that the *kleine Älpler* who Benjamin himself is, ‘betrifft uns nicht mehr,’ ‘no longer concerns us.’ (GS7, p. 794; SW2, p. 693) Instead, the image of Kafka’s gaze sinks into Benjamin’s first person plural: ‘Anders jener Blick, der aus dem ernsten Antlitz [...] sich in uns senkt.’ ‘How differently that gaze, that comes out of the earnest face [...] sinks itself into us.’ (GS7, p. 794; my translation, cf. SW2, p. 693) Benjamin does not simply appropriate the photograph of Kafka as an image of himself; he gradually superimposes his autobiographical self-portrait over the image of the author. When the passage appears in ‘Die Mummerehlen,’ the Alpinist completely recedes from the centre of attention and the sad boy moves further to the fore, accompanied by the studio setting outlined in ‘Kleine Geschichte der Photographie.’123 In the earlier article, Benjamin wrote that the photograph of Kafka is taken in one of ‘jene Ateliers mit ihren Draperien und Palmen, Gobelins und Staffeleien [...], die so zweideutig zwischen Exekution und Repräsentation, Folterkammer und Thronsaal schwankten’ – here the word *Thronsaal* is replaced with *Boudoir*, but the atelier appears to be the same:


---

123 The changes that the passage undergoes in its three revisions suggests that ‘Zur Lampe’ is written before ‘Die Mummerehlen.’ The editors do not provide a date of composition beyond suggesting that it is written towards the end of Benjamin’s first period of work on the *Berliner Kindheit*, thus around 1933. It is also worth noting that this partially plagiaristic photographic ekphrasis is edited out of the revised version of ‘Die Mummerehlen.’
The garment that ‘Zur Lampe’ describes as a jacket ‘in dessen Latz Embleme der Marine eingestickt sind,’ is in ‘Die Mummemerehlen’ described as a ‘mit Posamenten überladen Samtanzug’ echoing the description of Kafka’s jacket as a ‘mit Posamenten überladenen Kinderanzug’ in ‘Kleine Geschichte der Photographie.’ The Gemsbarthütlein that the Alpinist holds in his right hand is matched by a that held in the sad child’s left. But in ‘Die Mummemerehlen’ this hat is no longer simply a large straw hat, as in ‘Zur Lampe,’ but more specifically a sombrero, that is to say, ‘ein unmäßig großen Hut mit breiter Krempe, wie ihn Spanier haben,’ like the one in Kafka’s hand in ‘Kleine Geschichte der Photographie.’

Even though there is a walking stick in the Alpine photograph of Benjamin (however, no hat apart from the one worn by his brother Georg), Benjamin only introduces a walking stick into the picture here, with its end poking a ‘Büschel von Pleureusen’ only present in the photograph of Kafka. Moreover, the mother standing in the background is described as petrified, ‘Ganz abseits [...] stand die Mutter starr,’ in an strange adaptation of the petrified palm leaves in the Kafka passage of ‘Kleine Geschichte’ where we find ‘Palmenwendel starren im Hintergrund.’ In short, Benjamin’s ekphrastic description of a photograph that he claims to be of himself in fact describes a photograph of Kafka. The scene, with its palm trees, the big Spanish hat, the flowers, the winter garden, the fashionable childrens’ suit laden with maritime ornaments, all come together in superimposing Benjamin’s face onto Kafka’s. While it is possible that there was a picture of Benjamin that matches the ekphrasis in ‘Die Mummemerehlen,’ it is more likely that this is an example of the Entstellung in which the child, who is ‘umstellt von Leinwandschirmen, Polstern, Sockeln’ (‘Die Mummemerehlen,’ GS4, p. 261; my emphasis) engages. After all, the passage opens by noting the child Benjamin’s mimetic ability to be like all things except himself:


Even in this ekphrastic, autobiographical portrait of himself Benjamin refuses to be like himself and presents Kafka’s likeness as his own. While others have noted the similarity between the two portraits, I have not come across anyone who comments on the fact that
Benjamin converts Kafka’s face into his own. Brüggeman, for instance, emphasises the interchangeableness of such photographs and contrasts it to the individuality they are supposed to portray. He concludes that the picture ‘stellt den puren Zwang zur Entstellung dar, den Zwang zur Selbstverstellung ohne Selbst, der seine präfabrizierte Kostümperson, sein phantasmatisches Mode-Ich, als sein eigenes Bild betrachten soll.’ (pp. 85-6) However, he does not comment on the fact that Benjamin presents Kafka’s image in lieu of an image of himself. Sven Kramer also notes the similarity between the two images, but seems to assume that there is a matching image of Benjamin in a sailor’s costume and that Benjamin is playing with the resemblances between a photograph of himself and one of Kafka:

Im Grunde geht es nicht um ein Kinderbild, wie im Zwischentitel nahegelegt wird, sondern um zwei. Wird allerdings ‘ein’ nicht als Ziffer, sondern als unbestimmter Artikel gelesen, so ist Ambiguität in ihm schon angelegt, weil dadurch, daß nicht gesagt werden kann, um welches Bild es sich mit Bestimmtheit handelt, die Existenz mehrerer zugestanden ist, also auch die Möglichkeit, daß sich mehrere auf den Titel beziehen lassen. [...] Das Aufblitzen einer Ähnlichkeit der beiden Kinderbilder dürfte ein Motiv für die Beschreibung gerade dieses Bildes abgegeben haben. [...] Durch es hindurch scheint das objektiv Ähnliche auf, das in den Fotoateliers des 19. Jahrhunderts waltete.124

Like Brüggeman, Kramer suggests that Benjamin is making a point on stereotypical studio portraits and even if he does not reproduce a photograph of Benjamin that corresponds to the description, the ekphrasis on a child photograph is representative of any bourgeois reader who was young around 1900 and had to go through the ordeal of being dragged to the photographer’s studio. It is thus not only an image of Benjamin or of Kafka, but an image for Benjamin’s metropolitan generation.

35. Tit for tat.

When Benjamin comes to write the 1934 essay on Kafka, the ekphrastic description is returned to its rightful owner – but not without having gained resonance in its passage through Benjamin’s childhood writings. The image, opening the section called ‘Ein Kinderbild,’ ['A Childhood Photograph'] is essentially the same as the portrait presented in ‘Kleine Geschichte der Photographie’ – only a little bit entstellt:


In the earlier version, the child was dominating the landscape with his sad gaze. Here Benjamin further emphasises that the child is listening for sounds. Kafka’s big ear, visible in the photograph, gives Benjamin an occasion to use the word Muschel, ‘auricle’ as Harry Zohn translates it, but also a homophone of the shell of the nineteenth century that the child Benjamin listened to in ‘Die Mummerehlen.’ The childhood photograph is a picture puzzle: Benjamin says that he cannot resemble himself – and offers a self-portrait in the image of Kafka. At the same time, by choosing the word Muschel he connects this image of Kafka as a young child to the shell that the child Benjamin holds to his own ear in his autobiographical appropriation of Kafka’s photograph. Not only does Benjamin borrow Kafka’s face to give face to himself, he also returns Kafka a face that is Benjamin’s own.

36. Shelley’s remains.

The example from Benjamin's childhood writings shows how giving face is a multi-layered process: while describing a historical document (a photograph) the depiction is at the same time a fictional act. It is this blend of reality and fiction that de Man foregrounds. As I noted in the introduction, by the time we get to the end of ‘Shelley Disfigured’ de Man asserts that not only autobiography, but all literary and historical documents are prosopopoëtic, insofar as they endow the past with a voice that speaks back to us and a face to address. Disfiguring prosopopoëia is no longer restricted to the genre of autobiography – it is at stake in all writing on writing: ‘And to read is to understand, to question, to know, to forget, to erase, to deface, to repeat – that is to say, the endless prosopopoëia by which the dead are made to have a face and a voice which tells the allegory of their demise and allows us to apostrophize them in our turn.’ (‘Shelley Disfigured,’ p. 122) In the figure of prosopopoëia, the language of criticism reflects the language of literature: both serve to give the author a face. In his reading of Shelley ‘after de Man,’ Woodman notes: ‘In “Shelley Disfigured,” de Man becomes the voice of the dead Shelley [...] De Man’s function, as the voice of the dead, is to make present.’ (p. 257) That is, de Man performs the same function vis-à-vis Shelley as Shelley does vis-à-vis Rousseau: he confers a face, a face that is – like Rousseau’s – figured as disfigured. But de Man names his piece ‘Shelley Disfigured’ – it is neither Rousseau, nor language, nor poetic figures, but Shelley himself who ends up, literally, disfigured. Towards the end of ‘Shelley Disfigured,’ de Man squarely places Shelley’s ‘defaced body [...] in the margin of the last manuscript page’ where, he contends, it ‘has become an inseparable part of the poem.’ (p. 120) It is Shelley’s decomposed body – rather than any of his poetic figures – that de Man terms his
Life after Life

last poem’s ‘decisive textual articulation’ because this is what arrests the poem’s self-repetitive series of visions (p. 120). The disfiguration at stake in de Man’s reading of ‘The Triumph of Life’ is therefore ultimately ‘the actual death and subsequent disfigurement of Shelley’s body, burned after his boat capsized and he drowned of the coast of Lerici’ (p. 120). In this closing gesture, de Man turns Shelley’s corpse into the disfigured figure that surpasses all the poem’s rhetorical figures of disfiguration.

37. ‘Then, what is Life?’ I said.

On the last page of Shelley’s manuscript, five lines before its break-off point, the narrator, faced with Rousseau’s ‘new Vision’ of the triumphal procession of Life asks ‘Then, what is Life?’ (l. 544) Mary Shelley, who was the first to publish the poem in Posthumous Poems of 1824, suppressed the lines after it and many editors have followed her lead in letting this question stand as Shelley’s last words. This question itself is the last in a series of questions initiated by that opening ‘And what is this?’ to which Rousseau answers ‘Life’ (l. 177; l. 180). This editorial practice turns Shelley’s drowning into his definitive answer to the questions that he voices within the poem. De Man’s placement of Shelley’s disfigured corpse in the margins of this last page follows Mary Shelley’s editorial insinuation but it also points to the poem’s lack of self-containment: ‘The Triumph of Life’ asks what life is and answers its own question with a vision of a triumphal procession of life. The poem’s irony is that it literally answers the question, it shows life, without answering it – since does not give us the tools to explain what it is that we see. Therefore its questions are not merely questions posed within the text, but, more prominently, questions posed by the text to its reader who is left to interpret the vision which the poem’s character cannot comprehend. These questions thus suspend literature’s suspension of disbelief and invite the reader to offer the answers that the text fails to give. The idea that the questions are central to the poem is not new. Orrin N. C. Wang reminds us that ‘one historically reconstructed “The Triumph of Life” by coming to terms with the unanswered questions left hanging at the end of the fragment. By speculating on how Shelley would have answered that question, one “completed” the poem.’125 It is in his stab at answering the question ‘Then, what is Life?’ that Derrida performs the translation that gives this thesis its name: ‘The Triumph talks about living. But what does it say about it? A great deal, far too many things, but this much at least, in its writing-on-living, it is ... it lives-on.’ (‘Living On,’ pp. 79-80) As I noted in the introduction, the formulation ‘living-on’ – via an additional detour into the French sur-vivre – corresponds to Walter Benjamin’s term afterlife [Fortleben, Nachleben, Überleben] which Benjamin discusses in ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers.’ That is, Derrida’s assertion of the ‘triumph of translation’ is itself a very

particular kind of translation. Opening his piece with the double question: ‘But who is talking about living? In other words on living?’ (p. 75) Derrida comments on the difference introduced into the two seemingly synonymous questions by means of the proposition ‘on’ and its equivalents in translation.

Translating (almost, in other words) the Lating dē, the French de, or the English “of,” “on” immediately comes to contaminate what it translates with meanings that it imports in its turn, those other meanings that rework “living on” or “surviving” (super, hyper, “over,” über, and even “above” and “beyond”). It would be superficial to attribute this contamination to contingency, contiguity, or contagion. At least, chance makes sense here, and that’s what interests me. (p. 76)

On the second page of his piece, Derrida signals his wish to reading sense into the otherwise contingent or non-sensical relations opened up in the translation of the preposition ‘on.’ This is a way of taking the non-sensical seriously that allows him to read Shelley’s ‘The Triumph of Life’ together with Maurice Blanchot’s L’arrêt de mort all the while refusing to posit the definitive relation between them. ‘(This is where my scenario breaks off, unfinished,’ Derrida informs us in brackets:

– it would have related, on the one hand, all the “triumphs of death” of the Italian quattrocento, the ironical or antithetical quotation of a genre by The Triumph of Life, the supposed unfinished quality at the apparent lower edge of a poem by Shelley at the moment when, in greatest proximity to the signature, at the apparent lower edge of the poem, the signatory is drowned, loses his footing, loses sight of the shore, and on the other hand, all the drownings in Blanchot’s stories [...] You may ask what I mean by that: do Blanchot’s stories, his récits, treat, in their own way The Triumph of Life, and even the supposed unfinished quality that separates it from its ending, and even what separates it from its supposed signatory and his drowning? For now, I shall not answer this question, but ask one of my own: What is it to say that the supposed signatory of a piece of writing must answer for it, and answer at every turn the questions of this person or that, telling him “exactly” what the “story” is?) (pp. 82-3)

Derrida’s question corresponds to the questions within Shelley’s poem, which repeatedly asks ‘What is this?’ about the vision that it unfolds. But at the same time, since he is here juxtaposing Shelley’s actual dead body to the figurative dead bodies in Blanchot’s writing, Derrida turns it into a question self-reflectively posed within and to his own critical text: what is this ‘story’ that Derrida is telling, asking us to read Shelley’s dead body alongside literary events that ‘obviously ha[ve] nothing to do with Shelley’s drowning?’ (p. 81) The relation between the two is one of chance, contingency, contiguity, and contagion that makes sense in the movement of words, in which the suspension of death (l’arrêt de mort) becomes a counterpart to Life’s triumph. In other words, only in Derrida’s words can
Shelley's drowning make sense or be made sense of in relation to the many drownings in Blanchot’s work. And it is also in the medium of words that the dead and disfigured Shelley himself lives on in writing on, i.e. in the afterlife of, ‘The Triumph of Life.’

38. Go figure.
Disfiguration is a pun: it refers to the distortion of linguistic figures performed by measure and the physical alteration of facial features – both the poem’s and Shelley’s own faces. However, de Man’s transition from one aspect of disfiguration to the other hinges on the French word for face, figure.126 As Wang points out, ‘de Man uses the French défiguré to turn Rousseau’s loss of face into a sign of linguistic disfigurement.’ (pp. 643-4) This sleight-of-hand translation allows de Man to swiftly move from the image of Rousseau’s disfigured face to the rhetorical figure and from there to its disfiguration – conceived both literally and figuratively. In fact, de Man has to supplement the English ‘face’ with the French figure to link face-giving and rhetorical or literary figuration because, etymologically, the -figur- in disfiguration comes from the Latin translation of the Greek σχῆμα, schema, ‘form, shape’ and is not related to a face.127 To read the significance of de Man’s trajectory from apostrophe to disfiguration in his translation of face into figure and back into figure is to read for non-sensuous similarities in language – looking for correspondences that emerge in the translation, transition, and transformation of the word: figure, figure, face, defaced, défiguré, disfigured. The same can also be said for reading Derrida’s transformation of ‘The Triumph of Life’ into living-on, sur-vivre, überleben. However, the transpositions of face/figure/figure/défiguré/disfigured and living-on/sur-vivre/über-leben also highlight a difference that emerges from Derrida’s and de Man’s readings of Shelley: where de Man makes prosopopoeia, the giving of a voice and a face to authors of the past that allows them to address us in the present the essence of critical labour, Derrida conceptualises our relation to literary history as a translation in which the historical object is transmitted in a way that is neither its life nor its death, but always already its living on.

---

126 Which de Man points out in both the Wordsworth and the Shelley essays, p. 76 and p. 100, respectively. Both passages are cited above.
127 OED; entry for ‘figure’ cf. entries for ‘disfigure,’ ‘defigure,’ ‘disfiguration,’ ‘defiguration,’ and ‘disfiguration.’ This etymology, however, by supplementing ‘-figur-’ and ‘-form-’ in the Greek σχῆμα, links the word disfiguration to Hamacher’s neologism afforation – since both dis- and a- are prefixes that negate, one can say that both a-formation and dis-figuration are a-schematic.
39. A final remark on 'Life.'

I have argued that Rousseau enters the poem by appropriating the narrator's musing, 'And what is this?' as an address to himself and by answering it with the word 'Life' gains a face and identity within the poem. But while it is appropriate that Rousseau comes to life uttering the word 'Life,' the word 'Life' is itself extrapolated by Shelley's editors from a tangle of cancelled lines. Wilson reminds us that '[i]n the editorially established text, “Life” emerges from beneath these multiple deletions only tentatively, between the forensic pincers of quotation marks and a sort of at once amputated and distended ellipses.' (Shelley and the Apprehension of Life, p. 147) Given the state of the manuscript, Wilson rightfully questions the 'decisiveness' of de Man's reading of the passage, the way in which de Man offers 'a critical encapsulation' of the poem even as he expresses 'scepticism regarding the possibility of such a thing.' (p. 147) The same can be said for the decisiveness with which I assure that the word 'Life' gives face to Rousseau, an imposition of order upon the manuscript text that helps me move between de Man's discussion of prosopopoeia and Derrida's discussion of living on. The question that I have to leave unanswered is the extent to which this kind of violence is acceptable in close reading, or whether it is even a question of violence and not merely a consequence of the inevitable distance between a draft manuscript and a printed edition.

Figure 3: Shelley, 'The Triumph of Life,' holograph MS. f27v. BSM 1, pp. 170-1 (detail)

And a voice said Life... 
Life...And life...
And said...
And who is she.
And whose shape is that within the car? & why --

added

I would have said murmured is all here amiss? Leaw! turned & saw

But a voice answered...Life...and then I [kn---saw]...

knew.
Slight adjustments

40. Rousseau.

Having examined physiognomic disfiguration in Shelley and in Benjamin, I will now situate it within the wider historiographical vision of 'The Triumph of Life' and from there look at the connections between disfiguration and history that Benjamin makes in his essay on Kafka. But I begin with the historical marker provided by the proper name Rousseau. By turning Rousseau, the erstwhile radical of Europe, into a strangely distorted root, Shelley evokes the Latin word for root, radix, which is also the root meaning of radical. Wang reads the Rousseau-as-root trope as a parodic image of 'the radical all Europe and England knew' (p. 644). The face that Shelley gives Rousseau – that of an old root – is a picture puzzle that has to be supplemented by its Latin origin to be deciphered. This is a peculiar type of prosopopoeia that gives face and defaces in one stroke – Wang calls it a 'reverse prosopopoeia,' (p. 637) but the ploy is also well captured in Hamacher's concept of afformation as simultaneous figuration and disfiguration. Once the narrator has encountered the strangely distorted Rousseau, his task will mainly be to record what Rousseau says and the bulk of the fragment consists of an autobiographical narration spoken by Rousseau. However, as Edward Duffy notes in his study of Shelley's reading of Rousseau, 'Shelley's Rousseau tells his life Shelley's way, not his own.' That is, while Rousseau's narration is, in the words of O'Neill, a piece of 'self-accusing, self-excusing autobiography' (p. 181; cf. ll. 188-96), the thrust of Shelley's staging of Rousseau is not to accuse or excuse the French philosopher, rather Rousseau's name serves as a marker for a historical moment: the French Revolution. By choosing precisely Rousseau to occupy the place that Virgil has in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Shelley also positions his own poetic persona in relation to what he saw as the greatest event of his age. For Shelley's generation, Rousseau is the thinker most closely associated with the ideals and failures of the French Revolution. The presence of Rousseau links the poem's visions to the status of Romanticism itself: by enjoining the fallen image of Rousseau – defaced origin of Romantic thought – Romanticism is simultaneously implicated as one more broken monument of the Western cultural shrine. Shelley stages Rousseau's autobiographical narrative so that the judgment we pass on it is implicated with the judgment we pass on the historical moment with which Rousseau is associated. The name Rousseau therefore links the

---

129 Forest Pyle, *The Ideology of the Imagination: Subject and Society in the Discourses of Romanticism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 102; further references in text. Pyle's reading draws on the work of Paul de Man as well as Louis Althusser to uncover the politics of the 'positing' power of language. Pyle's further identifies ideology as the misuse of words and signs, which the mind must free itself of – yet at the same time, so Pyle, Shelley does not believe this to be possible.
Triumph’s Chinese box set of visions to history, and he is joined by a long line of named dignitaries – from Plato and Aristotle, to Catherine the Great, Frederick the Great and Bacon, in addition to the more anonymous ‘common men’ (l. 507), such as ‘lawyer, statesman, priest and theorist’ (l. 510). The procession is thus a mixture of the great and the many but what they all share is their disfiguration. Joel Faflak’s reading suggests that these various figures testify to ‘the discontents of civilization. To judge the moral and philosophical value of this corpus, Rousseau’s dream re-figures history’s subjects as cultural types […] a visionary process […] that illuminates within the masque of history, the *arche*-types of its political unconscious.’ So while Rousseau may be chosen to play Virgil to Shelley’s Dante because he is the philosopher who represents the ideals that gave impetus to the French Revolution, at the end of the day, Rousseau is merely one in the throng that makes up European history. ‘I among the multitude | Was swept;’ he narrates, ‘among | “The thickest billows of the living storm | I plunged, and bared my bosom to the clime’ (ll. 460-7). It is by joining the triumphal procession that Rousseau becomes disfigured and ends up a twisted old root. As he himself describes it:

long before the day

“Was old, the joy which waked like Heaven’s glance
The sleepers in the oblivious valley, died,
And some grew weary of the ghastly dance

“And fell, as I have fallen by the way side (ll. 537-41)

Fallen by the wayside is precisely the state in which the narrator encounters Rousseau, but Rousseau’s words also imply that he is not the only root that may turn out to be a person. This image, which now stands at the end of the fragment, also brings it full circle by returning us to the wayside scene where we first encounter the root-like radical. While the choice of Rousseau is specific, the philosopher is at the same time representative of Life’s victims: a twisted root is all that is left when Life is done with the living.

130 Noting that a theorist ‘brings up the rear in a train of shady company’ at the end of Shelley’s triumphal procession of European history, Deborah Esch asks us to consider our own position as readers of the poem in relation to the historical event that it narrates. Rather than being able to pass judgment from a critical distance, we are in fact judging something – European history – of which we are ourselves invested actors. ‘A Defence of Rhetoric / The Triumph of Reading’, in *Reading de Man Reading*, ed. by Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 66–81 (p. 67)

131 ‘The Difficult Education of Shelley’s “Triumph of Life”, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 58 (2009), 53–78, (p. 72)

132 Shelley’s triumph includes ‘All but the sacred few who could not tame | Their spirits to the Conqueror’ (ll. 128-9) although it is unclear which historical figures (if any) would actually correspond to those ‘sacred few,’ who escape disfiguration.
41. Triumphal procession.

If the figure of Rousseau links 'The Triumph of Life' to the French Revolution, Shelley's choice to stage history as a triumphal procession further ties in with the political rhetoric of the French Revolution and its aftermath. Both conservatives and radicals invoked Ancient Rome in describing the French Revolution – a fact that Karl Marx will comment on in the famous opening passage to Der achttzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte [The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte]:

Die Tradition aller todten Geschlechter lastet wie ein Alp auf dem Gehirne der Lebenden. Und wenn sie eben damit beschäftigt scheinen, sich und die Dinge umzuwälzen, noch nicht Dagewesenes zu schaffen, gerade in solchen Epochen revolutionärer Krise beschwören sie ängstlich die Geister der Vergangenheit zu ihrem Dienste herauf, entlehen ihnen Namen, Schlachtparole, Kostüme, um in dieser altehrwürdigen Verkleidung und mit dieser erborgten Sprache die neuenWeltgeschichtsszene aufzuführen. [...] die Revolution von 1789-1814 drappirte [sic] sich abwechselnd als römische Republik und als römisches Kaiserthum.\(^{133}\)

Alluding to this sentence of Marx's, Benjamin writes in his fourteenth thesis on history: 'Die französische Revolution verstand sich als ein wiedergekehrtes Rom. Sie zitierte das alte Rom genau so wie die Mode eine vergangene Tracht zitiert.' (GS1, p. 701) It is this fashion that Shelley's triumphal procession in its turn cites. That is, Shelley does not, like many political commentators of his day, evoke ancient Rome to bolster his rhetorical stance, rather he cites their citations of ancient Rome to parody them and, by so doing, to criticise their model.\(^{134}\) In the first appearance of the Chariot of Life, Shelley echoes these revolutionary discourses by likening the 'jubilee' surrounding it to the inhabitants of ancient Rome:

The million with fierce song and maniac dance
Raging around; such seemed the jubilee
As when to greet some conqueror's advance

---

\(^{133}\) in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Gesamtausgabe (MEGA), ed. by Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim Zentralkomitee der Kommunistischen Partei der Sowjetunion (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1985) 1:2, pp. 96-189 (p. 97)

\(^{134}\) Harold Bloom was perhaps the first to read the poem as a 'diabolic parody' (Shelley's Mythmaking, p. 244). Milne agrees with Bloom in reading 'the procession is a parody of what ought to be' (p. 690). However, for Milne and Bloom the parody subverts religious doctrine – the triumphal processions found in the Book of Ezekiel, Dante and Milton, rather than the political landscape of its time. David Quint also reads the poem as a biblical parody, albeit he suggests that it is the Shape that is a parody of 'the anthropomorphism of the Judaeo-Christian deity' as he appears in 'the likeness as the appearance of a man' enthroned in a Chariot in the Book of Ezekiel. 'Representation and Ideology in The Triumph of Life,' Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, 18 (1978), 639–657 (p. 643); further references in text. Cf. Ezekiel 1.26: 'And above the firmament was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone: and upon the likeness of the throne was the likeness as the appearance of a man above upon it.'
However, whereas most conservatives and radicals evoked triumphant rhetoric indiscriminately, Shelley marks that the triumphant procession was a feature of imperial rather than republican Rome, which can be read as a stab at those radicals who evoke the Roman Empire as a model for contemporary liberty. The bigotry of appealing to the Roman Empire when celebrating liberty is found in the nature of the Roman triumph itself – its celebration of victory parades the defeat of its opponent. In other words, victory and subjugation are two sides of the same coin and the triumph may just as well be understood as a celebration of enslavement rather than liberty. The narrator’s description goes on:

Imperial Rome poured forth her living sea
From senatehouse and prison and theatre
When Freedom left those who upon the free

Had bound a yoke which soon they stooped to bear.
Nor wanted here the true similitude
Of a triumphal pageant, for where’er

The chariot rolled a captive multitude
Was driven (ll. 113-20)

The phrase ‘true similitude’ emphasises that we are dealing with a representation at the same time as it stresses the true equivalence between this representation and a real procession. This truthfulness is not guaranteed by the crowd’s joy but by the triumph’s captives: the ‘true similitude’ of a triumphal procession is not ‘wanted here’ ‘for where’er’ – any triumph is primarily recognisable by the prisoners taken. But the adjective ‘captive’ should also be read in the sense of captivated, fascinated, mesmerised: not only the prisoners chained to the car, but also the multitude surrounding it is bound to the chariot by the intoxicating force of ‘victory.’ In other words, the crowd consists of those who are held captive by the representation of history as the triumphal march of civilisation. Pyle argues that the poem ‘considers in the form of a dream the practices and institutions of making and reading monuments, another name for which is “history.” And the poem tells the story of the insistent revisions of the triumphal processions of European cultural history.’ (p. 102) The force of Shelley’s critique is not directed at the choice of particularly imperial Rome as model, but the dynamic of a historical narration that dresses present terror in the guise of past triumphal victory. The representation of history as a triumph seduces people to believe that their history is a triumph and Shelley’s poem targets precisely this self-
congratulatory stance, thereby revealing these would-be triumphalists as prisoners to their own rhetoric.

42. The reformer’s duty.

‘The Triumph of Life’ offers several accounts of Life’s triumphal procession, yet rather than building on one another in a linear manner, each account is marked as a new vision and serves to efface its predecessor. While the protagonists are each time encountering the triumphal procession of Life as if for the first time, the reader’s experience is better described with Nietzsche’s conception of the eternal return of the same.\textsuperscript{135} Each triumphal representation of history dresses the same old enslavement in the same old guise – which nevertheless manages to bedazzle the actors with a sense of progress. Since no past liberation has managed to stand the test of time, freedom can only enter through a break with the past, not its reiteration. ‘The Triumph of Life’ demonstrates the necessity for such a break, but it does not itself perform this break. Rather, it enacts what Shelley, in ‘On Life,’ defines as the reformer’s duty:

\begin{quote}
Philosophy, impatient as it may be to build, has much work yet remaining as a pioneer for the overgrowth of ages. It makes one step towards this object however; it destroys error, and the roots of error. It leaves, what is too often the duty of the reformer in political and ethical questions to leave, a vacancy. (SPP, p. 507)
\end{quote}

By simultaneously couching the question of Life and representing history in a series of effaced visions, Shelley leaves vacancy where we would expect doctrine – thereby living up to the reformer’s duty. The purpose of the poem’s repeated erasures is precisely to clear the ‘overgrowth of ages’ of triumphal rhetoric that still has failed to free man. Quint aligns ‘The Triumph of Life’ with the epistemic questioning in Shelley’s essays ‘On Life’ and ‘On Love’ to suggest that the problem of representation in ‘The Triumph of Life’ is precisely that all representation is ideological. Quint understands ideology as the belief in stable answers – and the poem’s repeated visions of the selfsame triumph serve to unsettle such a faith in definitive answers to the question of history. Consequently, Quint reads the Shape all light not as a figure of language, but a figure of ideology: ‘the Shape is the principle of ideology, any representational shadow exalted into a god, into an absolute authority that exerts its tyranny over the mind and imagination.’ (p. 643) However, if each

\textsuperscript{135} Benjamin argues that Baudelaire and Blanqui anticipate the Nietzschean insight by some thirty years, I would argue that it is anticipated already in Shelley. Nietzsche first formulated the idea in \textit{Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft} [\textit{The Gay Science}] and later repeated it in \textit{Also Sprach Zarathustra} [\textit{Thus Spoke Zarathustra}]: ‘Wie, wenn dir eines Tages oder Nachts ein Dämon in deine einsamste Einsamkeit nachschliche und dir sagte: »Dieses Leben, wie du es jetzt lebst und gelebt hast, wirst du noch einmal und noch unzählige Male leben müssen; und es wird nichts Neues daran sein […] Die ewige Sanduhr des Daseins wird immer wieder umgedreht – und du mit ihr, Stäubchen vom Staub!’ (‘Das größte Schwergewicht,’ in \textit{Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft}, in Friedrich Nietzsche: \textit{Werke}, ed. by Karl Schlechta (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Ullstein, 1984), ii, pp. 281-548 (p. 476)
of Shelley’s renarrations of history efface their predecessors in order to thereby challenge the tyranny that the monumentalised past exerts over the human mind (‘thought’s empire over thought’ as Shelley phrases it in l. 211), this is not to say that Shelley advocates for the kind of historical and epistemological amnesia represented by the figure of Rousseau and the triumphalists in Life’s wake. Rather, the poem’s repeated erasures make manifest how discourse continually renews itself by inventing new pasts in order to forget the past – and Shelley’s own historical narratives, not least the poem ‘The Triumph of Life,’ are also examples of such consoling myths. If the poem ultimately effaces itself it is precisely in order not to succumb to the ideology it critiques. Shelley’s series of visions does not offer a definitive perspective that would amount to the truth about history, but it reveals the process whereby historical narratives are generated by those who stand to gain from the historical process. Thus the poem has no positive meaning; rather it means its own erasure of meaning. ‘Poetry is there to be disenchanted. But this power to disenchant itself is its supreme creativity,’ Paul Hamilton writes, pointing to the educational nature of this self-effacing procedure (p. 181). The historical procession of ‘The Triumph of Life’ does not represent history, but disenchanters and, so to speak, un-represents prior representations of history. In other words, the poem’s visionary unmasking of visions of history does not itself offer a vision of history. This stance finds a counterpart in Benjamin’s 1931 sketch of ‘Der destruktive Charakter,’ who ‘kennt nur eine Parole: Platz schaffen; nur eine Tätigkeit: räumen’ (GS4, p. 396). This clearing away is so thorough that ‘[d]er destruktive Charakter verwischt sogar die Spuren der Zerstörung’ (GS4, p. 398). In a commentary on this text, Timothy Bahti wonders: ‘How does one read from the sign to the meaning of the sign as its own erasure?’ This is also the problem of reading ‘The Triumph of Life’: How does one read from the poem to the meaning of the poem as its own erasure – especially when what is being erased is a history that encompasses the act of erasure? But this is also a problem in reading Benjamin’s historiographical writings. ‘Der Destruktive Charakter’ is sometimes read as a prototype for the historical materialist whose task Benjamin will theorise in his methodological sketches for Das Passagen-Werk. Certainly, an element of his destructiveness can be glimpsed in this programmatic entry at the beginning of the convolute:


The statement is uncharacteristic in its optimistic faith in reason’s ability to cut through error – but it also shows an ethos remarkably similar to Shelley’s characterisation of a reformer’s duty to leave a vacancy. Both writers seek to clear away the ever-same delusions of triumph that repeat themselves in European representations of its own history.

43. Bequest.
Shelley’s representation of Rousseau finds a curious counterpart in Benjamin’s afterlife, a section of Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* called ‘Vermächtnis’ ['Bequest']. The bequest in question is the legacy of Benjamin’s claim that the progress of civilization is simultaneously the progress of barbarism:

Wenn Benjamin davon sprach, die Geschichte sei bislang vom Standpunkt des Siegers geschrieben worden und müsse von dem der Besiegten aus geschrieben werden, so wäre dem hinzuzufügen, daß zwar Erkenntnis die unselige Geradlinigkeit der Folge von Sieg und Niederlage darzustellen hat, zugleich aber dem sich zuwenden muß, was in solche Dynamik nicht einging, am Wege liegen blieb – gewissermaßen den Abfallstoffen und blinden Stellen, die der Dialektik entronnen sind.137

Fallen by the wayside is, of course, precisely where the narrator first discovered Rousseau in the shape of ‘what I thought was an old root’ (l. 182). Rousseau, like all the other dancers of Shelley’s procession, ends up disfigured by the wayside. They are the ‘waste products’ of Life. ‘[B]orne into the madness of the crowd, falling to the wayside exhausted and deformed, Rousseau becomes a monument to the crowd’s failure to escape the monumentalized history of the chariot’s captives, and to create, with a vocabulary that goes beyond that monumentalized history, an as yet unspoken and unformed history of its own.’ (Wang, p. 649) Wang’s comment points to a certain affinity between Shelley’s procedure and the demand that Adorno makes of theory in the ‘Vermächtnis:’

Was die herrschende Gesellschaft transzendiert, ist nicht nur die von dieser entwickelte Potentialität, sondern ebensowohl das, was nicht recht in die historischen Bewegungsgesetze hineinpaßte. Die Theorie sieht sich aufs Quere, Undurchsichtige, Unerfaßte verweisen, das als solches zwar vorweg ein Anachronistisches an sich trägt, aber nicht aufgeht im Veralteten, weil es der historischen Dynamik ein Schnippchen schlug. (p. 170)

That is, theory should not merely concern itself with the winners and losers of history – but also with those who did not even make it into the picture. In Shelley’s poem this would be represented by the anonymous shadows that flank and absorb the named kings,

137 Gesammelte Schriften, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), iv, p. 170; further references in text.
philosophers, and political leaders in the triumphal procession. But while Shelley explicitly stages his vision of Western history from the wayside, told by a narrator who does not join the ‘ghastly dance,’ the lesson of his ‘Triumph of Life’ cannot be accommodated within Adorno's framework. In Shelley, the experience of the wayside challenges the principle of historiography, the types of representation captured in Adorno’s use of phrases such as ‘historische Bewegungsgesetze,’ ‘laws of historical movement’ and ‘historische Dynamik,’ ‘historical dynamic.’ Shelley’s lesson is that all narratives, no matter how emancipatory, risk to become enshrined and monumentalised and thus turn into symbols of ‘thoughts empire over thought’ (l. 211). As I just noted, Shelley does not offer a new historical dynamic, his poem rather erases the historical dynamics at hand and means their erasure. What ‘The Triumph of Life’ unsettles, then, is the belief in the idea a task such as the one Adorno ascribes to Benjamin’s legacy can be resolved.

44. Now you see it, now you don’t.

Bahti’s own answer to the question of how to ‘read from the sign to the meaning of the sign as its own erasure?’ is that we need to learn how to trace traces of the effaced, ‘the non-present, now you see it, now you don’t instant – of an erasure even in the erasure of all traces.’ (p. 80) I suggest that this instant of erasure is captured precisely in the disfiguration of the participants in the triumphal procession of Life, a process of disfiguration that Shelley underlines by the use of cloudy imagery. Just before he encounters Rousseau, the narrator offers the poem’s first description of the crowd around the Chariot of Life: ‘All hastening onward, yet none seemed to know | Whither he went, or whence he came, or why’ (ll. 47-8) The narrator’s words emphasise the confusion of this crowd: they are all driven by a force, yet no one has a clue why, whence, or whereto. Some of the multitude

...mournfully within the gloom

Of their own shadow walked, and called it death . . .
[...]

But more with motions which each other crost
Pursued or shunned the shadows the clouds threw (ll. 58-63)

The shadows of the participants have mingled with the shadows of the clouds to such an extent that each individual may – for all he knows – be pursuing, or shunning, his own shadow, or that of anyone else, or that of a cloud. Inaugurating the poem’s procedure of vision unfolding onto vision, as soon as the Chariot of Life passes with ‘solemn speed’ (l. 106) this first view of the crowd unfolds unto another view of the same crowd. Now,
however, rather than pursuing the shadows of clouds, the multitude is itself become like to the clouds:

The crowd gave way, and I arose aghast,
   Or seemed to rise, so mighty was the trance,
   And saw like clouds upon the thunder blast

   The million with fierce song and maniac dance
Raging around (ll. 107-11)

If the first impression of the crowd presents individuals that are all raging around in confusion, this still individuated crowd gives way to a singing and dancing multitude where individual shapes are blurred. In this transformation, the mass of people takes on the likeness of ‘clouds upon the thunder blast,’ a modification of cloud whose swift change of shape is easily perceptible. Rather than a crowd of people, the procession is now a mutable mass of movement – ‘fierce song and maniac dance.’ The cloud simile appears again a few lines later:

   Maidens and youths fling their wild arms in air
   As their feet twinkle; now recede and now
   Bending within each other’s atmosphere

   Kindle invisibly;
   […]

   Till like two clouds into one vale impelled
   That shake the mountains when their lightnings mingle
   And die in rain – the fiery band which held

   Their natures, snaps . . . the shock still may tingle –
   One falls and then another in the path
   Senseless, nor is the desolation single (ll. 149-60)

Here, too, the image of the thunderstorm stands for a rapid change of shape: in the Chariot’s wake the dancing maidens and youths turn into ‘Old men and woman foully disarrayed,’ a transformation marked by the image of two clouds impelled into a vale: what dies like clouds die in rain is the natural life of these dancers. But it also signals the narrator’s inability to give ready legible shape to these swift transformations:

   Yet ere I can say where the chariot hath
   Past over them; nor other trace I find
   But as of foam after the Ocean’s wrath
Is spent upon the desert shore. — Behind,
Old men, and women foully disarrayed,
Shake their grey hair in the insulting wind,
Limp in the dance and strain with limbs decayed
To reach the car of light which leaves them still
Farther behind and deeper in the shade. (ll. 161-9)

This 'where' in Shelley's italics, is precisely the 'now you see it, now you don't' moment in which the Chariot of Life triumphantly passes over the crowd, turning it into indistinguishable millions in the same stroke as youths and maidens turn into old men and women – akin to the old root that the narrator will soon find by the wayside. As I mentioned above, after his encounter with the narrator, Rousseau will partially take over the task of describing the triumphal procession of life and his description also draws on meteorological imagery to describe the physiognomic alterations that the crowd undergoes: some of 'the crew | Seemed in that light like atomies that dance | Within a sunbeam' (ll. 445-7), while 'others made | “Circles around it [the chariot] like the clouds that swim | Round the high moon in a bright sea of air' (ll. 453-55). The 'multitude' (ll. 460) as a whole is depicted as a 'living storm' (l. 466) and a slightly later simile talks of 'others like discoloured flakes of snow' (l. 511). This imagery is used to figure the multitude's strange distortion, wrought by the 'creative ray' of the Chariot of Life:

Each, like himself and like each other were,
At first, but soon distorted seemed to be

“Obscure clouds moulded by the casual air,
And of this stuff the car's creative ray
Wrought all the busy phantoms that were there

"As the sun shapes the clouds (ll. 530-5)

In Rousseau's simile, the Chariot's ray moulds the dancers like sunrays mould the clouds, an image of light reflected in water that traces the boundary where shapelessness passes into shape. The cloudy imagery that Shelley employs in showing the disfiguration of human figures in 'The Triumph of Life' links the poem's critique of triumphalist historiography to Shelley's representation of poetic language. I have already discussed Shelley's 'afformative' suspension between the visual, conceptual, and prosodic elements of a word, captured in the feet of the cloud-like Shape all light that appears in Rousseau's vision. However, Shelley also stresses the movement of feet in his description of this amorphous multitude. As indicated in the narrator’s first vision, when the 'maidens and youths' of l. 149 turn to 'Old men and women foully disarrayed' (l. 165), the
transformation they undergo is not merely one of shape, it is also a rhythmic one – from the ‘Swift, fierce and obscene’ dance (l. 137) in which the young dancers ‘Mix with each other in tempestuous measure [...] As their feet twinkle’ (ll. 141-50) to a limping attempt to ‘reach the car of light which leaves them still | Farther behind and deeper in the shade.’ (ll. 168-69) The Chariot’s ray of light stalls the tempestuous measure of the twinkling feet of the young dancers. However, light is also a figure of language in this poem. When the Chariot’s creative ray disrupts the measure of the dance, we have a self-reflective image of poetry destroying another self-reflective image of poetry – just like in the fifth stanza of ‘The Cloud’ when the moon’s glimmering feet tear the metric woof of poetry. And the moon is also the analogy that Shelley offers in the narrator’s first description of the Chariot of Life:

Like the young Moon

When on the sunlit limits of the night
Her white shell trembles amid crimson air
   And whilst the sleeping tempest gathers might
Doth, as a herald of its coming, bear
   The ghost of her dead Mother, whose dim form
Bends in dark ether from her infant’s chair,

   So came a chariot on the silent storm
Of its own rushing splendour, and a Shape
   So sate within as one whom years deform
Beneath a dusky hood and double cape
   Crouching within the shadow of a tomb (ll. 79-90)

The image of the moon is most likely a borrowing from Coleridge’s ‘Dejection: An Ode’ where Coleridge uses the ‘Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence’ for an epigraph:

   Late, late yestreen I saw the new Moon,
   With the old Moon in her arms;
   And I fear, I fear, my Master dear!
   We shall have a deadly storm.138

This premonition of a storm is based on a natural phenomenon: the vague outline of the full moon which can be traced when the moon is in abeyance. The chariot holds the Shape of Life like the new moon appears to hold the full moon: ‘Like the young Moon [...] So came a chariot’ (ll. 79-86). At the same time as signalling the approaching storm, the image of

the moon gives Shelley an occasion to introduce a ‘white shell’ – emblem of poetry and his own signature – into his description of the Chariot of Life. But likening the Chariot of Life to the white shell of the moon places the Shape of Life in the position of the ‘ghost of her dead Mother’ – itself nothing but the shade that earth casts on the moon. Life arrives on the scene as a ghost, a dead Mother, a deformed widow crouched in the tomb-like shadow of the moon-like car. The creative ray that moulds the crowd does not emanate from the Shape of Life nor her Chariot, but from the equipage, ‘that wonder-winged team. | The Shapes which drew it in thick lightnings | Were lost: I heard alone on the air’s soft stream | The music of their ever moving wings.’ (ll. 95-8) Here Shelley stretches grammar to present his point that the ‘lightnings’ emanating from this ‘wonder-winged team’ blind vision and can therefore only be perceived by the sound they make – the music of their wonderous wings. Thus, the only possible ‘Shapes’ that the narrator can be referring to must be the sonic shapes created by the unseen beat of their gallop – anticipating the passage from light to sound that I have already noted in the Shape all light scene. It is poetic language – here represented by a wonder-winged team so luminous that we only hear the measure of its gallop – that issues the ‘creative ray’ that performs the poem’s physiognomic disfiguration: the passage of the Chariot of Life lets one of the poem’s figures for language (light; creative ray) destroy another (measure; twinkling feet). The transformation from ‘twinkling’ feet to ‘limping’ limbs under the Chariot’s creative ray thus stands for language’s disfiguration of language – a figure that disfigures itself. However, as I will argue in the next section, it is precisely by ‘physiognomically’ disfiguring the people in the crowd that this poem lifts the veil that obscures reality – their disfiguration reveals their true faces as compromised participants in the triumphal march of history.

45. Simulacra.

When Rousseau describes the crowd as ‘[p]hantoms diffused around, and some did fling | Shadows of shadows, yet unlike themselves’ (ll. 487-8), the image of shadows is indebted to Lucretius’ De Rerum Natura. Lucretius argues that all things are continually stripping off a thin film; today one could liken the process to a photographic snapshot. Perception, on this model, is the recording of such stripped-off scraps of film. Shelley’s addition to his Lucretian model is to introduce an element of distortion into these simulacra. In the glare of ‘that cold light, whose airs too soon deform’ as Rousseau puts it (l. 468), people become

---

unlike what they once were. Like the narrator’s initial description of the triumphal procession, Rousseau’s narration of this ‘new Vision’ of the Chariot of Life (ll. 481-541) emphasises the rapid ageing process of the crowd in its wake:

I became aware

“Of whence those forms proceeded which thus stained
The track in which we moved; after a brief space
From every form the beauty slowly waned,

"From every firmest limb and fairest face
The strength and freshness fell like dust, and left
The action and the shape without the grace

“Of life; the marble brow of youth was cleft
With care, and in the eyes where once hope shone
Desire like a lioness bereft

“Of its last cub, glared ere it died; each one
Of that great crowd sent forth incessantly
These shadows, numerous as the dead leaves blown (ll. 516-28)

As the participants fling off their shadows, they lose their beauty and youth, leaving them old and deformed: in the triumphal procession of life, the participants are stripped of the ‘grace | “Of life’. However, this aging is not simply the relentless progress of life over a person’s body: by being thus ‘moulded’ by Life’s ‘creative ray’ the participant’s physical frame becomes a mirror of his inner being. Already in the initial description of the procession, the narrator speaks of the ‘corruption’ that ‘veils’ its participants after the Chariot has passed over them (l. 174) and Rousseau confirms the link between moral corruption and physiognomic disfiguration when he says that:

...if the spark with which Heaven lit my spirit
Earth had with purer nutriment supplied

“Corruption would not now thus much inherit
Of what was once Rousseau’ (ll. 201-4)

The state of Rousseau’s disfiguration mirrors his moral corruption while alive. The stripping off of shadows is also an unveiling of our moral corruptions and it is those ‘from whose forms most shadows past | And least of strength and beauty did abide’ that fall first and who look the worst (ll. 542-3). In the passage’s swift flow of similes, these ‘shadows of shadows’ quickly become unlike the person they flew off simultaneously as the people themselves take on a creaturely aspect – they are like ‘eaglets’ (l. 489), ‘elves’ (l. 490),
'restless apes' (l. 493), 'vultures' (l. 497), 'old anatomies' (l. 500), 'worms' (l. 504), 'falcons' (l. 506), 'like small gnats and flies as thick as mist' (l. 508). Everyone is like to something, but never to anything human. Since the procession includes the great and the many of European history, its process of disfiguration unmasks European civilisation as a throng of beasts and the progress of history itself as dehumanising. As Pyle puts it, 'the vision consistently refers us to the signs of power and empire that are harbored within the triumphal narrative of European civilization and thus demonstrates, to recall Walter Benjamin's celebrated phrase, that “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”' (p. 125) Shelley uses his Lucretian model to expose the barbarism underneath the veils of civilisation. Benjamin, too, was interested in Lucretian simulacra. However, Benjamin’s only explicit reference to simulacra does not take place in the notes towards a historiographic methodology, but in his work on childhood. In the Berliner Chronik Benjamin describes the miniature portraits of a ‘Großstadtkindheit,’ ‘metropolitan childhood’ (GS7, p. 385; SW3, p. 344) that he is working on as ‘Bilder […], [die] nicht in der Art genereller sondern jener, die nach der Lehre des Epikur aus den Dingen ständig sich absondern und unsere Wahrnehmung von ihnen bedingen.’ (GS6, p. 489) By the time the first version of the Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert is finished, these Lucretian simulacra have come to be defined by the disfigured, entstellt, nature of the childhood world that they have detached themselves from. As disfigured simulacra, Benjamin’s images have a genealogical affinity to the ‘shadows of shadows’ (l. 488) that follow the triumphal procession of Life, which is to say that both Benjamin’s Berliner Kindheit and Shelley’s ‘The Triumph of Life’ participate in the afterlife of De Rerum Natura. At the same time, in the passage where Benjamin gives the doctrine of Epicurus as his source, he is discussing precisely the differential between an autobiography that renders the past the was it really was and his own project, that renders it the way it is remembered:

Denn die Autobiographie hat es mit der Zeit, dem Ablauf und mit dem zu tun, was den stetigen Fluß des Lebens ausmacht. Hier aber ist von einem Raum, von Augenblicken und vom Unstetigen die Rede. Denn wenn auch Monate und Jahre hier auftauchen, so ist es in der Gestalt, die sie im Augenblick des Eingedenkens haben. (GS6, p. 488)

Both Shelley and Benjamin adopt the Lucretian model to figure an alternative relation to the past. A further affinity is marked by the fact that both Shelley and Benjamin introduce an element of disfiguration into their adaptations of the Lucretian image. Benjamin’s thought-images from his childhood are pervaded by similarities between words and

things. ‘Nur meinem eigenen Bilde nie. Und darum wurde ich so ratlos, wenn man Ähnlichkeit mit mir selbst von mir verlangte.’ (GS4, p. 261) The child Benjamin is perplexed when someone demanded his likeness because the likenesses of the world of childhood are unlikenesses. The child can resemble anything or anyone but himself. As I have argued, this is precisely the case in Shelley’s vision, where '[e]ach, like himself and like each other were, | At first, but soon distorted seemed to be’ (ll. 530-1). However, while in Shelley this detachment of simulacra contributes to turning the triumph of life into a ‘dance of death,’ for Benjamin, images that detach from the ‘entstellte Welt der Kindheit’ signify a privileged form of memory and of perception: the disfiguring simulacra that Shelley employs to represent moral corruption are used by Benjamin to point towards redemption.

46. Putting things right.

In the 1934 essay on Franz Kafka, Benjamin recycles one of the titles of his childhood images to name a section of the essay: ‘Das bucklichte Männlein’ [‘The Little Hunchback’]. Like Muhme Rehlen, the little hunchback emerges from a nursery rhyme and deals with distortion. However, unlike the Mummerlehnen that Benjamin cannot find, the Hunchback is inevitably found everywhere. ‘Das Männlein kam mir überall zuvor. Zuvorkommend stellte sich’s in den Weg. Doch sonst tat er mir nichts, der graue Vogt, als von jedwedem Ding, an das ich kam, den Halbpart des Vergessens einzutreiben.’ (GS4, p. 303) The Hunchback leaves his mark by distorting the world; his look is one ‘dem die Dinge sich entzogen, bis aus dem Garten übers Jahr ein Gärtlein, ein Kämmerlein aus meiner Kammer und ein Bänklein aus der Bank geworden war. Sie schrumpften, und es war, als wüchse ihnen ein Buckel.’ (GS4, p. 303; my emphasis) Under the Männlein’s influence things shrink and grow a hump – in German this distortion is accompanied by -lein, the diminutive ending that these distorted things share with the Männlein himself and which can be read as quite literally a hump in language. Here, too, we are dealing with a cross-over between language and physiognomy, therefore it is not surprising that the little hunchback accompanies Benjamin into the tonal world of his childhood recollection. After counting the places where he would encounter the hunchback, Benjamin says that while he is gone now, ‘seine Stimme, welche an das Summen des Gasstrumpfs anklingt, wispert über die Jahrhundertschwelle mir die Worte nach: »Liebes Kindlein, ach ich bitt, | Bet förß bucklicht Männlein mit!«’ (GS4, p. 304) Benjamin thus places the little hunchback

---

142 ‘Das bucklichte Männlein’ [1934] GS4, pp. 302-4; [1938] GS7, pp. 429-30; SW3, pp. 384-85 (Since the piece travels almost verbatim from the 1934 to the 1938 version, it is only translated once in the SW.) ‘Das bucklicht Männlein’ Franz Kafka, GS2, pp. 425-32; SW2, pp. 806-812
on the threshold of the nineteenth century, which is to say, on the edge of the *Muschel* to which the child Benjamin was listening in 'Die Mummerehlen.' Furthermore, the hunchback speaks with a voice 'wie das Summen des Gasstrumpfs,' the buzz of the gas flame that was one of the echoes heard in this shell.\(^{143}\) When Benjamin introduces the *bucklichte Männlein* into the Kafka essay, he lets a different light shine on the distorted world of his childhood: this world becomes a model for the fallen world in which the Messiah is still absent. Referring to the nursery rhyme, Benjamin says: ‘Dies Männlein ist der Insasse des entstellten Lebens; es wird verschwinden, wenn der Messias kommt, von dem ein großer Rabbi gesagt hat, daß er nicht mit Gewalt die Welt verändern wolle, sondern nur um ein Geringes sie zurechtstellen werde.’ (‘Franz Kafka,’ GS2, p. 432)\(^{144}\) The Messiah appears as the one who will put right, *zurecht stellen*, that which is disfigured, *entstellt.*\(^{145}\) *Entstellung* functions as an negative index of the Messiah's coming – comparable to how translation, by highlighting the discrepancies between languages, marks how much they have fractured since they were one in the Word. This is not to say that the more disfigured things are the more spectacular the coming of Messiah will be. On the contrary, the Messiah will only make a 'slight adjustment,' *ein Geringes ... zurechtstellen*, a thought that echoes a Hasidim 'Spruch von der kommenden Welt,' ‘saying about the world to come,' that Benjamin cites in a short story that he published in the *Kölnische Zeitung* in December 1932:

> Es gibt bei den Chassidim einen Spruch von der kommenden Welt, der besagt: es wird dort alles eingerichtet sein wie bei uns. [...] Alles wird sein wie hier – nur ein klein wenig anders. So hält es die Phantasie. Es ist nur ein Schleier, den sie über die Ferne zieht. Alles mag da stehen wie es stand, aber der Schleier wallt, und unmerklich verschiebt sich's darunter. (In der Sonne,' ['In the Sun'] GS4, pp. 419-20)

The difference between the fallen and the redeemed is miniscule and yet unbridgeable; and describable as drawing a veil over the distance – not unlike the veil of glistening light that is drawn in the proem to 'The Triumph of Life.' However, the vision seen in 'The

\(^{143}\) ‘...der dumpfe Knall, mit dem die Flamme des Gasstrumpfs sich entzündet’ (‘Die Mummerehlen,’ GS4, p. 262)

\(^{144}\) For a discussion of the interrelation between Benjamin’s memoir, the Kafka essay and the alleged rabbi citation, see Wohlfrath’s ‘Walter Benjamin’s Image of Interpretation’, *New German Critique, 17* (1979), 70-98. He critiques the possibility that distortion is a positive force: ‘The distorting readjustment of a distorted world will restore it to its “true surrealist face,” “the state of similarity.” But if similarity is a shifting play of dis-placement (*Ent-stellung*), would not such a final resting-place amount to the reinstatement of identity, to death warmed up as utopia?’ (p. 95).

\(^{145}\) Sigrid Weigel discusses Benjamin’s equivocations between linguistic and messianic *Entstellung* and *Zurechttstellung* in *Entstelte Ähnlichkeit: Walter Benjamins Theoretische Schreibweise* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997): ‘Betont Benjamin mit dieser Bezugnahme auf den Körper, auf die Dinge, auf Organisches und Anorganisches das Material der Entstellung [...] so wird gleichzeitig – im Kontext einer kabbalistischen Lektüre Kafkaescher Literatur – die Entstellung im Sinne messianischer Vorstellungen gedeutet.’ (p. 78)
Triumph of Life’ is anything but redemptive – on the contrary, in the fragmentary state in which it comes down to us, the poem is probably Shelley’s most dejected take on history. If Shelley projected an optimistic ending, such as the new age dawning at the end of *Prometheus Unbound*, this was cancelled by Shelley’s death – which interrupts shortly after Rousseau’s description of his ‘new Vision’ (Il. 481-541). Somewhat fatefully, however, Rousseau’s vision rewrites a scene from the post-apocalyptic vision of *Prometheus Unbound*, a passage full of the optimism which is denied in ‘The Triumph of Life.’ Adopting the Lucretian model there too, Shelley lets Prometheus’ release coincide with the stripping off of masks, but here the masks being stripped off are those of human evil. If moral aberration is a disfigurement, the Promethean moment sets such aberrations right: here human goodness and beauty are revealed as the *simulacra* of corruption fall off. After a tour around the post-apocalyptic world, the Spirit of the Earth reports:

> Those ugly human shapes and visages  
> Of which I spoke as having wrought me pain,  
> Passed floating through the air, and fading still  
> Into the winds that scattered them; and those  
> From whom they passed seemed mild and lovely forms  
> After some foul disguise had fallen; and all  
> Were somewhat changed; and after brief surprise  
> And greetings of delighted wonder, all  
> Went to their sleep again: and when the dawn  
> Came – wouldst thou think that toads, and snakes and efts,  
> Could e’er be beautiful? yet so they were,  
> And that with little change of shape or hue:  
> All things had put their evil nature off. (III.iv.65-77)

This ’somewhat,’ ’little change of shape or hue’ makes all the difference.
Speculations

47. The word ‘I.’

‘Wenn ich ein besseres Deutsch schreibe als die meisten Schriftsteller meiner Generation, so verdanke ich das zum guten Teil der zwanzigjährigen Beobachtung einer einzigen kleinen Regel. Sie lautet: das Wort “ich” nie zu gebrauchen,’ Benjamin asserts in the Berliner Chronik (GS6, p. 475). This claim dovetails with Benjamin’s ambition to find a way to represent the experience of metropolitan childhood as a historical phenomenon: his autobiographical writings strip subjective experience of individual subjectivity. In the notes towards his Kafka essay, Benjamin commends this very quality in Kafka’s work:

Es gibt etwas, das Kafka mit Proust gemeinsam ist, und wer weiß, ob dieses etwas sich irgendwo sonst findet. Es handelt sich um ihren Gebrauch des »Ich«. Wenn Proust in seiner recherche du temps perdu [sic], Kafka in seinen Tagebüchern Ich sagt, so ist das bei beiden ein gleich transparentes, ein gläsernes. Seine Kammern haben keine Lokalfarbe; jeder Leser kann sie heute bewohnen und morgen ausziehen. (GS2, p. 1221)

Benjamin’s use of the word in ‘Die Mummerehlen,’ ‘Ich stehe barhaupt da,’ evidences him taking advantage of this impersonal quality of Kafka’s work and moving into an image of Kafka. But Benjamin’s commendation of Proust and Kafka also resembles the paradigmatic romantic ambition of fashioning a lyric voice that is strongly subjective without being reducible to an individual subject. In an essay that takes the lyric as a case study in defending the literary-historical study of genre, Jonathan Culler notes that the romantic period introduced ‘a more vigorous conception of the individual subject [which] made it possible to conceive of lyric as mimetic: mimetic of the experience of the subject. […] The lyric poet absorbs into himself the external world and stamps it with inner consciousness, and the unity of the poem is provided by this subjectivity.’¹⁴⁶ A comparable kind of mimesis is operative in Benjamin’s childhood writings: the word ‘ich’ of Benjamin’s ‘Die Mummerehlen’ allows the child Benjamin, as remembered by the adult Benjamin, to mime the image of Kafka even as the tonal world of the passage mimics this child’s recollected experience of language, an experience which is further elucidated in the accompanying essays on our mimetisches Vermögen, mimetic faculty. Furthermore, Benjamin asserts that this experience, which turns Muhme Rehlen through a Misverstehen into Mummerehlen, opens the way into the world’s interior. ‘Das Mißverstehen verstellte mir die Welt. Jedoch auf gute Art; es wies die Wege, die in ihr Inneres führten.’ (GS4, p. 260) That Benjamin claims to enter the interior of the external world through language, rather than through consciousness, points to the key difference between Benjamin’s practice and the romantic

¹⁴⁶ ‘Lyric, History, and Genre’, New Literary History, 40.4 (2009), 879–99 (p. 884); further references in text.
lyric: where the latter is grounded in a 'vigorous conception of the individual subject,' Benjamin's work is grounded in a vigorous conception of language – here it is language that 'absorbs' and 'stamps' the external world and provides the text's unifying principle. Nonetheless, the dynamic whereby the speaking voice becomes mimetic of experience – in this case the experience of language – is at home in the romantic lyrical tradition that Culler describes.\footnote{That said, for Culler the central distinguishing mark of the lyric is neither its expressive nor its mimetic qualities, but rather the fact that it is apostrophic. Shelley's 'O West Wind...' is one of his examples of characteristically lyric apostrophe. (p. 886)} Furthermore, turning to Shelley's work, it becomes clear that the lyric voice is not limited to the poetic form. For instance, the ideal of refracting a universal experience through the subject's inner consciousness is also reflected in Shelley's notes towards an essay on epistemology that Mary Shelley collected and published as 'Speculations on Morals and Metaphysics.' The essay is motivated by the following hypothesis:

If it were possible that a person should give a faithful history of his being from the earliest epochs of his recollection, a picture would be presented such as the world has never contemplated before. A mirror would be held up to all men in which they might behold their own recollections and, in dim perspective, their shadowy hopes and fears – all that they dare not, or that daring and desiring, they could not expose to the open eyes of day. (Prose, pp. 185-6)

Shelley's project is thus to present a mirror of his own mind which would expose all that lies hidden in the minds of other men. To this end Shelley started producing a 'Catalogue of the Phenomena of Dreams, as Connecting Sleeping and Waking' that Mary Shelley placed at the end of the 'Speculations.' The analysis of Shelley's own dream patterns amounts to the analysis of the human mind as such. This is not because Shelley sees himself as exemplary, but because he does not believe in selves at all. 'The words I, you, they, are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblages of thoughts thus indicated [i.e. by the words I, you, they], but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind,' Shelley writes in his essay 'On Life' (SPP, p. 508). Selfhood is an illusion that arises out of the structure of language: pronouns are signs taken for realities whereas in fact, Shelley goes on, they are:

...grammatical devices invented simply for arrangement, and totally devoid of the intense and exclusive sense usually attached to them. Let it not be supposed that this doctrine conducts to the monstrous presumption that I, the person who now write and think, am that one mind. I am but a portion of it. (SPP, p. 508)

Each mind is but a local modification of the one mind that encompasses all minds. The same goes for the distinction between external, or real, and internal, or imaginary, objects.
of thought. For Shelley there is no qualitative difference between things in the world and ‘hallucinations, dreams, and the ideas of madness’ since all are ‘different modifications of the one mind’ (SPP, p. 508). Temporal markers are likewise included amongst the fallacies of reifying signs:

We see trees, houses, fields, living beings in our own shape, and in shapes more or less analogous to our own. [...] To express the varieties of these modes, we say, we move, they move; and as this motion is continual, though not universal, we express our conception of the diversities of its course by, it has been, it is, it shall be. (Prose, p. 184)

This is an idea that Shelley takes from Sir William Drummond’s *Acedemical Questions* (1805). Drummond is today seen as an inferior philosopher who does little more than summarise the empiricist/sceptical tradition in the wake of David Hume and George Berkeley. If he is studied at all, it is most often by romanticists, ‘with an eye to its influence on the idealist metaphysics suffusing Shelley’s later poetry and prose.’¹⁴⁸ In his essay ‘On Life,’ Shelley enthusiastically embraces Drummond’s philosophy: ‘Examined point by point and word by word, the most discriminating intellects have been able to discover no train of thoughts in the process of its reasoning, which does not conduct inevitably to the conclusion which has been stated.’ (SPP, p. 507) Shelley’s name for this stated conclusion is the ‘intellectual system’ or the ‘intellectual philosophy,’ which he summarises as a unified picture of the world: ‘The view of life presented by the most refined deductions of the intellectual philosophy, is that of unity. Nothing exists but as it is perceived.’ (SPP, p. 508) The emphasis on perception allows Shelley to connect this philosophical system to his poetics since, for Shelley, poetry is something that alters our perception, it ‘makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar’ (‘Defence,’ SPP, p. 517). Here, too, Shelley employs the metaphor of veiling and unveiling the world that he also uses to describe poetic language and that informs his adaptation of Lucretian *simulacra*:

The most refined abstractions of logic conduct to a view of life, which though startling to the apprehension, is in fact that which the habitual sense of its repeated combinations has extinguished in us. It strips, as it were, the painted curtain from this scene of things. I confess that I am one of those who am unable to refuse my assent to the conclusions of those philosophers, who assert that nothing exists but as it is perceived. (‘On Life,’ SPP, p. 506)

The ‘view of life’ as unity in perception, like poetry, strips the painted curtain from the world. A further link between poetry and the intellectual philosophy is found in the recurring image of childhood. The ‘Defence’ offers an analogy between an individual

human childhood and the childhood of man; the unified view of life is likewise related to how children perceive the world. ‘Let us recollect our sensations as children. What a distinct and intense apprehension had we of the world and of ourselves. […] We less habitually distinguished all that we saw and felt from ourselves. They seemed as it were to constitute one mass.’ (SPP, p. 507) And just like poets are the class of people best able to remember the ‘certain rhythm’ innate to the childhood of mankind and of individual men, so there is a class of people that are better able to perceive the unity of existence:

There are some persons who in this respect are always children. Those who are subject to the state called reverie feel as if their nature were dissolved into the surrounding universe, or as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into their being. They are conscious of no distinction. And these are states which precede or accompany or follow an unusually intense and vivid apprehension of life. As men grow up this power commonly decays, and they become mechanical and habitual agents. (SPP, pp. 507-8)

It is the ‘reiteration’ of impressions that blunts the apprehension of life. The word ‘reiteration’ returns in the ‘Defence’ where Shelley writes that poetry ‘creates anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration.’ (SPP, p. 533) And it does so precisely by making us aware of our selves as modifications of the one mind:

A Poet participates in the eternal, the infinite and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not. The grammatical forms which express the moods of time, and the difference of persons and the distinction of place are convertible with respect to the highest poetry without injuring it as poetry. (‘Defence,’ SPP, p. 513)

When Shelley empties the word 'I' of meaning it is precisely to capture the experience of dissolving into the one mind where such distinctions are not – and in this Shelley’s conception of the one mind resembles Benjamin’s discussion of the romantic Absolute in his doctoral dissertation on Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik [The Concept of Criticism in Early German Romanticism].

48. Caveat.

As I noted in the Introduction, Shelley’s readings in German philosophy were scarce and his otherwise richly intertextual works relatively rarely refer to German authors. At some point, most likely around 1815-1816, Shelley executed a literal translation of the opening parts from Goethe’s Faust, and he returned to the drama and re-translated the Prolog im Himmel, ‘Prologue in Heaven,’ as well as the Walpurgisnacht, ‘May-Day Night,’ scene in

---

149 Shelley translated the ’Dedication,’ ’Prologue in Heaven’ and ll. 1-1213 of Part 1, Suggestions for the exact date of these translations have ranged from 1810-1822; I follow the dating suggested by Murray in BSM 21, p. 476.
early 1822. In route to Italy he read Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* [*History of Ancient Art*] (1764) and once there he studied August Wilhelm Schlegel’s lectures *Über dramatische Kunst und Litteratur* [*On the Dramatic Art and Literature*] (1809–11) in French translation. Both works served as guides for his engagement with the ancient artworks he encountered in Italy. Hugh Roberts has further traced how Shelley’s ‘attentive reading’ of Schlegel’s lectures influenced the composition of *The Cenci*. On the other hand, there is no sign of him being familiar with the work of Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis or Hölderlin who (in addition to Goethe) are the romantic authors that Benjamin is most interested in. Instead, the primary influence of German literature on Shelley is found in his early passion for the Gothic. Shelley’s philosophical sources are found in the English epistemological tradition: John Locke, David Hume, George Berkeley, Thomas Reid, and, above all, Sir William Drummond, in addition to Plato, Spinoza, and Lucretius. Especially in his youth, he was also an avid reader of the French *philosophes* Jean le Rond d’Alembert, Julien Offray de la Mettrie, and Baron d’Holbach. While some of them, most notably Spinoza, but also Hume via Kant’s readings and the French *philosophes* – inform the development of German idealism, there is not enough overlap to talk about a shared genealogy. In short, Shelley’s speculations are separate from those of his German contemporaries. Nevertheless, in presenting the one mind as a universal medium in which self, objects, and time dissolve, and further identifying this medium with ‘life,’ Shelleyan idealism has an affinity to early romantic German philosophy, particularly as it is represented by Benjamin in his doctoral thesis on *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*. Winifred Menninghaus has traced the limitations of Benjamin’s corpus of Schlegel’s and Novalis’ works as he was preparing his dissertation and the extent to which he extrapolates from his materials. Benjamin resolves the problem of not having enough primary material by positing that Schlegel’s and Novalis’ works can be treated as the work of one author:

Die Heranziehung der Schriften des Novalis zu denen Schlegels rechtfertigt sich durch die völlige Einhelligkeit beider hinsichtlich der Prämisse und der Folgerungen aus der Theorie der Kunstkritik. [...] Diese enge Gemeinschaft macht die Untersuchung der

---

150 The relevant MSS. are reproduced and transcribed in BSM 19 (‘The Faust Draft Notebook: A Facsimile of Bodleian MS. Shelley adds. e. 18’; incl. the draft for the 1822 translation) and BSM 21 (‘Miscellaneous Poetry, Prose and Translations from Bodleian MS. Shelley, adds. c. 4’; including the literal 1814–1818(? ) translation and the fair copy of the 1822 translation). I am indebted to the editorial apparatus in these two volumes for the dating of the translations.

151 ‘Mere Poetry and Strange Flesh: Shelley’s *The Cenci* and Calderón’s *El Purgatorio de San Patricio*, *European Romantic Review*, 20 (2009), 345–66 (p. 349); further references in text.

That is, rather than positioning Schlegel's and Novalis' writings in relation to one another to comparatively explore the concept of criticism in Jena romanticism, Benjamin declares such a task not only impossible but irrelevant. Instead, he alternatingly cites from either author to substantiate his argument - which he has to do to in order to have enough material to construct an argument. 'As historical entities, these two [Schlegel and Jena Romanticism] must be considered separate from what Benjamin represents under those terms in his book,' Marcus Bullock reminds us in a critique of Benjamin's romanticism dissertation and the influence it has had in later criticism on the romantics.  

Part of the irony of this influence is that subsequent critics remain under the sway of Benjamin's argument even though much of it is an attempt to 'overcome gaps in Schlegel's oeuvre which no longer exist.' (p. 78) If Benjamin spends much energy on surmising what Schlegel may have written in his lost texts, present-day critics can consult these texts directly. However, Benjamin's lack of primary sources gives him the added benefit of precisely surmise. It allows him to cite indiscriminately from either writer to assemble a composite image of Schlegel/Novalis that almost resembles an academic equivalent to Frankenstein's monster. 'The interchangeability of the two figures is now brought to the point where whichever provides the most suitable statement in elaborating the posited common body of thought may be introduced indifferently,' Bullock writes of Benjamin's Schlegel/Novalis, '[t]hey are fused into one.' (p. 83) And if they are fused into one, this one persona is also the representative of die deutsche Romantik as a whole: 'Als die romantische Theorie der Kunstkritik wird im folgenden diejenige Friedrich Schlegels dargestellt. Das Recht, diese Theorie als die romantische zu bezeichnen, beruht auf ihrem repräsentativen Charakter.' (GS1, p. 14) Using Novalis as a supplement, Benjamin draws a portrait of Schlegel that stands as a representative of the romantic concept of art criticism, and the absence of primary materials leaves Benjamin the more free to fashion an image of Schlegel, or indeed of romantic criticism, that suits his needs.  

As Benjamin writes in the letter to Ernst Schoen in which he announces the completion of a draft of his doctoral dissertation:

> Was sie [die Dissertation] sein sollte ist sie geworden: ein Hinweis auf die durchaus in der Literatur unbekannte wahre Natur der Romantik – auch nur mittelbar das weil ich an das

---


154 For a detailed analysis of Benjamin's wilfully messianic misrepresentation of Schlegel, see Bullock pp. 77-97. This may perhaps be compared to Shelley's rewriting of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Unbound*. The original being lost allows Shelley to take the liberty to adjust the story of Prometheus' release in the image of his own millenial vision.
Zentrum der Romantik, den Messianismus [...] ebenso wenig wie an irgend etwas anderes, das mir höchst gegenwärtig ist herangehen durfte, ohne mir die Möglichkeit der verlangten komplizierten und konventionellen wissenschaftlichen Haltung [...] abzuschneiden.

(Briefe 1, p. 208)

Benjamin’s dissertation thus walks a tightrope between his wish to reveal messianism as the true nature of romanticism and the demand to submit to academic form. The result is an anticipation of de Man’s point about the prosopopoeic nature of literary criticism: Benjamin summons Schlegel and Novalis to give face to a messianic romanticism.

Since the German Frühromantiker were Shelley’s near-contemporaries, one may expect that Benjamin’s romanticism dissertation would be a central touching stone in a comparative study of Shelley and Benjamin. However, since Shelley himself had little direct knowledge of their works, and since Benjamin’s characterisation of them is so geared towards Benjamin’s own thought, I will not attempt to ground any affinities between Shelley’s and Benjamin’s thought on subjectivity and knowledge in the German Frühromantik. Instead I will treat them as ‘non-sensuous’ similarities akin to those between Shelley’s and Benjamin’s collocations of clouds and disfiguration. I primarily want to show how Benjamin’s portrait of the Frühromantiker anticipates his last writings, Über den Begriff der Geschichte, and thereby situate Benjamin’s last theses not against the backdrop of Jewish theology or historical materialism (as they are most often read), but that of romantic poetics. This is not to say that I deny the importance of either theology or historical materialism to Benjamin’s theses, but merely to acknowledge that the angle of comparison makes me foreground the element of Benjamin’s historiography that has an affinity to Shelley’s work. It is here that the epistemological perspective in which the word ‘I’ recedes from view is the first point of correspondence.

49. Self-positing.

At the outset of his doctoral dissertation, Benjamin argues for the importance of situating the early romantic concept of art within the epistemological framework that underpins it. Benjamin enters his preliminary epistemological discussion with the Fichtean ‘I’ that primordially posits itself. From this initial positing, knowledge unfolds as the self-reflection of this ‘I.’ However, since reflection is potentially infinite, (I think of my thinking of my thinking etc.), there must be an arrest that interrupts this endless process because we know that we are not endlessly thinking ourselves. Therefore Fichte suggests that the absolute self posits the not-I in order to delimit itself. The autonomous positing of the not-I ensures the sovereignty of the self (it is not limited by anything external to it) as well as demarcates its boundaries against the world, lest the whole world be reduced to this self-positing I. It is here that the early romantics depart from Fichte: ‘Die Romantiker haben in
Benjamin asserts (GS1, p. 26). He argues that Schlegel prefers to think of a ‘self’ rather than an ‘I’ to bypass the opposition between self and world, ‘I’ and ‘not-I.’ ‘Die Romantiker gehen vom bloßen Sich-Selbst-Denken als Phänomen aus; es eignet allem, denn alles ist Selbst. Für Fichte kommt nur dem ich ein Selbst zu.’ (GS1, p. 29) Whereas Fichtean thinking rests on a dichotomy between object and I, romantic thought sees no such division. On the contrary, for the romantics the Absolute is the aggregate of selves where the ‘I’ has no privileged position:

According to this view, nature is a thinking self that comes to know itself through reflection. This reflection is refracted through thinking selves, but these selves are not ontologically distinct entities. Rather they are ‘centres’ of reflection within the universal medium of thought that is Nature or the Absolute. An analogous model applies to art: ‘Die romantische Kunstanschauung beruht darauf, daß im Denken des Denkens kein Ich-Bewußtsein verstanden wird. Die Ich-freie Reflexion ist eine Reflexion im Absolutum der Kunst.’ (GS1, pp. 39-40) This structural analogy between epistemology and aesthetics explains why the romantic concept of art cannot be separated from romantic epistemology.

50. Cyclopaedic history.

Benjamin’s representation of the romantic absolute would lose little of its formal structure if it were rewritten in Shelleyan vocabulary: the thinking ‘self’ of the romantics is a modification (‘centre of reflection’) of the one mind (‘the absolute’). Both the romantic absolute and Shelley’s conception of the one mind are unifying media whose modifications encompass all that exists. ‘A catalogue of all the thoughts of the mind and of all their possible modifications is a cyclopaedic history of the Universe,’ Shelley asserts in his ‘Speculations’ (Prose, p. 182). A synchronic catalogue of the mind is at the same time a diachronic history of the universe. However, this is not a conflation of temporal and spatial categories, but follows from the fact that not all modifications of the one mind can be realised at one moment, they may be mutually exclusive; for instance, I cannot think it is hot and cold at the same time. If the universe is to consist of the totality of possible
modifications of the one mind, cataloguing them all would have to include its modifications at various points in time – and thus the catalogue would become a history. It is within this catalogue of the one mind that differences between things and persons, dreams and hallucinations, 'I' and 'you' disappear, and it is also from this perspective that poetry is written. From this perspective we can also compare Shelley's idea of poetry, as participating 'in the eternal, the infinite and the one' (‘Defence,’ p. 513) to Schlegel's concept of progressive Universalpoesie, ‘progressive, universal poetry’, particularly as laid out by Benjamin:

Shelley's image of the catalogue can be helpful in avoiding the ‘modernizing misunderstanding’ that Benjamin diagnoses. The catalogue of the one mind is simultaneously synchronic and diachronic which is to say that history can be understood as a catalogue index of all possible modifications of the one mind. Likewise, the progression of universal poetry moves through a filled medium – equivalent to the catalogue entries on Shelley's model. It is not an empty infinity produced by merely adding another number to the series, but an infinitude which is filled with potential modifications of the reflective medium. '[Es] entsteht damit die Frage,' Benjamin writes in distinguishing between Fichtean and romantic notion's of infinity

in welchem Sinne sie die Unendlichkeit der Reflexion denn aufgefaßt und sogar betont haben. Offenbar mußte, damit dies letzte geschehen konnte, die Reflexion mit ihrem Denken des Denkens des Denkens und so fort ihnen mehr sein als ein endloser und leerer Verlauf [...] Die Unendlichkeit der Reflexion ist für Schlegel und Novalis in erster Linie nicht eine Unendlichkeit des Fortgangs, sondern eine Unendlichkeit des Zusammenhanges. Dies ist neben und vor ihrer zeitlichen Unabschließbarkeit des Fortgangs, die man anders als eine leere verstehen müßte, entscheidend. (GS1, p. 26)

Benjamin juxtaposes two concepts of infinity; firstly one of continuous advance, here equalled to ‘ein endloser und leerer Verlauf,’ ‘an endless and empty process,’ secondly
‘eine Unendlichkeit des Zusammenhanges,’ an infinitude of interconnections, or ‘connectedness,’ which could in principle take place within a finite realm of infinite connectivity. That is, infinity can be understood in two ways: temporally, as infinite progression, and spatially, as infinite interconnection. Anthony Phelan notes how this opposition hangs on a transition from *Fortgang* to *Zusammenhang*:

The term *Zusammenhang* presents a problem for translation. [...] *Zusammenhang* is not really an abstract noun at all: the associated verb *zusammenhängen* means to be joined to or related to something – literally, to hang together. If the successively higher degrees of reflexivity described as a *Fortgang* hang together in a simple sequence, the introduction of the term *Zusammenhang* is evidently designed to introduce a certain complexity which can avoid the linearity of *Fortgang*.155

In order to unfold the complexity of this notion of interconnectedness, Benjamin further supplements his portrait of Schegel/Novalis with the figure of Hölderlin:

Hölderlin, welcher ohne Fühlung mit den Frühromantikern in einigen ihrer Ideenzusammenhänge, die hier noch begegnet werden, das letzte und unvergleichlich tiefste Wort sprach, schreibt an einer Stelle, an der er einen innigen, höchst triftigen Zusammenhang ausdrücken will: “unendlich (genau) zusammenhängen.” (GS1, p. 26)

The introduction of a line from Hölderlin as a coda to the romantic concept of reflection, even while acknowledging that Hölderlin has no relation to (does not hang together with) the Jena romantics and their concept of reflection is an example of Benjamin’s selective construction of the romantic concept he would immanently uncover. It is also the ‘certain complexity’ which the term introduces that allows Benjamin to conceive of infinitude as a filled medium:

Das Gleiche hatten Schlegel und Novalis im Sinn, indem sie die Unendlichkeit der Reflexion als eine erfüllte Unendlichkeit des Zusammenhanges verstanden: es sollte in ihr alles auf unendlich vielfache Weise, wie wir heute sagen würden systematisch, wie Hölderlin einfacher sagt ‘genau’ zusammenhängen. Mittelbar kann dieser Zusammenhang von unendlich vielen Stufen der Reflexion aus erfaßt werden, indem gradweise die sämtlichen übrigen Reflexionen nach allen Seiten durchlaufen werden. (GS1, p. 26)

While his discussion of romantic epistemology tends to bring out its influence on the romantic concept of art criticism, Benjamin emphasises, ‘daß in anderen Zusammenhängen es wohl denkbar wäre, eine der anderen Bestimmungen – also nicht die Kunst, sondern etwa die Geschichte – jenem Absoluten, wofern nur sein Charakter als Reflexionsmedium gewahrt bliebe, einzudeuten.’ (GS1, p. 44) History can be constructed

---

on the romantic model of art – and this is precisely what Benjamin himself will do when he develops his notion of historical time in Über den Begriff der Geschichte. The two competing notions of infinity in the romanticism dissertation anticipate the distinction that Benjamin makes between the homogenous empty time of progressivist historiography and messianic time filled with the presence of Jetztzeit, now-time. In the thirteenth thesis Benjamin writes:

Die Vorstellung eines Fortschritts des Menschengeschlechts in der Geschichte ist von der Vorstellung ihres eine homogene und leere Zeit durchlaufenden Fortgangs nicht abzulösen. Die Kritik an der Vorstellung dieses Fortgangs muß die Grundlage der Kritik an der Vorstellung des Fortschritts überhaupt bilden. (GS1, p. 701)

And the seeds for such a critique are found in the romanticism dissertation where Benjamin rejects a ‘leere Unendlichkeit der Zeit,’ an ‘empty infinity of time’ in favour of a ‘mediale und qualitative,’ ‘medial and qualitative’ infinitude. ‘Die Geschichte ist Gegenstand einer Konstruktion, deren Ort nicht die homogene und leere Zeit sondern die von Jetztzeit erfüllte bildet,’ reads the fourteenth thesis, a structure that brings the romantic Reflexionsmedium into the realm of historical time (GS1, p. 701). As Bullock glosses it, Jetztzeit is ‘a dramatically foreshortened order of time through which a moment is not chronologically but historically bound up with the present.’ (p. 181)156 All times are infinitely zusammenhängend, connected, rather than progressively sequenced. But it also means that Benjamin’s structure of historical time is based in romantic aesthetics, an affinity I will seek to bring out when I read Benjamin’s late writings on history alongside Shelley’s ekphrastic poem ‘On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery.’

But before turning to this poem, I will comment on Shelley’s only translation of a German contemporary, who is also prominent in Benjamin’s work: Goethe.

---

156 Bullock’s example of such a foreshortening cites Benjamin’s fourteenth thesis: ‘So war für Robespierre das antike Rom eine mit Jetztzeit geladene Vergangenheit [...] Die französische Revolution verstand sich als ein wiedergekehrtes Rom.’ (GS1, p. 701) Jetztzeit is the medium in which past and present are connected. It is not a question of similarity – i.e. not about tracing resemblances between the socio-historical situation in ancient Rome and in revolutionary France – rather Jetztzeit is an interior correspondence more akin to the resemblance between two words that mean the same thing in different languages and that are thereby like to one another with regards to what is meant even if they are not in the least alike in sound or spelling. Read retrospectively, from the viewpoint of Benjamin’s last works, the romanticism dissertation can be understood as an attempt to write a history for Benjamin’s own messianic-romantic thought: Benjamin’s doctoral dissertation prosopopoetically cites a Schlegel/Novalis persona as representative of the Frühromantik through which Benjamin can recognise and anticipate his own historiographical principles in their literary-historical epoch.
Distorted reflections

51. Metaphors of mirroring.

The similarities between the romantic concept of reflection as Benjamin presents it and Shelley’s notion of the one mind are divided by a terminological difference: where Benjamin speaks of ‘reflection,’ Shelley speaks of ‘perception.’ When Shelley does use the word ‘reflection’ he tends to emphasise the word’s sense of mirroring rather than thinking. ‘Why is the reflection in the canal more beautiful than the objects it reflects?’ Shelley for instance asks in a note published as his first ‘Fragment on Beauty’ (Prose, p. 337). His own answer is that ‘[t]he colors are more vivid and yet blended with more harmony; the openings from within into the soft and tender colors of the distant wood and the intersection of the mountain lines surpass and misrepresent truth’ (p. 337). Opening from within, reflection is a form of distancing that harmonises and smoothens out imperfections found in nature. Maxwell foregrounds the distortion at stake in Shelley’s reflective image: ‘Shelley suggests that the non-mimetic and idealising mirroring carried out by art is itself a form of distortion.’ (p. 82) But truth is not only distorted by the ‘non-mimetic and idealising’ reflection, the reflection surpasses reality precisely because truth is misrepresented: distortion is here not disfigurement but beautification. In the essay ‘On Love,’ Shelley applies this structure of aesthetic reflection to human relations when he suggests that we seek a mirror of ourselves in the person we love:

We dimly see within our intellectual nature a miniature as it were of our entire self, yet deprived of all that we condemn or despise, the ideal prototype of every thing excellent and lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man. Not only the portrait of our external being, but an assemblage of the minutest particles of which our nature is composed: a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness: a soul within our soul that describes a circle around its proper Paradise… (SPP, p. 504)

Shelley’s formulation of a soul within the soul is echoed in the title of Epipsychidion – the poetised history of Shelley’s own love life, and the essay ‘On Love’ is often read as a coda to Epipsychidion. The poem is easily made to illustrate what Maxwell identifies as Shelley’s ‘metaphors of mirroring […] to explain identity and attraction’ (p. 54). However, since Shelley does not ultimately believe in the separation of selves, the mirroring at stake here is a peculiar form of self-reflection: if all apparent selves are but portions of the one mind, the reflecting mirror of love must show the one mind reflecting itself in such a manner that only the ideal is perceived. Maxwell is right in identifying a threat in this image: love verges on self-delusion.
52. Goethe’s Medusa.

Shelley rarely considers whether his metaphors of idealised mirroring verge on self-delusion, however, he does encounter this threat directly in his translation of the Walpurgisnacht, ‘May-Day Night’ scene from Goethe’s Faust. In the midst of the revelries, Faust is suddenly interrupted by the sight of a woman:

*Faust.* Seest thou not a pale,
Fair girl, standing alone, far, far away?
She drags herself now forward with slow steps,
And seems as if she moved with shackled feet:
I cannot overcome the thought that she
Is like poor Margaret [Gretchen].

*Mephistopheles.* Let it be – pass on –
No good can come of it – it is not well
To meet it – it is an enchanted phantom,
A lifeless idol; with its numbing look,
It freezes up the blood of man; and they
Who meet its ghastly stare are turned to stone,
Like those who saw Medusa.

*Faust.* Oh, too true!
Her eyes are like the eyes of a fresh corpse
Which no beloved hand has closed, alas!
That is the breast which Margaret yielded to me –
Those are the lovely limbs which I enjoyed!

*Mephistopheles.* It is all magic, poor deluded fool!
She looks to every one like his first love.

*Faust.* Oh, what delight! what woe! I cannot turn
My looks from her sweet piteous countenance.
How strangely does a single blood-red line,
Not broader than the sharp edge of a knife,
Adorn her lovely neck!

*Mephistopheles.* Ay, she can carry
Her head under her arm upon occasion;
Perseus has cut it off for her. These pleasures
End in delusion.157

Shelley’s rendition of Goethe’s Medusa is characterised by transformations. At first sight, Faust asserts that she resembles Gretchen (‘she | Is like poor Margaret’), Mephistopheles

---

then represents her as a ‘lifeless idol’ in analogy to Medusa (‘they | Who meets its ghastly stare are turned to stone | Like those who saw Medusa’). In Faust’s next speech she has actually taken over Gretchen’s body (‘That is the breast which Margaret yielded to me’) and then finally she is fully transformed into Medusa herself (implied by Mephistopheles last words: ‘Perseus has cut if off for her’). Goethe’s Medusa represents the threat of delusion; ‘look[ing] to every one like his first love,’ she offers every man a distorted reflection of his epipsychic desire – a false image that will turn him to stone. Although this process of substitutions is present in Goethe’s text, Shelley’s translation emphasises the petrifying power of the Margaret-like maiden. Shelley makes small but significant adjustments to Mephistopheles description of the young girl:

Es ist ein Zauberbild, ein Idol.
Lhm zu begegnen ist nicht gut;
Vom starren Blick erstarrt des Menschen Blut,
Und er wird fast in Stein verkehrt,
Von der Meduse hast du ja gehört. 158

A literal rendition of these lines would run: ‘It is a magic image, an idol. | To meet it is not good; | From a staring gaze human blood petrifies, | And he almost turns to stone, | Surely you have heard of the Medusa.’ Where Goethe offers the punning observation that a *starrer Blick*, staring gaze, *erstarrt*, petrifies, human blood, Shelley’s rendition lends this gaze agency: ‘its numbing look [...] freezes up the blood of man’ (ll. 386-7). Goethe writes that a man who encounters such a gaze almost *[fast]* turns to stone, whereas Shelley, adding the epithet ‘ghastly,’ more forcefully asserts that ‘they | Who meet its ghastly stare are turned to stone’ (ll. 387-8). And, finally, Mephistopheles’s suggestion that Faust has heard of the Medusa myth, ‘Von der Meduse hast du ja *gehört*’ becomes an allusion to ‘those who saw Medusa’ (Goethe, l. 4194; Shelley, l. 389; my emphases). While Shelley’s changes do not significantly alter the meaning of Mephistopheles’ speech, they do emphasise looking and the ‘numbing’ power of a gaze. Therefore it may not be irrelevant to note that as he worked on this translation, Shelley himself was one of those who had seen Medusa. Shelley’s shift from hearing about the Medusan myth to seeing Medusa evokes an experience captured in his ekphrastic poem ‘On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery,’ begun but not completed in 1819, a few years before he translated this scene from Goethe. Before turning to that poem, however, I will look at Shelley’s translations from Goethe to further examine how Shelley’s poetics feeds into his translation practice.

158 Sämtliche Werke, Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche: Faust Texte, ed. by Albrecht Schöne (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994), vii.1 (ll. 4190-4); further references in text.
53. Shelley translates Goethe.

Shelley's translation of Faust's Walpurgisnacht, 'May-Day Night' scene is drafted in an Italian parchment-bound notebook that can stake a claim on being his very last. On or around 29 January 1822 Shelley completed the 'May-Day Night' and moved on to translate Faust's 'Prolog im Himmel,' a section that he had already translated at some earlier point.\(^{159}\) The exact dates of Shelley's first Faust translation are unknown. E. B. Murray's 'reasonable conjecture' suggests a date between May 1815 and July 1816 (BSM 21, p. 476) although prior suggestions have ranged from Leland R. Phelps's argument that the translation stems from 1810-1811 (cited in BSM 21, p. 476) to Robert C. Casto's claim that it 'seems reasonable to assume that the prosings [of the literal translation] were made the same year [i.e. 1822], as part of the Faust project, as preliminary to the transmutation of their material into viable verse.'\(^{160}\) Webb similarly believes that 'it seems more likely that it [the 'literal' Faust translation] dates from 1821 when Shelley was studying Faust with Gisborne.' (Violet in the Crucible, p. 145) That is, like Casto, Webb presupposes a certain contiguity between the literal version and Shelley's 1822 Faust translations. However, whereas Webb limits himself to exploring the latter (pp. 191-3), Casto builds his argument around a comparison between the uncertainly dated 'literal' translation and the 1822 translation – a study that hinges on the assumption that both drafts are stages in one translation process. However shifty the MS. backing, it is easy enough to see why Casto would want to suppose such a thing: positing that all translations stem from one sustained engagement with Goethe's drama allows him to study Shelley's translation process from literal prose draft to holograph fair copy, giving rare insight into how Shelley fashioned a new English language poem out of Goethe's German.\(^{161}\) In this sense, Casto's supposition is an example of a critic's prosopopoeia – by representing all of Shelley's Faust translation drafts as part of a single 'Faust project' (p. 407), he presents us with an image of Shelley's creative mind in action. But not even Casto's own careful reading of Shelley's translations against the original supports the assumption that they belong to the same creative period. Any reader cannot help but note that Shelley's first rendition of Faust is painfully literal; 'it is not so much a translation as it is a first attempt at learning the words in a language, with little attention to its grammar and less to its syntax' as Murray summarise it in the Bodleian MS. facsimile edition of Shelley's notebook (BSM 21, p. 476). Reading Shelley's

\(^{159}\) For dating of the 1822 Faust translations, see BSM 19, pp. xxvii-xxviii.

\(^{160}\) 'Shelley as Translator of Faust: The "Prologue",' The Review of English Studies, 26 (1975), 407-24 (p. 407); further references in text.

\(^{161}\) The 1822 Faust translation is, alongside the 'Hymn to Mercury,' Shelley's only translation that is still extant in both holograph draft and fair copy. That Shelley took the trouble of producing a fair copy indicates the importance he allotted these works, despite his assertions of the secondary nature of translation. At the same time the co-existence of rough draft and fair copy does indeed offer materials for a thorough investigation of Shelley's translation process; a collation of Shelley's Faust translation drafts and fair copy is found in BSM 19, pp. 319-25.
first translation of Faust conjures up an image of the poet dictionary in hand proceeding word for word, only noting down the first dictionary meaning of each word – and at times barely even that. For instance, Shelley repeatedly renders noch, 'still, yet,' as the sonically similar but semantically unrelated 'not.' Furthermore, the translation shows ignorance of basic tenets of German grammar, e.g. the separable verb, and of colloquial expressions; mostly it does not even concern itself with making sense in English. Curtis C. D. Vail, who in 1948 undertook a systematic overview of the afterlife of Shelley’s Faust translations and followed it up with a close re-evaluation of the translations themselves, concludes that in working on the literal translation, Shelley ‘is still so much a beginner [in German] that «Faust» is still a closed book to him, serving only for language exercise and not literary profit. Viewed in this light, it is improper to speak of these exercises as translations at all.’ More than half a century later, David Constantine likewise recognises the similarity between Shelley’s first Faust translation and contemporary language-learning practices, noting that Shelley ‘would be familiar with such literal construing and such literal cribs from his learning of Latin and Greek.’ However, unlike for Vail and Murray, for Constantine the acknowledgement that Shelley’s Faust translation reads like an exercise does not preclude him from finding beauty in it. He offers a rather generous comparison of Shelley’s ‘strange translation’ with Hölderlin’s translations from the Greek:

Cleaving as close to the Greek as Shelley does to the German, Hölderlin did more than 2,000 lines of Pindar, likewise in fair copy, in the strict intention of learning what his own vernacular might be poetically capable of. It cannot be claimed that Shelley in his literal rendering of a foreign text either intentionally or accidentally gained so much. Nevertheless, there are moments when by this mechanical procedure a strange poetry materializes. (‘German,’ p. 222)

Constantine has himself presented an English translation of Hölderlin’s translations from Sophocles and is therefore well attuned to recognising a Hölderlinian echo in Shelley’s Faust or finding beauty in a literal translation. In his reflections on translation, Constantine conceptualises it as a service: ‘Translation is a service, it serves the foreign text [...] The page is not bare, there is a text on it, which the translator must address, is bound by, is there to serve.’ But the translator’s is a dual service: he or she not only serves the work being translated, but also undertakes a service abroad, in the foreign

162 ‘Shelley’s Translations from Goethe’s Faust’, Symposium, 3 (1949), 187-213 (p. 191); further references in text. For Vail’s survey of the then-existing literature on the Faust translations, see ‘Shelley’s Translations from Goethe’, Germanic Review, 23 (1948), 91–103
language, to return and enrich his or her own. ‘Like journeymen,’ Constantine writes of poet-translators, ‘they were required – literally or figuratively – to travel and to serve abroad.’ (Poetry, p. 36) In a lecture on Hölderlin, named ‘Service Abroad’ Constantine applies this notion of foreign service to Hölderlin’s translation practice, showing how his travels in the Greek served to enrich his German. But this also points to a decisive difference between Shelley and Hölderlin. Where Hölderlin’s literalism is an attempt to stretch the boundaries of his own language, Shelley’s literalism does not have a theoretical backing in his view of poetry. Furthermore, as I will show in looking at Shelley’s second round of Faust translations, for him translation is not service to a foreign text. Rather, for Shelley translation is, like all writing, service to poetry itself.

Shelley’s 1822 translations of Faust are no longer mere language-learning exercises but intended for publication in the then-to-be-launched The Liberal. Admittedly, these translations still find Shelley dictionary in hand. One of Trelawney’s anecdotes from this period presents Shelley ‘in his study with a German folio open, resting on the broad marble mantelpiece, over an old-fashioned fire-place, and with a dictionary in his hand.’ Although Shelley evidences a better grasp of German in his second attempt at translating Faust than in his first, the work still suffers from insufficient German and he gets some things wrong which he got right in the earlier version (cf. Casto’s commentary on the two translations, pp. 5-23). But although Shelley’s errors of translation are easy enough to trace, it is more difficult to determine how many of his deviations from the original are intentional. Webb suggests that ‘it is also possible that, in a few cases at least, Shelley was deliberately reinterpreting Goethe: whether consciously or unconsciously, some of the “mistakes” are clearly related to Shelley’s own concerns.’ (p. 181) In a similar vein Casto sees Shelley’s translations as a ‘workshop’ in which Shelley ‘moved from mere “translation” to true “invention” – that is to say, fine creative work.’ (p. 424) Vail’s detailed assessment of the errors and strengths of Shelley’s translation also tends towards the conclusion that for all its deficiencies with regard to the German, the translation works as a specimen of English-language poetry (pp. 193-205). Constantine likewise concludes that their errors

---

166 ‘I have, – (imagine my presumption) translated several scenes from both [Calderón and Goethe], as the basis of a paper for our journal.’ Shelley’s letter to John Gisborne, 10 April 1822, Letters 2, pp. 406-10 (p. 407); the ‘May-Day Night’ scene was posthumously published in The Liberal’s first issue of 15 October 1822 and, as the first posthumous publication of his work, Shelley’s Faust translation stands at the beginning of Shelley’s afterlife. Constantine places the translation in the atmosphere of Shelley’s death. Citing Shelley’s 18 June 1822 letter to John Gisborne, ‘Jane brings her guitar and if the past and the future could be obliterated, the present would content me so well that I could say with Faust to the passing moment, “Remain, thou, thou art so beautiful”’ (Letters 2, pp. 435-6), Constantine observes: ‘Three weeks later he was drowned.’ (‘German,’ Oxford History of Translation, p. 224; Constantine reproduces this remark in his reflections on translation in Poetry, p. 42). For Constantine, then, Shelley’s drowning is his loss of the Faustian wager.
notwithstanding, the translated ‘scenes stand in a vital relation to the original, and have autonomous poetic life, and on those two grounds – always a requirement – Shelley’s translation may be called a success.’ (‘German,’ p. 223) These critical evaluations have stood the test of time; they all more or less echo The Examiner’s 1833 review of Abraham Hayward’s translation of Faust, which both praises Shelley’s ‘magnificent translations’ and concedes that ‘many passages we have been in the habit of admiring in those translations are not only perversions but direct contradictions of the corresponding passages in Goëthe [sic], and that Shelley wanted a few months’ study of German to make him equal to a translation of Faust’ (cited in BSM 21, p. 467). Shelley’s translations succeed not on account of their fidelity to their original but because they are also original poetry in the English language – which indicates the extent to which Benjamin’s careful distinction between the poet’s and the translator’s task is not tenable within the terms of Shelley’s translation practice.

I have shown how Shelley’s apparent mistranslation of Mercury’s address to Apollo is in fact a deliberate alteration that brings the Homeric account of the birth of lyric poetry closer to Shelley’s own poetics. Here, too, Shelley’s departures from the original seem spurred by an attempt to bring his translation closer to original composition. ‘I feel how imperfect a representation, even with all the license I assume to figure to myself how Göthe [sic] wd. have written in English, my words convey,’ he writes in a letter to John Gisborne (Letters 2, p. 407). Leaving aside Shelley’s dissatisfaction with the translation, his comment implies that he does not seek to render Goethe’s words as they stand in German, but to represent how ‘Göthe wd. have written in English’. Since Shelley believes that the translation ‘must spring again from its [the original’s] seed or it will bear no flower’ (‘Defence,’ SPP, p. 514), the translator has little choice but to assume such poetic license to bring out the original poem’s conception. Where Benjamin proscribes a word-by-word rendition that reveals the manner of meaning of the foreign language in one’s own, Shelley is more interested in creating original poetry out of the translation. Therefore it should not be surprising that the way in which Shelley figures how Goethe would have written in English sounds much like Shelley did himself write in English. Shelley lays the groundwork for such a comparison in a note that he adds to the end of his treatment of the first 28 lines of the ‘Prologue in Heaven.’ The note contains a translation of the same 28 lines, commenting: ‘Such is a literal translation of this astonishing chorus; it is impossible to represent in another language the melody of the versification; even the volatile strength and delicacy of ideas escape in the crucible of translation, and the reader is surprised to find a caput mortuum.’ (Hutchinson, p. 749, n. 1) The terms are recognisable from the passage of the ‘Defence’ where translation is likened to the vanity of casting a violet in a crucible; its vanity arising from the impossibility of reproducing the relations between
sounds and thoughts of a particular poem in a new language. There Shelley argues that the translating poet must create a new poem in his own language and a comparison between Shelley’s poetic and literal renditions of the prologue’s first 28 lines would show how Shelley manufactures a poem out of the caput mortuum he finds in the translation-crucible. But the demand that a translation be simultaneously original creation means that Shelley’s translation not only stands in relation to the original Prolog im Himmel but also to other works in Shelley’s own oeuvre – compare, for instance, the opening lines of Shelley’s rendition of Goethe’s chorus to one of Shelley’s choruses in Hellas, written in the early autumn of 1821, a few months before the Faust translations, and to the opening of ‘The Triumph of Life’ begun shortly after Shelley finished his fair copy of the translation in April or May 1822 (BSM 21, p. 466):

Worlds on worlds are rolling ever
From creation to decay,
Like the bubbles on a river
Sparkling, bursting, borne away.
But they are still immortal
Who through Birth’s oriental portal
And Death’s dark chasm hurrying to and fro,
Clothe their unceasing flight
In the brief dust and light
Gathered around their chariots as they go. (Hellas, ll. 197-206)

Raphael
The sun makes music as of old
Amid the rival spheres of Heaven,
On its predestined circle rolled
With thunder speed
[...]

Michael
And swift and swift, with rapid lightness,
The adorned Earth spins silently,
Alternating Elysian brightness
With deep and dreadful night; the sea
Foams in broad billows from the deep

\footnote{Shelley also wrote a ‘Prologue in Heaven’ for Hellas. Shelley’s prologue is modelled on Goethe’s Prolog im Himmel, which is itself modeled on the opening to the Book of Job; all three are set before the throne of God where Satan appears to indict humanity. Shelley himself had wanted to adapt Job into dramatic form as early as 1818 and his literal rendition of the Prolog im Himmel may have been related to this idea. Jane E. Kim studies Shelley’s interest in Job in ‘Jobian Suffering in Shelley’s “The Cenci”, Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, 52 (2012), 765–796.}
Up to the rocks, and rocks and Ocean,
Onward, with spheres which never sleep,
Are hurried in eternal motion (Faust’s ‘Prologue in Heaven,’ ll. 1-16)

Swift as a spirit hastening to his task
Of glory and of good, the Sun sprang forth
Rejoicing in his splendour, and the mask

Of darkness fell from the awakened Earth. (‘The Triumph of Life,’ ll. 1-4)

These three passages are not quite variations of one another, but they all share the same cosmic imagery of worlds rolling through a universe astir with billowing shifts between light and dark. This fluid motion is complemented by a swift-flowing metre with the characteristically Shelleyan streams of consonance, assonance and frequent enjambments. In fact, this is a mode recognisable in Shelley’s visionary poetry from the early Queen Mab to Prometheus Unbound and strictly speaking there is little in Shelley’s version of Goethe’s prologue to show that it is not one of his original compositions. Webb, setting Shelley’s translation of Goethe’s Prolog against another chorus from Hellas (ll. 1060-5), says that ‘[i]t is not possible to say whether Shelley’s reinterpretation of Faust suggested this passage or whether this passage suggested the image in the translation – what really matters is the fact that the two passages are related and that original work and translation are mutually reinforcing.’ (p. 192) At times the interrelation of original and translation becomes so entwined that the two are hard to distinguish; in ‘The Triumph of Life,’ for instance, the narrator’s description of his situation, ‘before me fled | The night; behind me rose the day; the Deep | Was at my feet, and Heaven above my head’ (ll. 26-8), is an unmarked citation from Goethe’s Faust: ‘Vor mir den Tag und hinter mir die Nacht, | Den Himmel über mir und unter mir die Wellen.’ (ll. 1087-8)169 In the preface to The Cenci, Shelley will refer to a similar borrowing – albeit from Calderón’s El Purgatorio de San Patricio – as ‘the only plagiarism which I have intentionally committed’ (PS2, p. 733), but in fact, for Shelley, ‘plagiarism’ of another poet’s materials is a constitutive element of how poetry lives on over time. ‘Have you read Calderon’s Magico Prodigioso?’ he asks in the letter to Gisborne in which he announces his translation of Goethe. ‘I find a striking similarity between Faust & this drama [El mágico prodigioso] [...] I should say, Göthe was the greatest philosopher & Calderon the greatest poet. Cypriano evidently furnished the germ of Faust, as Faust may furnish the germ of other poems; although it is different from it in structure & plan, as the acorn from the oak.’ (Letters 2, p. 407) Shelley’s acknowledged ‘plagiarism’ from Calderón and his suggestion that the same author also furnished the

169 I owe this allusion to G. M. Matthews. He further suggests that Faust’s speech influences the contrast between natural and artificial life in ‘The Triumph of Life.’ ‘On Shelley’s “The Triumph of Life”’, Studia Neophilologica, 34 (1962), 104–34 (p. 115, n. 2)
germ to Goethe’s *Faust* add up to the implication that Shelley’s *The Cenci* and Goethe’s *Faust* are the offspring of a common parent. Shelley’s and Goethe’s works are further related through Shelley’s ‘plagiarisms’ of Goethe in *Hellas* ‘Prologue in Heaven’ and ‘The Triumph of Life.’ Ultimately, by virtue of being poets, Shelley, Goethe, and Calderón are all three co-creators of a ‘that great poem, which all poets, like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world.’ (‘Defence,’ SPP, p. 522).

Since all poets participate in the one mind the distinction between creator and translator is as relative as the one between the words ‘I, you, they.’ The notion of the one mind in which all poetry originates provides with Shelley’s theoretical justification for his translation practice, which is never far removed from his original composition. Just as Hölderlin has a reason for being literal in his Pindar or Sophocles, so Shelley has a reason for the license he takes with Goethe’s work. Furthermore, if all poems unfold germs sown in previous works, then the relation between original poems is not essentially different from that between original and translation: the translation merely unfolds these germs in a new language. In what follows, however, I will turn to Shelley’s ekphrastic Medusa poem to explore another kind of translation: not translation between languages but a passage from visual to verbal modes of representation. I will draw on the image of Medusa and the concept of petrified reflection to connect some motifs in Shelley and Benjamin, much like the collocation of clouds and disfiguration did in my reading of ‘The Triumph of Life’ and *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*. There I placed the emphasis on Shelley’s ‘The Triumph of Life’ to link the workings of figurative language and historical narration, now I will turn to Benjamin’s work on history in his late writings to show how – via the image of Medusan petrification – Benjamin introduces aesthetic motifs into his historiography.170

---

In the gallery

54. Ekphrasis.

Shelley began writing 'On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery' during his stay in Florence in 1819, when he spent his days in the Uffizi galleries, drafting notes on the statues he found there. The painting in question is no longer attributed to Leonardo da Vinci but an anonymous sixteenth century Flemish painter. The title’s inaccuracy notwithstanding, it clearly signals the ekphrastic nature of the poem, making it Shelley’s only explicitly ekphrastic poem or rather poetic fragment as the poem is not completed. On James A. W. Heffernan’s influential definition of ekphrasis, ekphrasis is a 'literary representation of visual art' that is not simply a convergence of visual art and literature, but, rather, ekphrasis 'explicitly represents representation itself.' In other words, the ekphrastic trajectory from the visual to the verbal calls attention to the similarities and differences between these two modes of representing 'the same thing.' So doing, ekphrasis trespasses on the dichotomy between visual and verbal art influentially established by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in Laokoon oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie [Laokoön, or on the Limits of Painting and Poetry]. Lessing rejects Horatian ut pictura poesis and claims that whereas painting is a spatial art, poetry is temporal – it should not deal with static description, but foreground the musical flow of syllables as they unfold in time. Hegel later appropriates Lessing’s distinction as one between temporal arts (poetry, music) and spatial arts (sculpture, painting). The influence of these two thinkers on aesthetics has led to a perception of ekphrasis as an inferior form. Later critics have sought to show that ekphrasis does not simply congeal the narrative, but rather brings the static image to life: description is itself a form of narrative. At the same time, image can be seen as a form of threat to narrative, proverbially a picture says more than a thousand words. In Picture Theory, W. J. T. Mitchell turns to Shelley’s poem to discuss ekphrasis in terms of fear – the fear that the verbal description will be so lively

171 The attribution to da Vinci was based on the authority of Vasari’s The Lives of the Most Excellent Architects, Painters and Sculptors (1550, revised and expanded 1568) where he tells an anecdote of how da Vinci, asked to paint a peasant’s buckler, ‘started to think what he could paint on it so as to terrify anyone who saw it and produce the same effect as the head of Medusa.’ When his father sees the finished buckler, he ‘gave a sudden start, not realizing that he was looking at the buckler and that the form he saw was, in fact, painted on it.’ In The Medusa Reader, ed. by Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) pp. 60-1. The painting is so like life that it reverses the archetypical Medusan effect – where Medusa petrifies, turns men to statues, Leonardo’s painting brings the dead Medusa to life. Vasari’s account shows how the mimetic force of representation generates the semblance of life – which is also the main theme in my use of the Medusa myth.

172 In the 1960s, Neville Rogers added an additional stanza to the poem. Catherine Maxwell has shown this stanza to be an assemblage of unrelated fragments in ‘Shelley’s “Medusa”: The Sixth Stanza’, Notes and Queries, 36 (1989), 173–4

that it will bring the image to life and make the poet’s words obsolete. The Medusa is a particularly piquant object for the ekphrastic fear because if she would come alive, the poet would be petrified by his creation. While the myth itself never specifies whether it is being seen by her or seeing her that is deadly, we can be certain that Medusa ‘must be seen through the mediation of mirrors (Perseus’s shield) or paintings or descriptions.’

Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux calls Medusa’s reflection the ‘condition of her visibility’ suggesting that the fact that she petrifies all who behold or are beholden by her effectively renders Medusa invisible. Perseus, the only man to have survived looking at Medusa, overcomes the Gorgon by capturing her reflection in a shield given to him by the goddess Athena. He decapitates her with a sickle provided by Hermes, although it is possible that Medusa is already dead – having petrified herself by meeting her own gaze in the shield. Any image of Medusa can only be a representation of her reflection, because, as Mitchell points out, if ‘she were actually beheld by the poet, he could not speak or write; if the poet’s ekphrastic hopes were fulfilled, the reader would be similarly transfixed, unable to read or hear.’ (p. 172) On Mitchell’s picture, the ekphrastic poet seeks to bring the image alive at the same time as he fears the success of his endeavour: in short, he is writing to fail.

55. Automorphosis.

In his discussion of the ekphrastic fear of the image coming alive, Mitchell does not consider that even if Shelley’s poem would bring Medusa to life, the life in question would not be the same as normal life; it would be a life peculiar to artistic works – what Benjamin has defined as their ‘afterlife’ and which has nothing to do with biological life. Louis Marin’s discussion of Caravaggio’s Medusa-shield focuses on the temporal displacement inherent in the Medusan scenario and helps clarify the difference between lived life and the kind of life that ekphrastic works can hope to attain. Marin highlights the dual determination at play in representations of Medusa: when we see a representation of Medusa we see the very sight that killed her, but that we can behold unscathed, shielded by the medium in which the representation is presented. Medusa’s death and Medusa’s attaining visibility are two sides of the same coin. Therefore any representation of Medusa not only captures her likeness, but also her death. Marin reads such representations as a temporal fold: one that ‘condenses two historical moments [...] causing each of them to envelop the other’ – the last moment when Medusa is alive (the moment when she catches sight of herself in the shield) and the first when she is dead (killed by her

175 ‘The Gorgon, Paradigm of Image Creation’ in The Medusa Reader, pp. 262-6 (p. 262); further references in text.
reflection in the shield). Marin speaks of this transition as an automorphosis: unlike in a metamorphosis, Medusa does not change her form. Rather, what changes is her manner of being: in one moment she is alive, in the next she is turned to stone. A poem by William Drummond, a seventeenth century namesake to Shelley’s favourite philosopher, well illustrates such automorphosis:

Of that Medusa strange,
Who those that did see her in Rockes did change,
None Image carv’d is this;
*Medusas selfe it is*.

Since Medusa dies by self-petrification it is of course possible that any statue of Medusa is in fact the real thing – ‘*Medusas selfe it is*.’ At the same time, Drummond’s assertion ‘None Image carv’d is this’ is belied by the verbal medium in which he represents the statue of Medusa; his poem is precisely an image carved in words – it may be a verbal reflection of Medusa’s head, but it is not her ‘selfe’ itself. Drummond’s poem thus names three Medusas: the petrified Medusa, a carved image (statue) of the petrified Medusa, and his own verbal image of ‘that Medusa strange.’ In a formal sense, the term automorphosis captures how an image can simultaneously exist on literal and figurative levels: it is one image in different media. Therefore the concept can well be applied to any ekphrastic text; as the ekphrastic text presents the visual image in the medium of words the image can be said to undergo an automorphosis in which the represented remains ‘the same’ even as the manner of representation changes from vision to language. But Marin for his part is interested in another aspect of the word: ‘The automorphosis,’ he goes on, ‘is also a displacement from one temporality to another, a passage from the moving, linear time of life and history to the time of representation with its immobility and permanence.’ (pp. 136-7) The Medusan effect is a displacement of temporalities: between the time of life and the time of art. But this displacement is also, necessarily, a picture of violence – the violence of Medusa’s gaze ‘applied intransitively to itself, reflecting itself and thereby producing its own petrifaction’ which is the violence that both kills her and makes her visible (Marin, p. 136). In this regard the Medusan scenario is representative of something that happens in all art, namely the fixing of living objects in a medium that allows them to live on, as artworks, over time. The violence of Medusa’s gaze therefore stands for a violence characteristic of all representation as it transfers the represented object from living life into the afterlife of art.

56. The ever-shifting mirror.
The artistic representation that allows us to behold Medusa takes the place of and functions as a reflective shield in which we can meet her gaze. It is worth noting that the artistic work cannot be identified with Perseus’ shield: after slaying Medusa, Perseus goes on to mount Medusa’s decapitated head onto the shield, where it looses none of its petrifying power. The shield is thenceforth known as the Gorgoneion and returned to Athena to serve as her apotropaic aegis in her function as protectoress of Athens. Since the Gorgoneion retains the petrifying power of Medusa’s gaze, it cannot be beheld any more than Medusa could and a second reflection is needed to make it available for contemplation. Most traditional representations of Medusa are thus reproductions of the Gorgoneion rather than portraits of Medusa and, in fact, most of them also take the form of a shield: Caravaggio’s Medusa-shield may be the most famous such image and it can be said to stand at a double remove from the female figure it depicts. Although Shelley must have seen this work in the Uffizi, he chooses a painting of Medusa that is unusual in that it represents her decapitated head lying on the ground, at an angle that foregrounds the snakes rather than Medusa’s face [Figure 4].

The unfamiliar perspective allows Shelley to forgo representing a representation of the Gorgoneion and instead generate his own reflective surface within the poem. Thus, rather than beginning in the descriptive vein of ekphrastic poetry, Shelley’s poem opens with the words ‘It lieth, gazing...’ as if we were standing right in front of the decapitated head. If

178 The first ekphrastic account is, incidentally, Homer’s depiction of Achilles’ shield.
ekphrasis is generically concerned with describing, Shelley slightly shifts this focus and makes gazing into the central motif. As befits a poem on the Medusa, this is a petrifying gaze, however, Shelley makes it impossible to decide who the subject of petrification is. We are told that ‘it is less the horror than the grace | Which turns the gazer’s spirit into stone’ (ll. 9-10), but we do not learn who this petrified gazer is: the lyric mode would suggest that Shelley is speaking of the petrification of the poem’s ‘I’, while the ekphrastic mode suggests it is the reader who is actually beholding Medusa through the poem’s words that turns to stone. Perseus is not mentioned, but the myth makes him a likely candidate,\(^\text{179}\) while the poem’s opening description of Medusa’s decapitated head, ‘It lieth, gazing…’, suggests that it is Medusa herself who is the gazer and that it is consequently her own spirit that has turned to stone. But this is not the only thing that happens in the moment of petrification:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Yet it is less the horror than the grace} \\
\text{Which turns the gazer’s spirit into stone,} \\
\text{Whereon the lineaments of that dead face} \\
\text{Are graven, till the characters be grown} \\
\text{Into itself, and thought no more can trace (ll. 9-13)}
\end{align*}
\]

Shelley consistently refers to Medusa’s head as ‘it.’\(^\text{180}\) It imprints its features onto the gazer’s, and turns the latter’s spirit to stone. The moment of petrification rests on a transition in which the petrified spirit takes on the features of the head that ‘lieth, gazing’ in the first line so that even if the gazer is not originally Medusa, the gazer’s spirit receives the ‘lineaments’ of her ‘dead face.’ In other words, the anonymous gazer becomes Medusa’s mirror image. Furthermore, these inward-growing characters also correspond to the written characters that we see on the page, since the lineaments of Medusa’s dead face are precisely the main image of the ekphrastic poem. In the poem’s final transformation this image itself appears as a mirror image written in the poem’s characters:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{For from the serpents gleam a brazen glare} \\
\text{Kindled by that inextricable error} \\
\text{Which makes a thrilling vapour of the air} \\
\text{Become a [ ] and ever-shifting mirror} \\
\text{Of all the beauty and the terror there –} \\
\text{A woman’s countenance, with serpent locks,} \\
\text{Gazing in death on heaven from those wet rocks. (ll. 34-40)}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{179}\) Maxwell even goes so far as to identify Perseus with Percy S. (The Female Sublime, p. 83) \\
\(^{180}\) l. 1; l. 4; l. 5; l. 17; in addition to the ’itself’ of the 13\(^{th}\) line. Not once does Shelley use ‘she’ or ‘her’ in this poem, at most he refers to a ‘woman’s countenance’ (l. 39).
'The mirror,' Jacobs writes about the 'ever-shifting' mirror that forms in the blank space of the 37th line, 'resembles both the painting and the poem that take the head of the Medusa as their model; but that reflection is also the image of a work of art produced from within the work of art.' Jacobs thus invites us to read this mirror as a self-reflective surface in which the poem is reflected from within the poem. The appearance of the mirror resolves the problem of the gazer's identity as Medusa's, the narrator's, and the reader's gazes all meet in the ever-shifting mirror. Since the Medusan 'lineaments' have been graven onto the gazer's spirit in one of the poem's earlier moves, the self-reflection that Medusa contemplates in the mirror is also a reflection of the poem's gazing narrator as well as its gazing reader. The *mise en abyme*-effect is further heightened when we recall that these Medusan 'characters' are also homophonic with the written characters on the page, and, moreover, that the image seen in the ever-shifting mirror described by these characters, 'A woman's countenance, with serpent locks,' is the very same scene as is depicted on the painting in the Florentine gallery that the poem describes. However, the mirror is absent from the painting itself, which is to say that it is Shelley and not the anonymous artist who introduces a mirror into the scene (hence the significance of Shelley's choosing a painting that does not depict Perseus' reflective shield as object of his ekphrasis). Comparing Shelley's mirror to the painting, Jacobs suggests that the mirror is 'formed of a vapor that arises from her [Medusa's] own mouth' (p. 14) and links this vapour to the petrified spirit via the word spirit's etymological connection to the 'breath of life' (as in *spiritus, anima, psyche, or ruach*), which in its turn can be read as 'an image of poetry, as the spoken word.' (p. 13) Admittedly, it takes some imagination to identify the mist seen on the painting with the 'ever-shifting mirror' of Shelley's ekphrasis on it. By introducing this mirror, Shelley breaks the promise of ekphrasis – to give an accurate description of a painting – even as it is this very distortion that fulfils the essence of ekphrastic writing as a 'literary representation of visual art' (to use Heffernan's definition). Shelley literally depicts an ever-shifting mirror of words in which the scene depicted on the painting is reflected. It is the reflection seen in Shelley's ever-shifting mirror, rather than the one on the canvas, that the critic has to trace in writing 'On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery.' 'It is in this sense,' Jacobs concludes, 'that criticism, too, another attempt to behold, might well be regarded as an act of the Imagination.' (p. 18) Such criticism must make the reader see what the critic has read by philologically and imaginatively completing Shelley's unfinished fragment. Therefore criticism is also an ekphrastic act, however, the literary critic has the benefit of working in the same medium as the work he or she describes. In addition to description, the critic operates with citation: within the

---

critical text citations become the 'ever-shifting mirrors' that generate an image of the work to be criticised from within the critical text.

57. Returning a gaze.

Commenting on Shelley's conversion of Medusa's apotropaic gaze into an interplay of gazes, William Hildebrand suggests that his 'Medusa replicates the process of self-involution in which subject turns to object: to gaze at is somehow suddenly to be gazed at.' The ease with which 'to gaze at' transforms into 'to be gazed at' points to what we could, after Benjamin, regard as the poem's auratic element. In one of Benjamin's early formulations of his theory of aura, the 1927 review of Gottfried Keller's Sämtliche Werke, Benjamin writes: 'Das Beschreiben ist nämlich Sinnenlust, weil in ihm der Gegenstand den Blick des Schauenden zurückgibt, und in jeder guten Beschreibung die Lust, mit der zwei Blicke, die sich suchen, aufeinander treffen, eingefangen ist.' (GS2, p. 290) The interplay of gazes at work in Shelley's Medusa poem would thus merely be an extreme case of what happens in every descriptive text. In the following decade, Benjamin develops this idea into his theory of aura.

In the margin of a sheet with an add for S. Pellegrino water, Benjamin scribbles: 'Blick im Rücken | Begegnung des Blickes | Aufblicken,' [Figure 5] The slightly uncanny awareness of being looked at that causes one to look up is incorporated into the notion of aura. In one of his last finished texts, 'Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire' [On Some Motifs in Baudelaire] (1939), Benjamin rewrites this exchange of gazes in terms of

---


183 Reproduced Walter Benjamins Archive: Bilde, Texte und Zeichen, ed. by Ursula Marx, Gudrun Schwarz, Michael Schwarz, and Erdmut Wizisla, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), p. 40 and, in Esther Leslie's English translation, in Walter Benjamin's Archive (London and New York: Verso, 2007), pp. 44–5. The editorial headnote suggests that 'Im [Benjamins] Exil, so hat man den Eindruck, gebot die ökonomische Not, alles zu verwenden (oder wiederzuverwenden), war ihm in die Finger kam' (p. 32), and yet it is somewhat appropriate that Benjamin's reflection on aura should take place on something as incongruous as a piece of advertising material whose purpose is precisely to conjure an aura around the object it sells. Its current location in the Walter Benjamin Archive has confirmed its auratic status – even if not in the manner in which the original advertisement designers anticipated.
expectation and fulfilment. Aura is here defined as the fulfilment of the expectation that the inhuman object will return the human gaze: ‘Dem Blick wohnt aber die Erwartung inne, von dem erwidert zu werden, dem er sich schenkt. Wo diese Erwartung erwidert wird [...] da fällt ihm die Erfahrung der Aura in ihrer Fülle zu’ (GS1, p. 646). Having established this, Benjamin cites the fragment almost verbatim:

Die Erfahrung der Aura beruht also auf der Übertragung einer in der menschlichen Gesellschaft geläufigen Reaktionsform auf das Verhältnis des Unbelebten oder der Natur zum Menschen. Der Angesehene oder angesehen sich Glaubende schlägt den Blick auf. Die Aura einer Erscheinung erfahren, heißt, sie mit dem Vermögen belehnen, den Blick aufzuschlagen. (GS1, pp. 646-7)

Aura displaces the human ability to return a gaze into the world of things, such as for instance Shelley’s depiction of Medusa’s decapitated head as an ‘it’ that yet ‘lieth, gazing.’ In Shelley’s poem the reader meets this gaze in the ever-shifting mirror that forms in the poem’s last stanza, but that is at the same time the poem’s self-reflective image of itself. In other words, the poem’s various gazes meet in this mirror and thus fulfil the aural expectation that one’s gaze be returned by a lifeless object – here the object is the poem’s own self-reflective image of itself. However, since the poem not only returns a gaze, but also inscribes its characters upon the gazer’s spirit it almost turns into a parody of its own aural expectations. When encountering a work named after the Medusa, we expect to be able to safely meet her gaze through the artistic reflection. Instead Shelley offers a melee of reflections where there is definitely gazing going on, but no definite gazer. The outcome of this gazing is that the beholder has the characters of Medusa’s decapitated head imprinted on his or her spirit in a hyperbolic amplification of the process that Benjamin is depicting. One could even go so far as to invert Benjamin’s statement and say that here it is the poem that endows the reader with the ability to return its gaze(s); by arresting its gazing in an ever-shifting mirror image, the poem reveals itself as a ‘fixed’ reflection, an object for contemplation. In a footnote to the last quoted sentence Benjamin calls this phenomenon ‘ein Quellpunkt der Poesie,’ ‘a wellspring of poetry’ (GS1, p. 647; SW4, p. 354, n. 77) that draws the poet into the close distance of aura. Shelley’s ever-shifting mirror is such a wellspring.
Medusan gaze

58. Adorno’s portrait of Benjamin.

‘Der Blick seiner Philosophie ist medusisch,’ Adorno writes in his ‘Charakteristik Walter Benjamin’ ['Portrait of Benjamin']. Four years later, in the introduction to the first edition of Benjamin’s *Schriften* (1955), Adorno again foregrounds Benjamin’s ‘medusischen, zum Erstarren zwingenden Blick,’ ‘medusan, fixing gaze’. Since both the ‘Charakteristik Walter Benjamins’ and the *Schriften* edition form part of Adorno’s work on securing the posthumous legacy of Benjamin, one can say that Adorno here gives Benjamin the Gorgon’s face as an image through which the reader may engage with his work. However, as he goes on to unpack the image it becomes obvious that Benjamin’s gaze not only petrifies but also brings to life – Adorno represents it as a dynamic of petrification and motion:

> Indem der Gedanke glechsam zu nah an der Sache herantritt, wird diese fremd wie jegliches Alltägliche untern Mikroskop. [...] Nicht der Blick als solcher beansprucht unvermittelt das Absolute, aber die Weise des Blickens, die gesamte Optik ist verändert. Die Technik der Vergrößerung läßt das Erstarrte sich bewegen und das Bewegte innehalten. (‘Charakteristik,’ p. 251)

Adorno’s emphasis on the interchange of rigidity and motion reads like an echo of Lessing’s distinction between temporal and spatial modes of art. Certainly his claim that Benjamin’s philosophy is Medusan must be read in an aesthetic rather than a mythic sense. Where the mythic Medusa irrevocably petrifies those she encounters, Benjamin’s Medusan glance enlivens the dead and petrifies the living; the Medusan moment is poised precisely on the boundary separating the mobile time of life from the fixed medium of representation. Adorno’s emphasis on Benjamin’s ability to make the object appear ‘foreign’ also resembles Shelley’s contention that poetry ‘makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar’ (‘Defence,’ SPP, p. 517). While I would not venture so far as to claim that Adorno is here primarily evoking the aesthetics of defamiliarisation, his phrasing points to an element of Shelleyan poetics that I would like to bring into relation

---

184 in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 10.1, 238–53 (p. 243); further references in text. The ‘Charakteristik’ is part of Adorno’s 1951 essay collection *Prismen* [Prisms].

with Benjamin's philosophy of history. In my reading of 'The Triumph of Life' I stressed how Shelley's staging of the triumphal procession of Western civilisation unmasked it as a march of barbarism. The lesson that Shelley would teach through this unfamiliar perspective on a familiar historical narrative is an awareness of the ideological nature of representation. This is not to say that Shelley wants to replace the received view on history with one of his own making, rather Shelley highlights the representational status of these representations – none of which can give the truth about history precisely because they are representations rather than history itself. ‘On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery’ teaches a similar kind of lesson in self-reflective awareness by adding a mirror to the painting it describes. This mirror both reflects the painting and represents the poem’s words – it is thus simultaneously a self-reflective figure of the poem itself and a descriptive image of the painting the poem is an ekphrasis on. In this and the following three sections I explore a comparable self-reflective dynamic in Benjamin’s writings on history by focusing on Benjamin’s use of Medusan images of petrification. I argue that Benjamin’s use of Medusan motifs serves the purpose of promoting a self-reflective awareness about representations of history as representations. This is an effect quite similar to the one Shelley achieves by presenting history in a self-effacing series of new visions in which the selfsame triumphal procession appears. However, to get to Benjamin’s last comments on the representation of history, I begin with what Benjamin wrote on literary representation in his early works.

59. Undulating life.

I have already noted Benjamin’s redefinition of the concept of life to accommodate the life of works of art in ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers.’ Benjamin tackles the idea that literary objects are alive by redefining life as everything that is subject to history:

Vielmehr nur wenn allem demjenigen, wovon es Geschichte gibt und was nicht allein ihr Schauplatz ist, Leben zuerkannt wird, kommt dessen Begriff zu seinem Recht. Denn von der Geschichte, nicht von der Natur aus, geschweige von so schwankender wie Empfindung und Seele, ist zuletzt der Umkreis des Lebens zu bestimmen. (GS4, p. 11)

This expanded conception of life as history turns life into afterlife: it is by tracing the history of a phenomenon that we perceive its life. In his essay on Goethe’s Wahlverwandtschaften, begun in the same year in which ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers’ is published, Benjamin introduces a further distinction into his concept of life as afterlife

---

186 Given Shelley’s popularity in Russia in the early twentieth century it is not impossible that this formulation influenced the Russian Formalist doctrine of oストラネーヌエ，ostranenie，which Brecht later appropriated as the ‘Verfremdungs-Effekt.’
187 Benjamin wrote the essay on Goethe’s Wahlverwandtschaften in 1921-22 and published it in 1924.
by separating the work of the artistic creator from that of the Creator. Where God creates out of nothing, the artist forms the work out of chaos: ‘Nicht aus dem Nichts tritt es [das Kunstwerk] hervor sondern aus dem Chaos.’ (GS1, p. 180) Benjamin’s description of chaos is structurally related to the lateral infinitude of forms that he ascribed to the romantics in his doctoral dissertation. There he described the romantic *Reflexionsmedium* ‘als Kontinuum der Formen, als ein Medium, dessen Versinnlichung durch das Chaos als den Schauplatz ordnender Durchwaltung’ is found in both Schlegel and Novalis (GS1, p. 92). In that context, Benjamin illustrates this point with a quotation from Schlegel: ‘Aber die höchste Schönheit, ja die höchste Ordnung ist denn doch nur die des Chaos, nämlich eines solchen, welches nur auf die Berührung der Liebe wartet, um sich zu einer harmonischen Welt zu entfalten.’ (*Jugendschriften*, ii, p. 177; cited in GS1, p. 92) This ‘touch of love’ transforms chaos into a harmonious world: love is a form of form-giving. Which is to say that the artist does not create a harmonious world with chaos as his means, rather he touches and re-touches the chaos, gives form to it, so that what was once chaotic now appears harmonious. In the Goethe essay, Benjamin develops the same thought with recourse to Medusan metaphors. ‘Künstlerisches Schaffen »macht« nichts aus dem Chaos’ he asserts (GS1, p. 180). Rather artistic creation gives form within this chaos:


The life undulating in the chaos is a semblance of life but it is not life. In other words, the lifelikeness that enlivens art is illusive and belongs to the chaos, not to the world. To emerge from this chaos into the world, art must resist its own semblance of life; put differently, artworks must signal their own awareness of themselves as works of art. This is accomplished by the expressionless: it arrests the undulating life in works of art and thereby reveals the truth of art: however lifelike, it is not life. If a work of art lacks an expressionless moment, it becomes mere semblance, *bloße Schein*, and stops being a work of art. In a reading of this passage, Nägele notes the Medusan dynamic at play here and clarifies that ‘[o]nly when this undulation is captivated and petrified in a moment is form born, and with it, the work of art. A violent, petrifying intervention, a caesura must take place.’\footnote{Theatre, Theory, Speculation: Walter Benjamin and the Scenes of Modernity (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 122} The caesura is a concept lifted from Hölderlin’s poetics which Benjamin mentions...
both in his Goethe essay and in his later theorisation of historical method. It is an analogue for the expressionless that arrests and petrifies the undulating movement of life in a moment, *Augenblick*, which literally translates as the blink of an eye; ‘Das ... wogende Leben muß erstarrt und wie in einem Augenblick gebannt erscheinen.’ (GS1, p. 181; my emphasis)

60. ‘Historiotropography.’

Benjamin’s concept of the expressionless is structurally linked to a cluster of related concepts that appear in his writings: form, limit-value, caesura, and *Jetztzeit*. All of them figure an interruption of movement within a filled medium – be it a romantic lateral infinitude of reflection, chaos, or historical time. I will not explore Benjamin’s often wilfully esoteric depictions of this medium, but focus on the moment of interruption, which I read as a self-reflective moment that alerts us to the representational status of the object described. In the early writings, the petrifying interruption destroys the semblance of life and reveals the truth of art: that it is not life. My central claim in what follows is that, in his writings on history, Benjamin employs the trope of petrification to make us aware of the representational status of representations of history – thereby showing the truth of such representations: that they are not history. ‘In each of the theses,’ Ronald Benier writes in an essay on Benjamin’s *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, ‘Benjamin seems to be defining the stance of the self-conscious historical materialist, as opposed to the false historicism of those who lack a genuine historical consciousness;’\(^\text{189}\) As Benier’s italics underline, it is a question of self-awareness: the task is not merely to write history ‘against the grain’ or from the viewpoint of ‘the oppressed’ – as is the most common interpretation of Benjamin’s theses\(^\text{190}\) – but to write history with an awareness of *writing*. Bahti’s *Allegories of Reading* acknowledges the literary nature of Benjamin’s stance and develops a ‘tropological’ reading of the theses as

...a kind of *literary* historiography and specifically as a rhetorical or allegorical theory of history, where tropes and allegory are the means of the *production* of historical meaning (in the movement from events to images), so that with Benjamin historiography can be said to transform itself into "historiotropography."\(^\text{191}\)

---

\(^\text{189}\) ‘Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy of History’, *Political Theory*, 12 (1984), 423–34 (pp. 423-4); Benier argues that Benjamin develops Marx’s historical analyses not from the viewpoint of current political action but from the question of how to respond to past suffering, working in opposition to Marx’s quip to ‘let the dead bury their dead.’

\(^\text{190}\) See for instance Michael Löwy’s *Fire Alarm* for an attempt to mediate between Benjamin’s theses and the oppressed of history represented by a case study from South America. *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’*, trans. by Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 2005)

Bahti’s privileging of ‘the production of historical meaning’ over the content of historical narration is a call for a self-reflective historiography — and hence the appeal of literary models, such as allegory, that signal their own artificiality. If this self-awareness is lost, the historical narration falls victim to what may be termed its own semblance of history. Just like artworks must arrest the semblance of life undulating in them to reveal that they are not life, so historical accounts must signal their difference from history. Since no account of history (short of its redemption) can do justice to all the suffering it encompasses, the would-be historiographer must be aware that his representation is just that: a representation among others, one that takes its place among those prior representations that he himself seeks to adjust. This is the lesson embodied in Benjamin’s portrait of the angel of history.

61. Angelus Novus.

The opening sentence of Benjamin’s ninth thesis on history, ‘Es gibt ein Bild von Klee, das Angelus Novus heißt’ (GS1, p. 697) signals the ekphrastic status of this text and thus generically raises the question of representation. Benjamin owned the original so the only access his readers could have been expected to have to Klee’s image is through the medium of his words. At the outset of this thesis I noted Scholem’s autobiographical reading of Benjamin’s angel, which suggested that we read Benjamin’s references to Klee’s picture as entstellte self-portraits. Like Adorno, Scholem evokes a Medusan dynamic in his portrait of Benjamin. ‘Er [der Engel] faßt den [Benjamin], der ein Gesicht von ihm erlangt hat, der sich Auge in Auge von ihm bannen läßt, auch seinerseits fest ins Auge.’ (‘Walter Benjamin und sein Engel,’ p. 122) On Scholem’s Medusan metaphor Benjamin is petrified, gebannt, by looking the Angelus in the eye and the Angelus is petrified by him in its turn. Scholem’s use of the verb bannen in this autobiographical context also refers to how Benjamin stood unter dem Banne of Jula Cohen to whom his essay on Goethe’s Wahlverwandtschaften (in which he theorises the petrifying force of the expressionless) is dedicated. Nonetheless, Scholem’s depiction of Benjamin as petrified by meeting the Angelus’ gaze notes the main thing that makes Klee’s Angelus Novus arresting: the figure depicted is staring at the beholder with a full frontal gaze – a pose characteristic of Medusa. Frontisi-Ducroux has noted that whereas most subjects of classical art – whether human or divine – are depicted in a three-quarter profile, Medusa is most often

192 On Scholem’s reading, the expressionless of Benjamin’s own critical essay is that he reads Goethe’s novel in analogy to his own situation: married to Dora, in love with Jula he is like Goethe’s protagonist Eduard who is married to Charlotte and in love with Ottile.

So darf man auch fünfzig Jahre nach der Auffassung seiner berühmten Abhandlung über Goethe’s Wahlverwandtschaften, die einen Höhepunkt der ästhetischen Literatur darstellt, einmal die einfache, aber verhohlene Wahrheit aussprechen, daß diese – wie Hoffmannsthal sie nannte »schlechthin unvergleichliche« Arbeit und ihre Einsichten nur möglich waren, weil sie in einer menschlichen Situation Benjamins verfaßt wurde, welche der des Romans haargenau entsprach. (Scholem, ‘Walter Benjamin und sein Engel,’ p. 91)
represented from a full frontal angle. Given the specificity of the image, it is possible that Klee is purposefully painting his *Angelus Novus* as a Medusan figure, certainly his *Angelus* shares a quality of the frontal posture that Frontisi-Ducroux highlights: 'The frontal character is a figure cut off from its iconic environment. By that very fact it can come into contact with the addressee of the image.' (p. 263) In other words, the frontal character returns the beholder's gaze, a crucial feature of Benjamin's theory of aura. Like the Medusan images that Frontisi-Ducroux refers to, Klee's painting shows little in the way of iconic environment beyond the texture of the canvas – the picture displays the angel as if in a blank void. Benjamin, however, repositions the angel in the perspective of history as he transforms an ekphrastic description of Klee's *Angelus Novus* into his ninth thesis *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*:


What Benjamin's ekphrasis presents us with is not only how the angel of history must look, but also how artists conventionally picture Medusa. Benjamin's angel *starrt auf* the wreckage of history. *Starren* literally means staring, but is also related to the verb *erstarren*, to grow stiff, to petrify. Zohn translates the phrase as ‘fixedly contemplating,’ leading onto the possibility that it is the angel's gaze that fixes history as an object of contemplation. But where Perseus' shield makes Medusa's face accessible by protecting the viewer from the petrifying force of her gaze, Benjamin's ekphrastic thesis encompasses all of history and reveals it as an *erstarnte Uralandschaft*, ‘petrified, primordial landscape’ to use a phrase from the *Trauerspiel*-book often cited in readings of the ninth thesis (GS1, p. 343; *Trauerspiel*, p. 160). Importantly, Benjamin emphasises the difference between our and the angel's perspectives: 'Wo eine Kette von Begebenheiten für uns erscheint, da sieht er eine einzige Katastrophe.' (p. 697) Where we see a progressive chain
of events, the angel sees a single catastrophe. This view of history as catastrophe is a notion that Benjamin’s late writings often return to, but it is too often neglected that this is the angel’s view, and not necessarily one that Benjamin asks us to adapt. That is, in Benjamin’s ninth thesis we see the angel seeing history as catastrophe, but this is not the same as ourselves being asked to see history as catastrophe. In a passage from ‘Central Park,’ Benjamin cautions:


The way the angel sees history, that is, ‘unter dem Begriffe der Katastrophe,’ ‘in terms of the concept of catastrophe,’ is like a kaleidoscope, and this very kaleidoscope must be smashed. Thus, paradoxically, while the angel of history wishes ‘das Zerschlagene zusammenfügen,’ to ‘make whole what has been smashed,’ its petrifying view of history is a kaleidoscope that itself must be smashed: ‘Daß Kaleidoskop muß zerschlagen werden.’

While the thesis that Benjamin constructs out of Klee’s painting aims to present a better view of history than common narratives of progress, Benjamin acknowledges that his own thesis is not essentially different from the ‘Begriffe der Herrschenden,’ ‘concepts of the ruling class’ that it would replace. It, too, arranges history into an aesthetically appealing order as its catastrophic vista is framed and contained by the angel’s fixedly contemplating gaze. The very fact that Benjamin’s ninth thesis is so often cited by academics and intellectuals, without this in any significant way altering the catastrophic course of history, shows that the image itself has become part of the debris of historical narratives seen by the angel’s gaze depicted on it. Eric Santner warns us of ‘a dimension of immobilizing fantasy at work’ in Benjamin’s image of the angel and wonders about ‘the degree to which Benjamin […] remain[s] under the spell […] of mythic violence when [he] evoke[s], with such hallucinatory power, the vision of history as a singular catastrophe.’

Santner accurately highlights the dangers of representation, even though his collocation of ‘mythic violence’ and ‘hallucinatory power’ and placement of Benjamin under its spell is somewhat simplistic. I will discuss Benjamin’s concept of mythic violence at length below, but already now one can note that by presenting his vision of history as catastrophe in ekphrastic, that is literary, terms, Benjamin is arguably aware of the ‘hallucinatory power’ of this representation. Moreover, by showing how the angel of history sees history,

---

Benjamin’s very point is to represent the generative force of representation. In other words, the ninth thesis does not simply present history as catastrophe, it is a ‘verbal representation of a visual representation’ (Mitchell, p. 152) in which we read the angel of history seeing history as catastrophe – a perspective that Benjamin elsewhere says must be smashed alongside other ruling-class concepts. Paying attention to the ekphrastic status of Benjamin’s thesis acknowledges how it thematises the representation of history from within a representation of history. Thereby Benjamin’s ninth thesis simultaneously reveals a truth about history, that it is a catastrophe, and the truth about historical representations: they are not history but representations. As Luke Donohue reminds us in a reading of Shelleyan poetics: ‘To preoccupy ourselves with violent catastrophes is to miss that violence is most powerful when it does not show itself, when it works imperceptibly through our language.’\(^{194}\) It is on account of a comparable insight that Benjamin demands that the historical perspective represented by his angel of history must be smashed. Furthermore, via the trope of petrification, the angel also links up with Benjamin’s work on the expressionless that destroys the beautiful semblance in art. The angel of history can thus be said to destroy its own semblance of historical truth through its petrifying force. The catastrophe seen in his gaze must remain spell-bound to the instant in which it appears and then smashed before we begin to view it as the truth of history.


I have noted Adorno’s designation of Benjamin’s philosophical gaze as Medusan and the Medusan element in Benjamin’s angel of history, but the image of Medusa also enters Benjamin’s later writings directly via a citation from Gottfried Keller’s poem *Verlorenes Recht, Verlorenes Glück*: ‘War wie ein Medusenschild | Der erstarrten Unruh Bild.’ (Il. 11-2, quoted in [J50,5]) Benjamin uses Keller’s phrase *erstarrte Unruh* to describe first Louis-Auguste Blanqui’s cosmology and then Charles Baudelaire’s concept of life:

\[\text{Die erstarrte Unruhe wird in Blanquis Weltansicht zum status des Kosmos selbst. Der Weltlauf erscheint hiernach eigentlich als eine einzige große Allegorie. [J55a,4]}\]

\[\text{Erstarrte Unruhe ist übrigens die Formel für Baudelaires Lebensbild, das keine Entwicklung kennt. [J55a,5]}\]

These citations are taken from a sequence where Benjamin reads both Blanqui and Baudelaire as anticipating the Nietzschean motif of the eternal recurrence of the same, *das*  

---

\(^{194}\) ‘Romantic Survival and Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”’, *European Romantic Review*, 25 (2014), 219–42 (p. 224); further references in text.
Blanqui anticipates it on a cosmic scale, Baudelaire in his conception of a life devoid of development. In another entry in the Baudelaire convolute, Benjamin clarifies his reading of Baudelaire:


The lack of development in Baudelaire’s conception of life would thus be the way in which the new is entangled in the Immerwiedergleiche. Benjamin’s adaptation of Keller’s phrase erstarrte Unruhe, petrified unrest, is a way to figure the Nietzschean motif of eternal return. But the phrase also bears out Adorno’s suggestion that Benjamin’s thought ‘läßt das Erstarrte sich bewegen und das Bewegte innehalten,’ ‘brings the rigid in motion and the dynamic to rest’ (‘Charakteristik,’ p. 251; ‘Portrait,’ p. 240) – the collocation erstarrte Unruhe combines the immobilising force of petrification with the motion of unrest. With its double image of rigidity and motion, the Keller quote allows Benjamin to move from cosmology to life in a single gesture encompassing Blanqui’s cosmic allegory and Baudelaire’s lifework. This movement from era to lifework is repeated in the seventeenth thesis on history where Benjamin describe’s the historical materialist’s task as

...eine bestimmte Epoche aus dem homogenen Verlauf der Geschichte herauszusprengen; so sprengt er ein bestimmtes Leben aus der Epoche, so ein bestimmtes Werk aus dem Lebenswerk. Der Ertrag seines Verfahrens besteht darin, daß im Werk das Lebenswerk, im Lebenswerk die Epoche und in der Epoche der gesamte Geschichtsverlauf aufbewahrt ist und aufgehoben. (GS1, p. 703)

The examples of Blanqui and Baudelaire show how the formula of erstarrte Unruhe operates at the joints of this process of Aufhebung – between work and lifework, lifework and era, era and the entire course of history. Erstarrte Unruhe can therefore be read as an alternative formulation of the ‘messianische Stillstellung des Geschehens,’ ‘messianic

195 James McFarland uncovers Benjamin’s lifelong engagement with Nietzsche’s work in Constellations: Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin in the Now-Time of History (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013). On his view, what distinguishes Benjamin’s use of the concept in Das Passagen-Werk is ‘an emphasis on newness’ whereas Benjamin’s earlier uses had focused on the claustrophobia of being fated to an eternal return of the same (p. 231).

196 I have argued that Shelley’s ‘The Triumph of Life’ also anticipates the Nietzschean return of the Immerwiedergleichen in its repetitive re-presentations of the triumphal procession of Life and of European history. The poem’s self-erasures can thus be said to induce a state of erstarrte Unruhe – the poem would thus be ‘die Darstellung [...] des Neuen, des schon Vergangenen und des Immergleichen in Einem,’ ‘the presentation of [...] at once the new, the already past and the ever same’ as Adorno summarises Das Passagen-Werk’s central philosophical theme. ‘Einleitung zur Benjamins Schriften,’ p. xvii; ‘Introduction to Benjamin’s Schriften,’ p. 10.
cessation of happening’ or ‘Dialektik im Stillstand,’ ‘dialectics at a standstill’ which, as I have noted, are themselves systematically connected to terms like Jetztzeit, the caesura, and the expressionless in Benjamin’s other writings. Speaking of Benjamin’s various formulations of Jetztzeit, Peter Osborne writes:

The images cohere in the climax of a narrative, cut off, frozen, like the final frame of a film, on the threshold of a new beginning. But what of the conceptual structure of this process, this ‘revolutionary’ experience of stasis? What kind of time are we talking about here? Everything depends on how we understand the doubling of the ‘now’ as the point of intersection of two radically different forms of time, the Messianic and the immanently historical.197

My answer to Osborne’s rhetorical question differs slightly from the one he himself offers. Osborne says that ‘Now-time is neither wholly inside nor wholly outside of history, but faces both ways at once’ and claims that this neither inside-nor outside position is ‘best approached by way of negation’ (p. 83). I want to suggest that this liminal position is a point of transition, a one-way street as it were, that moves from lived time to the time of representation. Even without introducing the theological aspect of the Messianic, it is a time which is other to lived time and has its fulfilment on a higher level – theologically speaking this higher level is related to redemption, aesthetically speaking it is a higher level of reflection, in the self-reflective sense that the romantics understood it.

197 ‘Small-Scale Victories, Large-Scale Defeats: Walter Benjamin’s Politics of Time’, in Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience, ed. by Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), pp. 57–107 (p. 83); further references in text.
Benjamin reads Shelley

63. Correspondences.

Benjamin’s work on Baudelaire for his projected study of the nineteenth century contains the only written record of his engagement with Shelley’s poetry. The Baudelaire convolute contains two comments that compare Shelley’s use of allegory to Baudelaire’s; additionally Benjamin cites Bertolt Brecht’s translation of Peter Bell the Third, stanzas I-X of ‘Part Third: Hell’ in [M18]. A brief juxtaposition of Shelley and Baudelaire also enters ‘Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire’ ['The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire’], the essay that Benjamin developed from his convolute notes during the summer and autumn of 1938. But while Benjamin’s assessment of Shelley is liberal with the superlatives – in [J81,6] he calls Shelley’s Peter Bell the Third ‘großartig,’ speaks of its ‘durchschlagende Wirkung’ and claims that it manages ‘mit unüberbietbarer Kraft’ ‘die unmittelbarsten Realitäten einzuverleiben,’ his actual comments on Shelley say more about what Baudelaire is not that they do about what Shelley is. Here is the longer remark in full:


Shelley rules over, whereas Baudelaire is ruled by allegory. To unpack this idea, we may begin with the concept of allegory in play here. The relation that Benjamin establishes between archaic allegorical models and the character types of the modern city suggests that allegory has to do with the correspondences between past and present which are at the heart of Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire. In the first exposé for Das Passagen-Werk, the 1935 version of ‘Paris, die Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts’ ['Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century’], Benjamin writes: ‘Das Moderne ist ein Hauptakzent seiner Dichtung. [...] Aber immer zitiert gerade die Moderne die Urgeschichte.’ (GS5, p. 55) This exchange of ancient and modern expresses an idea also found in an entry from the Baudelaire
convolute: 'Und in der Tat ist bei Baudelaire die Moderne nichts anderes als die “neueste Antike”' [J59a,4]. In the following entry, Benjamin adds that '[d]ie Korrespondenz zwischen Antike und Moderne ist die einzige konstruktive Geschichtskonzeption bei Baudelaire. Durch ihre starre Armatur schloß sie jede dialektische aus.' [J59a,5] The manner in which modernity cites antiquity as the latest fashion is therefore Baudelaire’s ‘einzige konstruktive Geschichtskonzeption,’ a conception of history whose starre Armatur, ‘rigid armature’ excludes any dialectical conception. The conclusion that one may derive from the convolute entries is, however, in blatant contradiction with the claims made in the first exposé where Benjamin represents Baudelaire’s citation of antiquity as ‘die bildliche Erscheinung der Dialektik, das Gesetz der Dialektik im Stillstand.’ (GS5, p. 55) Of course both convolute entries and exposé are notes towards an uncompleted project and it is possible that Benjamin would have resolved how it is that Baudelaire’s starre Armatur of correspondences between antiquity and modernity both excludes every dialectical conception and sets the law of dialectics at a standstill. Within the terms of my reading of Benjamin as advocating a self-reflective historiography, the contradiction can tentatively be resolved as follows: merely establishing correspondences between past and present is not enough to give ‘das Gesetz der Dialektik im Stillstand,’ ‘the law of dialectics at a standstill.’ What is missing is the self-reflective awareness in establishing these correspondences. Since Baudelaire lacks this awareness, his conception is not dialectical. As Benjamin writes of Baudelaire’s conception of ‘beauté moderne’ in the second exposé for Das Passagen-Werk, ‘Paris, Capitale du XIXème siècle’ of 1939: ‘la fatalite d’être un jour l’antiquité […] Le visage de la modernité elle-même nous foudroie d’un regard immémorial. Tel le regard de la Méduse pour les Grecs.’ (GS5, p. 72) Correspondences in which modernity is but the newest antiquity merely serve to petrify Baudelaire as the Immerwiedergleiche returns as the latest new. Nonetheless, these correspondences point towards ‘das Gesetz der Dialektik im Stillstand.’ This law does not consist in any given correspondence between modernity and antiquity but becomes perceptible through the process in which such correspondences are generated. It emerges as a form of metacommentary on how correspondences between past and present are blasted out of history. In other words, this law concerns itself with the form of the correspondence rather than its content. This formal relation between now and then is also at the heart of Benjamin’s concept of dialectical images as constellations where past and present come together in the now: ‘Zum Denken gehört ebenso die Bewegung wie das Stillstellen der Gedanken. Wo das Denken in einer von Spannungen gesättigten Konstellation zum Stillstand kommt, da erscheint das dialektische Bild. Es ist die Zäsur in der Denkbewegung.’ [N10a,3] The concept of caesura doubles back to Keller’s phrase erstarrte Unruhe which Benjamin
applied to Baudelaire’s lifework, including his ‘heroic’ struggle to wrest the new from the Immerwiedergleiche.

64. A grasp on allegory.

Benjamin’s contrast between Shelley and Baudelaire suggests that, unlike Baudelaire, Shelley is not petrified by the ‘Schein des Neuen’ of which Benjamin asserts that it is reflected ‘wie ein Spiegel im andern, im Schein des immer wieder Gleichen.’ (GS5, p 55.) Instead, Benjamin claims that Shelley’s grasp on allegory makes the distance between the modern poet and allegory perceptible. *Peter Bell the Third*, the poem in which this distance is so clearly felt is a parody on Wordsworth’s conversion story in *Peter Bell*. Shelley’s Peter is the third after John Hamilton Reynolds’s parody on the same subject and is thus embedded in a critique of Wordsworth’s turn to piety and political conservatism carried out by the circle around Leigh Hunt’s *The Examiner*. Where Wordsworth’s Peter Bell finds God, Shelley’s goes to hell. The third part, the one that Benjamin cites, offers a description of this hell. However, contrary to Benjamin’s gloss ‘London [wird] dem Leser als Hölle vorgestellt’, Shelley does not present London as Hell, ‘Hell is a city just like London.’ (III.1 my emphasis). Shelley naturalises the supernatural, and presents hell in ‘this world which is.’ As Claude Rawson points out ‘if Pope and Eliot drew on Hell to portray the city, Milton and Shelley proceed the other way: the city is instead used to portray Hell.’ The force of Shelley’s allegory comes from the fact that his hell is so recognisably familiar. ‘Hell looks a great deal like London on any given day,’ Steven E. Jones notes in his study of Shelley’s satire and links the poem’s ‘visionary medley’ (p. 48) to ‘The Triumph of Life’ and ‘The Mask of Anarchy.’ What all three poems have in common is their blend of allegorical imagery and contemporary realities: ‘The Triumph of Life’ names Rousseau as a placeholder for his generation, in ‘The Mask of Anarchy’ and *Peter Bell the Third* we meet Castlereagh, Lord Eldon, Cobbett, in addition to every possible member of the masses that make up the metropolis. *Peter Bell the Third*’s ‘farrago style’ lists everything from ‘Chancery Court’ and ‘King’ to the ‘manufacturing mob’ (ll. 162-3) not forgetting ‘Lawyers – judges – old hobnobbers [...] Bailiffs – Chancellors – | Bishops – great and little robbers – | Rhymesters – pamphleteers – stock-jobbers’ (ll. 187-90) in addition to

German soldiers – camps – confusion –
Tumults – lotteries – rage – delusion –
Gin – suicide – and Methodism;

200 Eric Lindstrom, “‘To Wordsworth’ and the ‘White Obi’: Slavery, Determination, and Contingency in Shelley’s ‘Peter Bell the Third’,” *Studies in Romanticism*, 47 (2008), 549-580 (p. 559)
Taxes too, on wine and bread,
And meat, and beer, and tea, and cheese

[...]

Thrusting, toiling, wailing, moliing,
Frowning, preaching – such a riot!

Each with never ceasing labour
Whilst he thinks he cheats his neighbour
Cheating his own heart of quiet.

And all these meet at levees; –
Dinners convivial and political; –
Suppers of epic poets; – teas,
Where small talk dies in agonies; –
Breakfasts professional and critical; –

[...]

At conversazioni – balls –
Conventicles and drawing-rooms –
Courts of law – committes – calls
Of a morning – clubs – book stalls –
Churches – masquerades and tombs.

And this is Hell – and in this smother
All are damnable and damned (ll. 174-218)

– and even this is still just a sampling of the profusion of things appearing in this hell. If conventional allegories of hell list varieties of eternal torment, Shelley’s quotidian list shows that it is the banality of everyday life in the early capitalist metropolis that is hell.

65. Metropolitan masses.
Benjamin’s second, shorter remark on Shelley also contrasts him with Baudelaire, but now with regards to the people that populate the hellish metropolis:

It is true that Shelley’s London had a larger population than Baudelaire’s Paris, but this alone does not explain how Shelley’s representation of the metropolitan masses is more unmittelbar, direct or unmediated, than Baudelaire’s. A clearer exposition of this point is found in ‘Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire’ where Benjamin cites the first five lines of ‘Hell’ in a discussion of the metropolitan crowds of Paris:


The citation from Shelley follows this, and after it Benjamin adds: ‘Dem Flaneur liegt ein Schleier, auf diesem Bild. Die Masse ist dieser Schleier’ (GS1, p. 562). In perfect accord with Shelley’s own poetics, Benjamin reads Shelley’s poem as lifting the veil on ‘die schreckliche gesellschaftliche Wirklichkeit,’ ‘the horrible social reality’ of the city he describes. It is worth noting that Benjamin uses the term unmittelbar twice in his two comments on Shelleyan allegory, presumably to describe how Shelley lifts the veil from reality. However, in Benjamin’s thought more generally, unmittelbar is most often associated with divine language that does not concern itself with communication, Mitteilung. In German the fall of the Word into mitteilende, communicative, human language is literally a division, Teilung. This division is also at the heart of the theory of allegory that Benjamin presents in the Trauerspiel-book. The fact that Benjamin here seems to use the word unmittelbar in a much more simple sense, as synonym to ‘unveiled,’ suggests that he does not read Shelleyan allegory within the terms of the baroque allegory that dominates Benjamin’s reflections on the subject. Instead, the context for Benjamin’s reading of Shelleyan allegory can be found in Brecht’s commentary on Shelley, most likely developed in conversations with Benjamin at a time when Brecht was working on the translation that Benjamin cites. The two friends spent the summer of 1938 together in the Danish town of Skovsbostrand. During the summer Brecht was also working with Margarethe Steffin on translations of some of Shelley’s political verse from 1819: parts of ‘The Mask of Anarchy’ and the ‘Hell’ section of Peter Bell the Third. Although Brecht’s commentary is on ‘The Mask of Anarchy,’ Brecht and Benjamin read and discussed ‘The Mask of Anarchy’ and Peter Bell the Third together and Brecht’s commentary highlights some of the same themes that Benjamin covers.

---

201 This is one of the reasons why Evan Horowitz wants to name London rather than Paris the capital of the nineteenth century, claiming that Benjamin selected Paris over London primarily because he spoke better French than English. ‘London: Capital of the Nineteenth Century’, New Literary History, 41 (2010), 111–128
‘The Mask of Anarchy’ is written in response to an event that took place in 16 August 1819 on St Peter’s Field outside of Manchester. The cavalry attacked a non-violent crowd assembled to hear a speech in favour of political reform. Several people were killed, more were injured and the unprovoked attack on defenceless protesters became a public scandal. The event became known as the Peterloo Massacre in parodic reference to the recent victory at Waterloo. Shelley’s poem was meant as a political intervention urging people to further protest but also to meet the violence employed against them by non-violent means. Brecht’s commentary on ‘The Mask of Anarchy,’ entitled ‘Weite und Vielfalt der Realistischen Schreibweise’ [‘Breadth and Variety of the Realist Mode of Writing’], was written for the German-language, Moscow-based journal Das Wort (1936-39) where Brecht served as co-editor from his Danish exile. In the late 1930s, the journal witnessed a debate on whether inherited lyric forms are inherently bourgeois and reactionary or whether they can be used for revolutionary means. As Brecht puts it in the essay’s Vorspann: ‘Man versuchte festzustellen, inwiefern bestimmte formale Elemente die Wirkung literarischer Werke abschwächen und ein falsches Bild der Wirklichkeit vermitteln.’ (Werke, 22, p. 423) Already here we have the key coordinates of Benjamin’s remarks on Shelley: the relation between a work’s Wirkung and Wirklichkeit – what Benjamin spoke of in terms of durchschlagende Wirkung and unmittelbare Realitäten. Realität is also key in Brecht’s commentary: ‘Realistisches Schreiben kann von nicht realistischem nur dadurch unterschieden werden, daß man es mit der Realität selber konfrontiert, die es behandelt. Es gibt da keine speziellen Formalitäten, die zu beachten wären.’ (p. 424) Brecht’s essay is positioned in the intersection between realism, reality and literary form. As the privileged use of the term realism implies, Georg Lukács’s Die Theorie des Romans [Theory of the Novel] (1920) looms in the background. Lukács’s authority was called on to prescribe a form of realism modelled on the nineteenth century novel. In the essay’s closing remark, Brecht explains that:

202 ‘Entsetzlich,’ Brecht writes in his Arbeitsjournal on 16 August 1938, exactly 119 years after the Peterloo Massacre, ‘die Gedichte Shelleys zu lesen […] in den die Unterdrückung und Ausbeutung beklagt wird! Wird man so uns lesen, immer noch unterdrückt und ausgebeutet, und sagen: schon damals . . .?’ (Brecht’s Arbeitsjournal, 16.8. [1938], Werke, 26, p. 319) Even though Brecht’s question challenges the efficacy of interventionist poetics, he adapts a Shelleyan model when he comes to terms with the atrocious events of his generation, most clearly in ‘Freiheit und Democracy,’ a parodic triumphal procession through post-war Germany that Brecht termed ‘Eine Art Paraphrase von Shelleys »The Masque [sic] of Anarchy».’ (Werke, 27, p. 242). Kaufman argues for a profound Shelleyan influence on the Hollywood-Elegien (where Brecht refers to him as ‘mein Bruder Shelley’), stating that the Hollywood elegies ‘are saturated with themes, directly-translated quotations, paraphrases and images from Shelley.’ (‘Intervention & Commitment Forever!’, §12). One such echo is in Brecht’s representation of the banality of Los Angeles life as hell.

203 Neither translation nor essay were published at the time, but Brecht included a revised version in his 1953 essay collection Versuche.
Ich habe den kleinen Aufsatz geschrieben, weil ich den Eindruck habe, daß wir die realistische Schreibweise, die wir im Kampf gegen Hitler brauchen, allzu formal bestimmen, so daß die Gefahr entsteht, daß wir uns vor der feindlichen Front in ein Formengezänk verwickeln. Ich kann im Grund nicht glauben, daß Lukács tatsächlich für realistische Schreibweise nur ein einziges Muster, das des bürgerlichen Romans des vorigen Jahrhunderts, aufstellen will. (pp. 433-4)

The stakes are high – this concerns not only the politics of the literary scene, but the battle against fascism itself. Benjamin’s notes from his conversation with Brecht on 29 July 1938 state that ‘Brecht liest mir mehrere polemische Auseinandersetzungen mit Lukács vor, Studien zu einem Aufsatz, den er im »Wort« veröffentlichen soll. Es sind getarnte, aber vehemente Angriffe.’ (Versuche über Brecht, p. 169) Benjamin’s notes do not mention the name Shelley nor what the subject of the polemic against Lukács was, nonetheless, it is possible and even likely that ‘Weite und Vielfalt der Realistischen Schreibweise’ would have been one of the pieces that Brecht read out. At any rate, the essay covers the main thrust conveyed by the entries in Brecht’s Arbeitsjournal for July and August. They repeatedly denounce Lukács’s embrace of the nineteenth century novel as well as the charge that Brecht is a formalist because he does not write in this style. ‘Da ich auf meinem Gebiete ein Neuerer bin, schreien immer wieder einige, ich sei ein Formalist,’ he writes on 3 August 1938 (Werke, 27, p. 315). His commentary on Shelley’s formal elements also serves to defend Brecht himself from the formalism charge. As Susanne Schmid notes, by proving Shelley’s combination of lyric form and political commitment, ‘Brecht justified his own use of literary techniques derived from modernism.’204 Shelley’s ‘The Mask of Anarchy’ forms the centrepiece of Brecht’s refutation of Lukács; Brecht includes a literal translation of stanzas 2-20 and 38-43 as examples of ‘realist’ writing that radically differs from the nineteenth century novel.205

205 In the context of 1930’s socialist/Soviet aesthetics, the choice of Shelley to display revolutionism is somewhat doctrinaire. As Rachel Polonsky points out in her study of Shelley’s reception in Russia, after the 1922 Russian translation of Edward Aveling and Eleanor Aveling-Marx’s 1888 lecture on ‘Shelley and Socialism,’ where they claimed that Marx saw Shelley as a ‘revolutionary through and through,’ ‘Shelley’s “rebelliousness” was soon enshrined for homage in the political culture of Stalinism, a culture which would not countenance free thought.’ ‘Revolutionary Etudes: The Reception of Shelley in Russia’, in The Reception of P.B. Shelley in Europe, ed. by Susanne Schmid and Michael Rossington (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 229–46 (p. 239). Polonsky here cites Maksim Gorky’s characterisation of Shelley as rebellious, and Gorky also commissioned the first complete translation of Shelley works, a commission that testifies to Shelley status as a politically ‘safe’ author at a time when dissenting thought was persecuted. Adorno, who probably knew of Shelley through his reception in English, doubted the accuracy of Brecht’s sources. In his critical letter on ‘Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire’ where Benjamin cites the opening stanza of Part III of Peter Bell the Third, Adorno writes: ‘Im letzten Abschnitt […] möchte ich den leisen Zweifel äußern, ob man die außerordentliche Strophe von Brecht wirklich Shelley zuschreiben kann. Direktheit und Härte sind sonst nicht eben dessen Charakteristika. Man müßte auf jeden Fall mit dem Original
Es wird vielleicht gut sein, dem Leser hier einen Schriftsteller der Vergangenheit vorzustellen, der anders schrieb als die bürgerliche Romanciers und doch ein großer Realist genannt werden muß: den großen revolutionären englischen Dichter P. B. Shelley. Sollte seine große Ballade »Der maskenzug der Anarchie«, [...] nicht den gewöhnlichen Beschreibungen einer realistischen Schreibweise entsprechen, so hätten wir dafür sorgen, daß die Beschreibung realistischer Schreibweise eben geändert, erweitert, vervollständigt wird. (pp. 424-5).

For Brecht, Shelley’s realism is so solid that it calls for a redefinition of the term realism to accommodate it. This is no less remarkable since the poem in question – die große Ballade (Brecht uses the adjective groß thrice in as many sentences – thus mirroring Benjamin’s superlatives) – employs the highly conventional form of an allegorical masque and the heightened artifice of allegory would seemingly contradict all that can possibly be meant by realism. In order to prove the poem’s realist credentials, Brecht separates form from content, and it is the latter that is the domain of realism in literature. He illustrates his argument by citing the eighteen stanzas from the poem’s opening. While the style is different, ‘The Mask of Anarchy’ opens with a dream vision in which a procession appears, and is thus quite close to ‘The Triumph of Life.’

As I lay asleep in Italy
There came a voice from over the Sea,
And with great power it forth led me
To walk in the visions of Poesy.

I met Murder on the way –
He had a mask like Castlereagh –
Very smooth he looked, yet grim;
Seven bloodhounds followed him (ll. 1-8)

Brecht’s translation tellingly omits the framing vision and begins with the second stanza which launches Shelley’s masquerade of contemporary politicians; Lord Castlereagh was Foreign Secretary and played an instrumental role at the 1814-15 Congress of Vienna and was a common target in Shelley’s political lyrics. The procession furthermore includes Fraud wearing Lord Eldon, the Lord Chancellor, and Hypocrisy dressed as Viscount Sidmouth, the Home Secretary (ll. 14-5; ll. 24-5). ‘And many more Destrucions played | In this ghastly masquerade, | All disguised, even to the eyes, | Like Bishops, lawyers, peers or spies.’ (ll. 26-9) Shelley’s allegory is reversed: whereas a usual masque disguises real people as allegorical figures, Shelley has Murder wearing the mask of Castlereagh, Fraud...
the one of Lord Eldon and so on. Through these disguises, he unmasksthe Foreign Secretary as Murder, the Lord Chancellor as Fraud and the Home Secretary as Hypocrisy. It is this that, according to Brecht, constitutes his realism.

Shelley’s allegorical mask unmasks the reality of political oppression – and thus his allegory is a realist work. Brecht concludes that ‘[ü]ber die literarische Formen muß man die Realität befragen, nicht die Ästhetik, auch nicht die des Realismus. Die Wahrheit kann auf viele Arten verschweigen und auf viele Arten gesagt werden.’ (p. 433) It is a work’s immediate relation to reality, and not its literary form, that constitutes realism. In the light of Brecht’s argument, we can return to Benjamin’s commendation of Shelley’s grasp of allegory: ‘Gerade dieser Griff, der die Distanz des modernen Dichters von der Allegorie fühlbar macht, erlaubt es, ihr die unmittelbarsten Realitäten einzuvverleiben.’ [J81,6]

Shelleyan allegory is able to incorporate the most immediate realities because Shelley has a strong enough grasp on the form to unmask timeless allegories in his present. By stating that Shelley’s allegory is one ‘in ihrem antiquarischen Charakter betonte’ [J81,6], Benjamin reads Shelley’s modernity in the same way as he reads Baudelaire’s, it is a modernity that cites the past. But, in contrast to Baudelaire, Shelley maintains an immediate grasp on the horrors of the here and now; he dresses his allegorical figures in the masks of parliamentarians, stock-jobbers and other metropolitan types. Brecht’s commentary on Shelley points to what may be termed an allegorical realism that unmasks reality not by styling it in the latest antique allegories, but, on the contrary, by letting antiquity appear in the mask of the latest political news.

The poems that Brecht and Benjamin read are political, interventionist pieces that only partially reflect the span of Shelley’s vision. It is when Shelley turns to tragedy – in The Cenci, written in the same year as ‘The Mask of Anarchy’ and Peter Bell the Third – that Shelley presents his most damning allegory of the political reality of his time. The Cenci will also be the central text in the remainder of the thesis. I read it alongside a series of Benjamin’s early texts, written 1916-22, where he himself cites antiquity, more precisely ancient tragedy, to theorise an opposition between mythic and divine violence. This opposition employs the structure of interruption that Benjamin designates with words such as the expressionless and erstarrte Unruhe. There too my reading is structured around the notion of similarity in difference; my main point is not that The Cenci is a tragedy in accordance with Benjamin’s definition of the art, rather I want to emphasise
how Benjamin's formulation of the mythic violence of tragedy resonates on the political, theological, and literary-critical dimensions of his thought – and that all of these dimensions find a counterpart in the world of *The Cenci*.
Tragic circumstances

67. The highest species of the drama.

Although the genre occupies a considerable part of his ‘Defence of Poetry,’ Shelley only completed one tragedy proper, *The Cenci* (1819). As Shelley’s preface informs us, the story is based on a manuscript account ‘copied from the archives of the Cenci Palace at Rome,’ although the fate of the Cenci family was notorious in Rome in the period that Shelley stayed there. The events narrated take place around the turn of the sixteenth century. The rich and powerful Count Francesco Cenci rapes his daughter Beatrice, after which she, her stepmother Lucretia, and brother Giacomo plot the assassination of Cenci with the help of the corrupt prelate Orsino, who is also in love with Beatrice. A further important character is Cardinal Camillo, who serves as a go-between between the Cenci family and the Pope. The assassination is carried out by the hired assassins Marzio and Olimpio. As soon as the murder is committed, the Pope’s legate Savella arrives with a papal order for the arrest and execution of Count Cenci. The Count is already dead and his assassins are discovered and arrested together with Beatrice, Lucretia, and Giacomo. The drama ends with their trial and execution. Shelley’s preface addresses the horrid subject matter of his play:

The highest moral purpose aimed at in the highest species of the drama, is the teaching of the human heart, through its sympathies and antipathies, the knowledge of itself; in proportion to the possession of which knowledge, every human being is wise, just, sincere, tolerant, and kind. (PS2, p. 730)

Shelley’s evocation of the ‘highest moral purpose’ of ‘the highest species of the drama’ serves to distinguish his work from the gothic thrills a contemporary audience would be accustomed to receive at a London stage. Thus, although Shelley’s letters testify to the immediate success that he anticipated for this drama, and he had the popular actors Edmund Kean and Eliza O’Neill in mind for playing the roles of Cenci and Beatrice, the ambitions that Shelley lays out in the preface transcend the stage of his day. However horrid *The Cenci* may be, it teaches a lesson associated with the highest form of drama. A

---

206 Shelley first received the MS. from Maria Gisborne in 1818. Mary Shelley translated it as ‘A Relation of the Death of the Cenci Family’ for publication alongside the play.

207 For a comparative reading of Shelley’s drama and its sources, see Truman Guy Steffan ‘Seven Accounts of the Cenci and Shelley’s Drama’ *SEL*, 9.4 (1969).

208 Later scholarship has shown the extent to which Shelley is working with contemporary stage conventions. Particularly notable in this regard is Joseph W. Donohue Jr.’s study of how Shelley’s development of Beatrice responds to Eliza O’Neill’s acting style as much as to the moral dilemmas that his subject matter raises. ‘Shelley’s Beatrice and the Romantic Concept of Tragic Character’, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 17 (1968), 53–73. Jaqueline Mulhallen offers a lucid overview of the play’s position in the context of contemporary dramatic writing and stage conventions as well as subsequent performances. ‘Chapter Three: Practical Technique – *The Cenci*,’ in *The Theatre of Shelley* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), pp. 85-113
few years later Shelley develops the idea in the ‘Defence:’ ‘In a drama of the highest order there is little food for censure or hatred; it teaches rather self-knowledge and self-respect.’ (SPP, p. 520) However, when he comes to discuss drama in the ‘Defence’ Shelley further clarifies that in addition to its moral lesson in self-knowledge, drama is ‘a prismatic and many-sided mirror’ that reflects the society it arises from, ‘and it is indisputable that the highest perfection of human society has ever corresponded with the highest dramatic excellence.’ (SPP, p. 520; p. 521) Shelley’s interest in drama was stimulated by an ‘attentive reading’ of A. W. Schlegel’s Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Litteratur and the correlation between social good and drama is most likely inspired by Schlegel’s work.209 Like his German contemporaries Shelley sees ancient Athens as the paradigm of both social relations and the dramatic art: ‘The drama at Athens or wheresoever else it may have approached to its perfection, coexisted with the moral and intellectual greatness of the age.’ (SPP, pp. 519-20) In Silent Urns, David Ferris explores the romantic construction of ancient Greece. His central argument is that the romantics define their own modernity in a differential relation to the ancients – Greece is primarily understood as that which is no longer possible for the moderns.210 If tragedy is the crown of the ancient arts, it is an art form so embedded in ancient Greek society that it becomes impossible together with the loss of ancient Greek socio-political institutions. Just like the image of a primal man whose language was song and bodily dance, this is a myth of origins whose primary import is not an accurate representation of historical truth, but a poetic programme in the present. Athens becomes the standard against which modern times have to measure themselves in an ineluctably negative relation: modernity constructs Athens as an ideal that it cannot achieve. This argument about drama’s impossibility in modernity will be made with more force by Søren Kierkegaard, reformulated by Friedrich Nietzsche in Die Geburt der Tragödie, and later revised in Benjamin’s Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels, which defines the baroque Trauerspiel as a modern form of tragic drama definitively other to ancient tragedy. While Benjamin’s argument foregrounds the theological aspect – the differences between the mythic polytheism of the ancient world and the God of the baroque era founds the differences between tragedy and Trauerspiel – he, too, essentially conforms to the idea that the tragic art cannot be separated from its socio-cultural context.211


210 Silent Urns: Romanticism, Hellenism, Modernity (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 54

211 The correspondence that Benjamin sees between Trauerspiel allegory and modern art practices such as montage would therefore rest on their status as moments in modernity.
68. Cold impersonations.

Shelley’s correlation between ‘the highest dramatic excellence’ and ‘moral and intellectual greatness’ leads to an inverse collocation between inferior drama and corrupt times:

But in periods of the decay of social life, the drama sympathizes with that decay. Tragedy becomes a cold imitation of the form of the great masterpieces of antiquity [...] or a weak attempt to teach certain doctrines, which the writer considers as moral truths; and which are usually no more than specious flatteries of some gross vice or weakness with which the author in common with his auditors are infected. (‘Defence,’ SPP, p. 520)

Bad times produce bad drama. Rather than leading to self-knowledge, such drama teaches the narrow prejudice of its age in the guise of ancient forms. Both the preface to The Cenci and the ‘Defence of Poetry’ consistently use sartorial metaphors to suggest that the age in which it arises serves as a disguise that covers and obscures the drama’s moral truths. In the preface Shelley adopts his favoured metaphor of the veil to distance his work from a cold imitation of the past:

I have endeavored as nearly as possible to represent the characters as they probably were, and have sought to avoid the error of making them actuated by my own conceptions of right or wrong, false or true, thus under a thin veil converting names and actions of the sixteenth century into cold impersonations of my own mind. (PS2, pp. 731-2)

Only by lifting the veil of early nineteenth century moral precepts, can a drama written in 1819 lay claim to the highest moral purpose of educating the heart. This is not to say that Shelley wishes to teach the moral precepts of the sixteenth century by representing his characters ‘as they probably were,’ rather his drama is aimed at the universal truths contained in the story – as abstracted from the particular historical situation. However, as Shelley implicitly acknowledges when he comments on specific authors, it is questionable whether any author is capable of placing his opinions in the kind of moral quarantine that he advocates. Dante and Milton are Shelley’s paragon examples, yet they too cannot distance themselves from the morality of their times: ‘The distorted notions of invisible things which Dante and his rival Milton have idealized [i.e. Christianity], are merely the mask and the mantle in which these great poets walk through eternity enveloped and disguised.’ (‘Defence,’ SPP, p. 526) Even in times of the highest moral excellence, historical contingency veils the moral lesson that drama would teach: ‘The tragedies of the Athenian poets are as mirrors in which the spectator beholds himself, under a thin disguise of circumstance.’ (‘Defence,’ SPP, p. 520) However thin, the disguise of circumstance is present in Athenian drama as well. Therefore, when judged within the terms of Shelley’s theory of drama, the perfection of Shelley’s own tragedy would have to be measured in relation to the corruptions of Shelley’s age rather than to his poetic aspirations. The play’s
dedication to Leigh Hunt famously separates *The Cenci* from Shelley's other works. Those writings which I have hitherto published, have been little else than visions which impersonate my own apprehensions of the beautiful and the just. [...] The drama which I now present to you is a sad reality.' (PS2, pp. 725-6) Shelley's isolation of *The Cenci* from his idealist works would suggest that insofar as he is committed to writing a tragedy, particularly one that would be commercially successful, he is committed to producing an inferior work. For this reason Sean Dempsey invites us to read *The Cenci* with the categories provided by Benjamin's analysis of that other historically inferior genre: the German *Trauerspiel.*[^212] The exemplary status that Benjamin grants to Shakespeare and Calderón – both of whom influenced Shelley's composition[^213] – provides a genealogical linkage, even though Shelley was not likely to have any first-hand knowledge of the German dramatists that Benjamin discusses. On Dempsey's model, Benjamin's 'three primary types – tyrant, martyr, and plotter – are figured in Shelley's play by Count Cenci, Beatrice, and Orsino. In addition [...] Shelley introduces a fourth type in his political anthropology' embodied in Marzio.[^214] However, a Benjaminian reading of Shelley that merely applies the characteristics that Benjamin ascribes to the German baroque *Trauerspiel* to Shelley's drama cannot account for the extent to which *The Cenci* is a mirror reflecting the sad reality which Shelley faced in 1819. Jeffrey N. Cox treats *The Cenci* as the 'most impressive' example of the romantic tragic drama,[^215] arguing that the play 'offers the period’s most complex dramatization of the romantic protagonist's turn to the interior in

[^212]: *The Cenci* has been translated into German as a *Trauerspiel*; e.g. August von Eye's *Beatrice Cenci: Trauerspiel in fünf Aufzügen* (1881); Adolf Strodtmann's *Die Cenci: Ein Trauerspiel in fünf Aufzügen* (1888) Max von Münchhausen's *Beatrice Cenci: ein Trauerspiel in 3 Akten* (1921) although there is no indication that Benjamin would have been aware of any of these.

[^213]: Shelley was studying Spanish and reading Calderón in the year that *The Cenci* was written. His letters bear witness to his admiration for the Spanish dramatist and, in the preface, he proclaims that 'there will scarcely be found a detached simile or a single isolated description [in the play], unless Beatrice's description of the chasm appointed for her father's murder should be judged to be of that nature.' A note to this sentence tells us that this description is 'the only plagiarism which I have intentionally committed in the whole piece,' (p. 733) taken from Calderón's *El Purgatorio de San Patricio.* See Roberts's 'Strange Flesh and Mere Poetry' for a detailed analysis of the relation between Shelley's play and the one he 'plagiarises.' Roberts also shows how Shelley's reading of Schlegel influenced his approach to Calderón. While Shelley chooses to explicitly mark this intertextual relation, of course it is not true that there are no other sources in *The Cenci* – as, e.g., the extensive bibliography listing Shakespearean echoes in *The Cenci* makes clear, see the editorial introduction to the Longman edition for a comprehensive overview (p. 723).

[^214]: 'The Cenci: Tragedy in a Secular Age', *ELH,* 79 (2012), 873–903 (p. 885); further references in text. Dempsey's procedure certainly reveals affinities between Shelley and Benjamin, although his claim that his reading is 'less anachronistic than it might at first appear, because [...] Shelley was himself a decisive influence on the thinking of both Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht' (p. 883) is somewhat disingenuous given that Benjamin developed his theory of the German *Trauerspiel* 1916-24 and published it in 1928, whereas the first evidence of his reading Shelley is the summer he spent with Brecht in 1938, that is, ten years after the book was published and more than twenty years after his first fragmentary essays on 'Trauerspiel und Tragödie' ['Trauerspiel and Tragedy'] (1916) and 'Die Bedeutung der Sprache in Trauerspiel und Tragödie' ['The Meaning of Language in Trauerspiel and Tragedy'] (1916).

the wake of the collapse of social and cosmic order.’ (p. 141) Where a classic tragic heroine like Antigone self-righteously contests the law that forbids the burial of her brother Polynices, Beatrice wages her battles not only with the corrupt legal mores of the society around her, but also with her inner self. There is therefore a double conflict represented in the character of Beatrice: firstly, between herself and the patriarchal society she lives in and, secondly, between herself and her God.

69. Fate and circumstance.
In Shelley’s preface as well as in Beatrice’s own words within the play, Beatrice’s justification for the parricide rests on the claim that she had no other options given the circumstances – having been born to a father who is determined to torment her, and into a society where no one dares or wants to stop him, killing him is her only means of escape. Since we cannot be responsible for the circumstances in which fate has placed us, Beatrice renounces moral responsibility for the parricide and claims herself to be innocent in a higher sense of the term. Benjamin’s ‘Schicksal und Charakter’ discusses the kind of separation between fate and character that Beatrice’s defence rests on. At the outset, Benjamin aligns fate with historical, external events and character with the individual’s response to these events. Shelley makes a similar distinction in the preface when he states that the ‘crimes and miseries in which she [Beatrice] was an actor and a sufferer are as the mask and mantle in which circumstances clothed her for impersonation on the scene of the world.’ (PS2, p. 735) Thus, Beatrice’s is an innocent character trapped in evil circumstances. Benjamin, however, will argue that this separation is impossible:

...die Trennung [zwischen Schicksal und Charakter ist] theoretisch unvollziehbar. [...] Denn es ist unmöglich, einen widerspruchlosen Begriff vom Äußern eines wirken den Menschen, als dessen Kern doch der Charakter in jener Anschauung angesprochen wird, zu bilden. [...] Zwischen dem wirkenden Menschen und der Außenwelt vielmehr ist alles Wechselwirkung, ihre Aktionskreise gehen ineinander über; ihre Vorstellungen mögen noch so verschieden sein, ihre Begriffe sind nicht trennbar. (GS2, pp. 172-3)

Benjamin claims that external circumstance is in practice inseparable from internal character and that therefore it makes no sense to separate the two. On this view of things, Beatrice is indeed guilty even if her fate left her no other options. The success of Shelley’s play lies in how difficult he makes it to accept either Beatrice’s guilt or her innocence – and

216 Benjamin wrote ‘Schicksal und Charakter’ in the late summer of 1919. In a 1924 letter to Hofmannsthal, Benjamin describes the essay as an attempt ‘die alten Worte Schicksal und Charakter aus der terminologischen Fron zu befreien und ihres ursprünglichen Lebens im deutschen Sprachgeist aktuell hafthaft zu werden’ (GS2, p. 941), and says that he pursued the same goal when discussing the concept of fate in his essay on Goethe’s Wahlverwandtschaften.
it is precisely in weighing Beatrice's relative guilt or innocence that Shelley locates the
dramatic character of his work:

> It is in the restless and anatomizing casuistry with which men seek the justification of
> Beatrice, yet feel that she has done what needs justification; it is in the superstitious horror
> with which they contemplate alike her wrongs and their revenge, that the dramatic
> character of what she did and suffered, consists. (PS2, p. 731)

The drama of *The Cenci* resides in the interplay, *Wechselwirkung*, between Beatrice and
her circumstances, and the dramatic character of Beatrice’s story is not her character but
is found in the reader's process of evaluating the relation between individual and
circumstances – it takes place not on stage but in the audience’s hearts and minds. 'The
drama is a catalyst for precipitating another kind of drama in the spectator, whose moral
capacities undergo an educational experience,' Michael Scrivener writes, suggesting that
this is a 'Brechtian kind of alienation effect [which] is intentional, designed to teach self-
knowledge of a very subversive nature to Shelley’s audience.'217 Shelley lets 'anatomizing
casuistry' take the place of catharsis in Aristotelian poetics: we are not invited to identify
with the heroine, rather, the real tragedy of *The Cenci* is the casuistry of moral judgment.
And yet if Shelley seeks to make ‘anatomizing casuistry’ into the essence of his drama’s
moral lesson to the heart, his terms are curiously chosen. Anatomy in Shelley’s day was
still outlawed and primarily performed on criminals whereas casuistry is a mode of moral
reasoning associated with Catholicism and thus seen as morally suspect. Furthermore,
while casuistry is a manner of applying general moral principles to particular
circumstances, Shelley presents it as a compulsion lined with 'superstitious horror.' In
most cases when he uses the word ‘superstition,’ Shelley is referring to Christianity,
however in this case it also resonates with Benjamin’s interpretation of ancient mythology.
According to Benjamin, in the ancient world there is no such thing as a happy fate:

> So wird, um den typischen Fall zu nennen, das schicksalhafte Unglück als die Antwort
> Gottes oder der Götter auf religiöse Verschuldung angesehen. Dabei aber sollte es
> nachdenklich machen, daß eine entsprechende Beziehung des Schicksalsbegriffes auf den
> Begriff, welcher mit dem Schuldbe... (GS2, pp. 173-4)

In the world of *The Cenci* there is no more of a happy fate than in ancient tragedies. It is
this entrapment in the circumstances of one’s fate that unites Benjamin’s exposition of
tragic fate with Shelley’s tragedy of *The Cenci*.

---

217 *Radical Shelley: The Philosophical Anarchism and Utopian Thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley*
70. Myth in modern costume.

In ‘Schicksal und Charakter’ Benjamin asserts that ‘die Tragödie war es, in der das Haupt des Genius aus dem Nebel der Schuld sich zum ersten Male erhob, denn in der Tragödie wird das dämonische Schicksal durchbrochen.’ (GS2, pp. 174-5) The sentence contains the two key concepts from Benjamin’s thought on myth: guilt and fate. ‘Schicksal ist der Schuldzusammenhang des Lebendigen.’ (GS2, p. 175) Fate is the entrapment in circumstances where innocence and happiness are excluded: instead every choice incurs more guilt. For Beatrice being born a Cenci is the Schuldzusammenhang she cannot escape.

‘What have I done?’ Beatrice demands after her rape,

Am I not innocent? Is it my crime
That one with white hair, and imperious brow,
Who tortured me from my forgotten years,
As parents only dare, should call himself
My father, yet should be! (III.i.69-74)

Beatrice interprets the rape as punishment, although her only crime is that of having been born Cenci’s daughter – an interpretation that exactly matches Benjamin’s idea of fate as punishment for being alive: ‘Das Schicksal zeigt sich also in der Betrachtung eines Lebens als eines Verurteilten, im Grunde als eines, das erst verurteilt und darauf schuldig wurde.’ (GS2, p. 175) It is Beatrice’s fate of being born a Cenci that provokes the parricide that she will be guilty of – and turns Beatrice herself into a parricide.218 On Benjamin’s interpretation, the theological outlook that accompanies this merciless notion of fate is one that views bare life, das bloße Leben, as guilty – most clearly captured in the Christian doctrine of ‘original sin.’219 However, in the essays on tragedy, Benjamin is less concerned with differences between various interpretations of the Judeo-Christian God, rather the thrust of his argument differentiates between the ancient Pantheon and a monotheistic God.220 Benjamin explores this opposition in various configurations in ‘Schicksal und Charakter’ and a cluster of political-theological reflections written between 1918-21 which includes the well-known ‘Kapitalismus als Religion’ and ‘Theologisch-Politisches Fragment,’ these are collected as fragments ‘Zur Geschichtsphilosophie, Historik und

---

218 It is a peculiarity of the English language that the person committing a parricide becomes herself a parricide: as if individuality were expanded in the crime. Cf. OED, parricide, n. 1 and 2. Derrida notes a similar peculiarity in the French word parjure: ‘The same word, parjure, in French means both the act of perjuring, the crime of perjury, in sum, and the author of the perjury, the guilty one, the perjurer.’ “Le Parjure,” Perhaps: Storytelling and Lying (‘abrupt breaches of syntax’), Acts of Narrative, ed. by Carol Jacobs and Henry Sussman, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 195-234 (p. 196, cf. p. 212).

219 Giorgio Agamben has popularised Benjamin’s concept of bare life through his use of it in Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life.

220 This theological difference gives rise to a clear difference between the Trauerspiel and tragedy: whereas the baroque Trauerspiel is locked in a state of mourning the fall of creation, ancient tragedy bears witness to a rebellion against its heathen gods.
Politik’ (GS6, pp. 90-108). These reflections can be said to culminate in the politically oriented ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt’ (1921), and in his essay on Goethe's Wahlverwandtschaften, written in 1919-22, published in 1924.221 In the latter piece Benjamin argues that the modern author is staging an encounter with the mythic forces that reigned in the realm of ancient tragedy:

> Nirgends ist zwar das Mythische der höchste Sachgehalt, überall aber ein strenger Hinweis auf diesen. Als solchen hat es Goethe zur Grundlage seines Romans gemacht. Das Mythische ist der Sachgehalt dieses Buches: als ein mythisches Schattenspiel in Kostümen des Goetheschen Zeitalters erscheint sein Inhalt. (GS1, pp. 140-1)

On Benjamin’s reading of Wahlverwandtschaften, the bond that binds Eduard and Charlotte to one another in marriage after they have fallen in love with others manifests the mythic forces in contemporary guise. A decade later, Benjamin will revisit many of the same themes and locate these mythic forces in Kafka’s Beamtenhierarkien, ‘so hätte Kafka [...] die Organisation als Schicksal definieren können.’ (GS2, p. 420; cf. pp. 426-7). Shelley's representation of the Catholic Church in The Cenci can be seen as Schicksal in this organisational sense. Most critics begin their reading by noting Beatrice's entrapment in a society governed by a patriarchal 'triple entente'222 of Father, Pope, and God. As the Pope is complicit with the patriarchal order, he ‘holds it of most dangerous example | In aught to weaken the paternal power, | Being, as 't were, the shadow of his own’ (Camillo, II.ii.54-6). The Church will offer no succour and, to put it in Benjamin’s terms, leaves Beatrice with a choice between Unglück and Schuld: she can either do nothing and continue being raped by her father (as Cenci vows that he will) or she can draw upon herself the guilt of parricide. It is this impossible decision that characterises the mythic world and marks the absence of not only justice but also religion in this world:

> Eine Ordnung aber, deren einzig konstitutive Begriffe Unglück und Schuld sind und innerhalb deren es keine denkbare Straße der Befreiung gibt (denn soweit etwas Schicksal ist, ist es Unglück und Schuld) – eine solche Ordnung kann nicht religiös sein, so sehr auch der mißverstandene Schuldbeziehung darauf zu verweisen scheint. (GS2, p. 174)

The Pope’s lack of religious feeling is evident not only in his refusal to aid Beatrice, but also in his sentencing her to death for killing Cenci when he had already himself ordered

---

221 In speaking of the self-referential citation at play within Goethe’s novel, Benjamin classifies such returning motifs as the eternal return of the same that is the hallmark of fate. That ‘Schicksal und Charakter’ is cited in the very paragraph where Benjamin offers this definition, as well as in ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt’ which is, in its turn, cited in the 1934 Kafka essay can be read as a self-ironic commentary on the thematic development in these works.

222 The formulation is James Rieger’s, but the analogy appears in various guises throughout criticism on the play. The Mutiny Within: The Heresies of Percy Bysshe Shelley (New York: George Braziller, 1967), p. 114; further references in text.
Cenci’s execution. The trial scene in The Cenci, like those in Kafka’s works, compels its audience think a higher justice than the one represented by this institution of justice, a more just justice that Benjamin names with the word Gerechtigkeit, righteousness.

71. Forgiveness.

For Benjamin, a theology whose only constitutive concepts are Unglück and Schuld, leaves no room for justice, Gerechtigkeit. ‘Es gilt also ein anderes Gebiet zu suchen, in welchem einzig und allein Unglück und Schuld gelten, eine Waage, auf der Seligkeit und Unschuld zu leicht befunden werden und nach oben schweben. Diese Waage ist die Waage des Rechts.’ (GS2, p. 174) Recht is the scale on which mythic guilt is measured and the law that presides over a worldview where life is a Schuldzusammenhang. ‘Das Recht verurteilt nicht zur Strafe, sondern zur Schuld.’ (GS2, p. 175) True religion only enters the picture in the figure of divine violence which destroys Recht in the name of Gerechtigkeit. At stake is an epochal opposition of theologico-judicial orders: ‘Wie in allen Bereichen dem Mythos Gott, so tritt der mythischen Gewalt die göttliche entgegen.’ (GS2, p. 199) In The Cenci, however, it is precisely God – enshrined in the figure of the Pope and the institution of the Church – that represents the archaic violence that needs to be overcome in the name of justice. Nonetheless, this is also an opposition between two conceptions of religion. In a note to the prophetic closing chorus of Hellas, Shelley explains his conception in a manner that anticipates Benjamin’s argument:

All those who fell are the Gods of Greece, Asia, and Egypt; the One who rose or Jesus Christ, at whose appearance the idols of the Pagan world were amerced of their worship; and the many unsubdued or the monstrous objects of idolatry of China, India, the Antarctic islands, and the native tribes of America… (SPP, p. 464).

Jesus breaks with the reign of the pagan gods, which yet remains unbroken in other parts of the world. But while Jesus may have ‘amerced’ the ancient gods of their worship, he has not destroyed them and the mythic (in Benjamin’s sense of the word) residue lodged in the figure of Jesus comes out in the following sentence:

---

223 Shelley’s exposition of this paternal trinity and its relation to the innocent Beatrice stages a primal conflict between a metonymic chain of fathers and the child that stands there as their victim – a family relation that also anticipates another mythic element Kafka’s works. Speaking of Kafka’s ‘Das Urteil,’ Benjamin notes ‘Weltalter muß er in Bewegung setzen, um das uralte Vater-Sohn-Verhältnis lebendig, folgenreich zu machen. Doch reich an welchen Folgen! Er verurteilt den Sohn zum Tode des Ertrinkens.’ (GS2, p. 411) Georg Bendemann duly goes and drowns himself, whereas Beatrice refuses to submit to her father’s prerogative.

224 The relation of mythic and divine violence may be read with the triple meaning of Aufhebung in mind. Hamacher places it within his language of position and de-position, and afformation in his essay ‘Afformative, Strike’. Andrew Benjamin coins the term ‘countermeasure’ to describe how mythic violence is countered by divine violence in Working with Walter Benjamin: Recovering a Political Philosophy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).
The sublime human character of Jesus Christ was deformed by an imputed identification of it with a Demon, who tempted, betrayed and punished the innocent beings who were called into existence by his sole will; and for a period of a thousand years the spirit of this most just, wise, and benevolent of men, has been propitiated with myriads of hecatombs of those who approached the nearest to his innocence and his wisdom, sacrificed under every aggravation of atrocity and variety of torture. (SPP, p. 464)

The Demon in question is none other than the God of the Bible, whose vengefulness in the older parts of the Bible is, for Shelley, incompatible with the goodness and mercy represented by the sublimely ‘human’ Christian ideal. Shelley’s publisher prudently omitted these passages from the first edition, reflecting a difficulty which Shelley’s readers, particularly early ones, had with coming to terms with Shelley’s atheism. On Trelawny’s account, Shelley’s choice of the term is a deliberate provocation:

"Why," I asked, “do you call yourself an atheist? It annihilates you in this world.” “It is a word of abuse to stop discussion, a painted devil to frighten the foolish, a threat to intimidate the wise and good. I used it to express my abhorrence of superstition; I took up the word, as a knight took up a gauntlet, in defiance of injustice. The delusions of Christianity are fatal to genius and originality: they limit thought.” (p. 53)

Trelawny’s records are notoriously inaccurate, yet they suggest defiance rather than theological conviction in Shelley’s choice of the word. Certainly Shelley’s attacks on Christianity are primarily directed against an anthropomorphous image of God as a cantankerous patriarch who punishes his creation for its flaws – particularly as he, if omniscient, would have had foresight of these when creating it – rather than against the belief in a higher power as such. A note appended to the second choric interlude of Hellas summarises a view that Shelley repeats in various formulations throughout his life:

The received hypothesis of a Being resembling men in the moral attributes of his nature having called us out of non-existence, and after inflicting on us the misery of the commission of error, should superadd that of the punishment and the privations consequent upon it, still would remain inexplicable and incredible. (SPP, p. 462)

It is this personified notion of God that Shelley rejects and his crusade against the Church is against an institution built in the image of such a vengeful God. ‘Revenge is the naked Idol of the worship of a semi-barbarous age; and Self-deceit is the veiled Image of unknown evil before which luxury and satiety lie prostrate.’ (‘Defence,’ SPP, p. 516) Revenge would thus be characteristic of the gods ‘who fell’ in Shelley’s gloss on the final chorus of Hellas. This view is in accord with Benjamin’s view of mythic violence, which he likewise connects with the ancients and also terms vergeltende Gewalt, retributive violence: ‘so ist es aus ältern Rechtsformen bekannt, daß bis in die Folge fernerer
Geschlechter diese vergeltende Gewalt hineinzureichen vermochte’ ('Die Bedeutung der Zeit in der moralischen Welt' ['The Meaning of Time in the Moral Universe'], GS6, p. 97). But Shelley also suggests that the age of revenge was succeeded by one that has Self-deceit as its idol, or else the Christian era. James Chandler identifies this as the age of casuistry, one where the semi-barbarous age of revenge has given way to the realisation that ‘revenge is unacceptable – that it must be covered up.’ (England in 1819, p. 503) That is, the desire for revenge is not overcome, it is merely justified by various species of casuistical self-deceit.

But, as long as casuistry itself goes unexposed, the cycle of revenge will continue. The double triumph of revenge over forebearance, and of self-deceit over honesty, is what constitutes the tragedy of The Cenci as it comes to Shelley’s hands, already made and played, as he suggests [by evoking the manuscript account in the preface], before he touches it. How then are we to understand his own work of “clothing” the action for the contemporary audience? (Chandler, p. 503)

Chandler turns to Hegel’s historiography and Sir Walter Scott’s historical novels to answer his question about the relation between the present of literary writing and literary representations of the past, but I would like to note the proximity between Benjamin’s thought on tragedy in modern literature and Shelley’s tragedy that Chandler’s question marks. Both ascribe revenge to a primitive moral economy characteristic of the ancients that lives on in another guise even when that age is past. By clothing these forces in contemporary guise, Shelley exposes the true face of casuistry as covered-up revenge. But it is not simply a question of ancient versus modern. Margot Harrison argues that the clash between generations in The Cenci is a clash between the Old and the New Testaments: Cenci and the Pope represents the vengeful face of the Old Testament God, whereas Beatrice evokes the forgiving ethics of Christ.225 However, Shelley's Beatrice also fails to live up to the ideal set by Christ. 'Revenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes,' Shelley writes in the preface (p. 730). Instead of revenge, Shelley says that ‘the fit return to make to the most enormous injuries is kindness and forbearance, and a resolution to convert the injurer from his dark passions by peace and love.’ (p. 730) Readers often note that Shelley's prescription is but cold consolation in Beatrice's circumstances – but the fact that Beatrice cannot viably choose ‘kindness and forbearance’ only emphasises Benjamin’s point that Gerechtigkeit cannot be found in the world of tragedy. Despite their theological differences, both Shelley and Benjamin reject vindictive justice in favour of a justice whose essential characteristic is forgiveness. Acknowledging the vengeful nature of God in the older parts of the Bible, Tracy McNulty suggests that Benjamin's opposition between

mythic and divine violence is not pitting God against ancient polytheism, but the God who gives the commandments (the written law) to the arbitrarily punishing God of the earlier parts of the Old Testament. ‘In this respect, one might even argue that the first “mythic violence” opposed by the written law is the mythic violence of God himself.’

This can be seen, for instance, in the fragment ‘Die Bedeutung der Zeit in der moralischen Welt,’ where Benjamin represents mythic violence as a vergeltende Gewalt (retributive violence): ‘so ist es aus ältern Rechtsformen bekannt, daß bis in die Folge fernerer Geschlechter diese vergeltende Gewalt hineinzureichen vermochte.’ (GS7, p. 97) But this notion of retribution is one ascribed to God in Numbers 14:18 where it is said that God ‘by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation.’ In contrast to the vergeltende Gewalt of Numbers, what Benjamin calls divine violence is forgiving vergeltend (GS6, p. 98), rechtsvernichtend, right-destroying, and entsündigend, expiating (GS2, p. 199). If it destroys, it is to wipe away all traces of guilt, including traces of divine injustice: divine violence is ‘die Hand, welche die Spuren seiner [Untat] vertilgt, und wenn sie die Erde darum verwüsten müßte.’ (GS6, p. 98) Divine violence is a kind of violence that would destroy creation itself with the force of its forgiveness. This cursory overview does not do justice to neither Shelley’s nor Benjamin’s theological outlooks – both of which have given rise to various competing interpretations – and is not meant to artificially reconcile their differences. However, I do want to emphasise the one point on which they agree: true justice chooses forgiveness over retribution.

Beatrice & Ottilie

72. A portrait not of Beatrice Cenci.

In addition to the historical account of the Cenci family, Shelley’s drama is structured around a portrait he saw in Rome. The picture in question is a ‘portrait that is not by Guido Reni of a girl who is not Beatrice Cenci,’ as Stuart Curran frames it,227 yet Shelley’s description of what he believes to be Reni’s portrait of Beatrice on the night before her trial is his most famous ekphrasis and inextricable from Shelley’s drama. ‘Shelley wanted to animate a particular painting by “telling,” that is, inventing, its story,’ Mary E. Finn writes228 and although her suggestion may be overstating Shelley’s intention, she is not alone in reading The Cenci as at least partially an ekphrasis on the painting. Shelley intended to include a reproduction in his edition of The Cenci, but ultimately could not afford to. Instead his readers had to make do with the following words:

The portrait of Beatrice at the Colonna Palace is admirable as a work of art: it was taken by Guido during her confinement in prison. But it is most interesting as a just representation of one of the loveliest specimens of the workmanship of Nature. There is a fixed and pale composure upon the features: she seems sad and stricken down in spirit, yet the despair thus expressed is lightened by the patience of gentleness. Her head is bound with folds of white drapery from which the yellow strings of her golden hair escape, and fall about her neck. The moulding of her face is exquisitely delicate; the eyebrows are distinct and arched; the lips have that permanent meaning of imagination and sensibility which suffering has not repressed and which it seems as if death scarcely could extinguish. Her forehead is large and clear; her eyes, which we are told were remarkable for their vivacity, are swollen with weeping and lustreless, but beautifully tender and serene. In the whole mien there is a simplicity and dignity which united with her exquisite loveliness and deep sorrow are inexpressibly pathetic. Beatrice Cenci appears to have been one of those rare persons in whom energy and gentleness dwell together without destroying one another: her nature was simple and profound. The crimes and miseries in which she was an actor and a sufferer are as the mask and the mantle in which circumstances clothed her for her impersonation on the scene of the world. (PS2, pp. 734-5)

Shelley’s portrait of Beatrice turned the picture into a tourist attraction amongst English tourists in Rome and has inspired later literary imitations, most notably perhaps Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Transformation, later renamed The Marble Faun (1860) which

---

takes the obsession with the alleged portrait of Beatrice as its theme. Shelley's ekphrasis is marked by a curious mixture of physical characteristics and moral categories: the young girl's pale fixity indicates gentleness in despair, her lips suggest an irrepressible imagination, her eyes indicate tender serenity, and it is her overall mien that confirms the simple profundity of her nature – all of these are characteristics that feed into the assertion that Beatrice's character is essentially innocent despite her crimes. With a face like that seen on the portrait, any crime that attaches to Beatrice merely veils her true moral nature, it pertains to the mask and mantle of circumstance because Beatrice's beauty is incompatible with wickedness.

73. Elective affinities.

In his essay on Goethe's _Wahlverwandtschaften_, Benjamin states that the novel requires us to believe in Ottile's beauty. *Denn es ist nicht zu viel gesagt, wenn man die Überzeugung von Ottilens Schönheit als Grundbedingung für den Anteil am Roman bezeichnet.* (GS1, pp. 178-9) The same is true of Beatrice's beauty. Not denying the horror of the parricide nor Beatrice's pernicious mistake in seeking revenge Shelley's preface argues that she is innocent in a higher sense than her factual guilt and, furthermore, in his argument her innocence is proven by the beauty of the girl depicted on the portrait that the preface describes. This conviction seeps into the drama itself; during her trial Beatrice says to Cardinal Camillo: 'I pray thee, Cardinal, that thou assert | My innocence.' (V.ii.59-60) The request does not fall on deaf ears: the Cardinal confesses that he is 'much moved'

---

229 Barbara Groseclose has studied the afterlife of Shelley's ekphrasis and its subject, which she terms 'less portrait than icon.' 'The Incest Motif in Shelley's "The Cenci",' _Comparative Drama_, 19 (1985), 222–239 (p. 223). _The Marble Faun_ is interesting from the viewpoint of Benjamin's thought on art. The novel holds up a Shelleyan ideal of art against the infringement of technological progress. Hawthorne has one of his main characters, the copyist Hilda, produce a copy of the Beatrice painting without having been allowed to work in front of it. As she says: 'I had no recourse but to sit down in front of the picture, day after day, and let it sink into my heart. I do believe it is now photographed there.' (p. 52) The result is 'the very saddest picture ever painted or conceived; it involved an unfathomable depth of sorrow, the sense of which came to the observer by a sort of intuition. It was a sorrow that removed this beautiful girl out of the sphere of humanity and set her in a far off region, the remoteness of which – while yet her face is so close before us – makes us shiver as at a spectre.' (pp. 51-2) 'Was ist eigentlich Aura?' Benjamin rhetorically asks in the fourth section of the _Kunstwerk_ essay: 'Ein sonderbares Gespinst aus Raum und Zeit: einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so näh sie sein mag.' (GS7, p. 355). In Hawthorne's novel, Beatrice's auratic portrait is set in 'a far off region' even as her face is 'so close' before its viewer. But whereas Benjamin argues that photography strips aura, the image of Reni's Beatrice 'photographed' on Hilda's heart maintains this distance. Hawthorne's narrator insists that while a copyist, Hilda is not like other copyists, who 'convert themselves into Guido machines, or Raphaelic machines. [...] Hilda was no such machine as this; she wrought religiously, and therefore wrought a miracle.' (p. 48) From the point of view of a Benjaminian reading, the miracle would consist in her photograph of Beatrice's aura.

230 _Die Wahlverwandtschaften_ is published in 1809, although there is no evidence that Shelley was familiar with it. On account of its offending content it was not translated into English until James Anthony Froude's 1854 _Elective Affinities_, who even then felt obliged to add the caveat: 'In many points, it were to be wished that Goethe had not so written; but to alter anything is not in the translator's commission.' (cited in Constantine, 'German', pp. 217-8).
and continues that ‘I would pledge my soul | That she is guiltless.’ (V.i.62-3) However, the Cardinal’s pledge rests on the sole evidence of Beatrice’s resemblance to his nephew:

(If he now lived he would be just her age;  
His hair, too, was her colour, and his eyes  
Like hers in shape, but blue and not so deep)  
As that most perfect image of God’s love  
That ever came sorrowing upon the earth.  
She is as pure as speechless infancy! (V.ii.65-70)

Camillo deduces Beatrice’s innocence from her appearance: the ‘golden hair’ and ‘beautifully tender and serene’ eyes that Shelley described at length in the preface and which led Shelley himself to the conclusion that Beatrice Cenci’s ‘nature was simple and profound.’ Because Beatrice is beautiful, any crime she may commit must be innately alien to her character.231 The fact that Beatrice’s beautiful appearance enters into our judgment over her actions may be the image in which, more than in any other, *The Cenci* reveals Shelley’s ‘own conceptions of right or wrong.’ As a ‘most perfect image of God’s love,’ Beatrice’s beauty is an idol because in fact she has committed the parricide she is being accused of. This is also the image in which Shelley’s drama has an elective affinity to Benjamin’s discussion of Ottilie’s beauty. Both Beatrice and Ottilie are represented in accordance with the romantic era’s physiognomic linkage of beauty and innocence and yet in both pieces the heroine’s beauty is counterbalanced by morally questionable actions. Beatrice’s beauty is a necessary component in the drama’s lesson about the casuistry of moral judgment much as Ottilie’s beauty is essential to Benjamin’s assessment of the *mythische Sachgehalt* of Goethe’s novel.

74. Choreography.

At the outset of the *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay, Benjamin adds a caveat on the limitations of moral judgment in reading fiction: ‘die Gestalten keiner Dichtung je der sittlichen Beurteilung unterworfen sein können.’ (GS1, p. 133) As I have noted, Benjamin rejects the romantic image of the poetic creator as a miniature God. Whereas God creates out of nothing, the artist gives form to chaos. In the Goethe essay Benjamin names the latter a *Bilder*, a ‘former;’ who *bildet*, forms *Geschöpfe*, fictional characters (SW1, pp. 323-4). The important difference between such characters and created beings is that fictional characters do not participate in the realm of redemption. In ‘Kategorien der Ästhetik’ ['Categories of Aesthetics’], a fragment written in 1919-20, Benjamin addresses the point:

231 From this perspective it matters little that the painting is now known to be neither a portrait of Beatrice Cenci nor by Reni – the portrait is a piece of evidence in *The Cenci’s* trial and its authority trumps whatever is said about Beatrice Cenci’s actions in the manuscript source.

Therefore ethical judgments drawn from reading are unlike those drawn from life – whereas each person is to be judged as an individual before God, fictional characters are to be judged through their relations. ‘Und nicht sittlich über sie zu befinden, sondern das Geschehn moralisch zu erfassen, ist geboten,’ Benjamin writes of Goethe’s novel (GS1, p. 133). It is the choreography that governs the interactions between the characters that forms the basis of the moral evaluation of a fictional work. Most readings of The Cenci tend to focus on Beatrice’s guilt or innocence, but in what follows I will take my cue from Benjamin’s approach to Goethe’s novel: ‘Von Anfang an stehen die Gestalten unter dem Banne von Wahlverwandtschaften.’ (GS1, p. 134) In a comparable manner Beatrice Cenci, ‘steht unter dem Banne,’ is cursed or spellbound by, being Count Cenci’s daughter – and vice versa. ‘The poles [of the drama] are Cenci and Beatrice; the subordinate characters serve to amplify and extend the significance of their antagonism.’ (Curran, p. 62) This premise informs Curran’s book on The Cenci – which is still the most comprehensive reading of the play. While I draw on many of Curran’s insights, I disagree with his suggestion that Shelley writes ‘for a medieval raised platform on which he mounted a Good and Bad Angel in deadly opposition’ (p. 62). Curran acknowledges that ‘Beatrice has the same temperament as her father’ (p. 93), however, his almost Manichean reading repeatedly holds up Cenci’s depravity against his daughter’s goodness. But if one takes seriously Curran’s suggestion that Beatrice has ‘the same temperament as her father,’ the Cenci family relationship (Verwandtschaft) presents a wholly different battle than that between good and evil. To begin with, since the relationship between Cenci and Beatrice is framed by the Christian analogy between father, Pope, and God, Beatrice’s parricide is, symbolically speaking, a deicide. But this analogy also operates in the male relationships in the play. Cenci’s own violent defiance of the Pope’s authority prefigures Beatrice’s literal and symbolic execution of her father. Furthermore, if the parricide is an effect of a temperament that Beatrice shares with her father; that is, if Beatrice, in committing this act, reiterates the violence characteristic of her father, she cannot be held up as the good to Cenci’s bad: rather she offers a reflection of his violence in beautifully distorted form. Since Beatrice defines her parricide as ‘the consequence of what it cannot cure’ (iii.i.91), it is Cenci, the father, who initiates the chain of events that will lead to his death. I argue that the conflict that The Cenci develops is not a battle of good and evil, but rather an auto-destructive drive at the heart of the Christian faith. Only when the play is approached
through the various relationships in which the characters stand to one another does the full critical force of Shelley’s tragedy come out. In the present section I discuss the elective affinity between Beatrice and Ottilie to bring out the expressionless nature of Cenci’s crime and relate it to Benjamin’s discussion of tragedy in his reading of Goethe’s novel. In the following section, ‘Payback time,’ I turn to the male relations in the play and then, in ‘Living on’ I will discuss the interplay between Beatrice and her father to reveal the extent to which Shelley conjures her in her father’s image. Then, in ‘Rebellion,’ I discuss the violence characteristic of the Cenci family and how it mirrors some of Benjamin’s remarks in ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt.’ In the final section, ‘Last line of resistance,’ I read the violence of The Cenci against the framework presented in ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt’ and suggest that the play points towards a third type of violence within Benjamin’s dichotomy of mythic and divine violence which I term Promethean violence.

75. Tragic or traurisch?

Goethe’s Wahlverwandtschaften is structured on a chemical reaction: when the compounds AB and CD mix, A binds with C and B binds with D, resulting in the compounds AC and BD. Wahlverwandtschaft, elective affinity, was the then-current scientific term for the process and the reaction is explicitly thematised in one of the novel’s conversations. But the word Verwandtschaft also means family relation, a double meaning that allows Goethe to apply the structure of this chemical reaction to human relations. The only family relation that we freely chose is our spouse and so a marriage can be termed a Wahlverwandtschaft, an elective family relation. Goethe’s novel opens at the home of the happily married couple Charlotte and Eduard. Before long they are visited by Charlotte’s niece Ottilie and Eduard’s friend the Captain. Soon Eduard falls in love with Ottilie and Charlotte with the Captain. That is, when AB, Charlotte and Eduard meet CD, Ottilie and the Captain, they regroup as AC, Charlotte and the Captain and BD, Eduard and Ottilie. While the former couple fights their emotions, Eduard is represented as too foolish and Ottilie too childishly innocent to realise what is happening until it is too late. As the forces of attraction play out, the novel stages the gradual corruption of Eduard and Charlotte’s marriage until it becomes a prison for both of them.232 The unviable situation reaches a climax when Charlotte conceives a child by Eduard. Once born, the child resembles Ottilie and the Captain, rather than its parents. Benjamin’s reading of the Wahlverwandtschaften as ancient myth in modern costume starts with the marriage bond that ties Eduard and Charlotte to one another. While marriage is a Christian sacrament, Benjamin argues that this marriage bond represents the presence of mythic forces: ‘Dieses aber sind freilich die mythischen Gewalten des Rechts und die Ehe ist in ihnen nur Vollstreckung eines

232 The scenario is in accord with Shelley’s view on marriage, which he believed should not last longer than the spouses’s love for one another.
Unterganges, den sie nicht verhängt.’ (GS1, p. 130) For Benjamin Recht condemns das bloße Leben, bare life, to guilt, in contrast to Gerechtigkeit which forgives. The marriage contract fetters the purest expression of bare life: sexuality. By falling in love with one another, and not being able to resist their love, Eduard and Otilie transgress against the Recht that ties Eduard to his wife, who is furthermore Otilie’s aunt. The transgression is doubled when Otilie accidentally kills the illegitimately legitimate child. The accident propels Otilie’s insight into the wrong she has done her aunt and benefactress, after which point Otilie starts to refuse food and slowly wastes away. Her death is often read as a sacrifice to Christian moral norms, Benjamin, however, emphasises her passivity. In Benjamin’s words, Otilie lives her life ‘im Scheinen und im Werden schicksalhafter Gewalt bis zum Tod unterworfen.’ (GS1, p. 176) She never decides to destroy her aunt’s marriage, she drifts into it and even when she commits suicide by starvation in apparent punishment for her transgression, her decision appears irresolute: Otilie’s ‘Entschluß zum Sterben bleibt nicht nur vor den Freunden bis zuletzt geheim, er scheint in seiner völligen Verborgenheit auch für sie selbst unfaßbar sich zu bilden.’ (GS1, p. 176) In other words, Otilie passively submits to her fate.

Nothing less tragic than Otilie’s end. But what of Beatrice – is her entrapment in her fateful circumstances to be read as untragisch and trauervoll? ‘By an objective standard she [Beatrice] may be wrong, but in the inescapable prison of human events, she is merely and thus profoundly tragic, beyond the realm of simple moral platitudes.’ (Curran, pp. 140-1) So Curran, for whom the mere inescapability of her circumstances renders Beatrice tragic. But as Benjamin’s reading of Otilie shows, being trapped in adverse circumstances alone does not make a heroine tragic. In this section I place Shelley’s Beatrice alongside Benjamin’s reading of Otilie (rather than Goethe’s novel itself). I argue that Beatrice, unlike Otilie, is a tragic heroine, if not quite for the reason’s that Curran offers. My main aim, however, is not to establish this somewhat moot point, but to highlight Shelley’s configuration of mythic forces in his play – particularly as they affect the place of women in a patriarchal system.
76. Chastity.
Beatrice and Ottilie do not only have their beauty in common but also their chastity – two qualities that combine to mark their innocence. Goethe’s repeated emphases on Ottilie’s childish nature serves to remove her from any implication of sexual depravity. Thus, Ottilie’s chastity protects her from being culpable even of the active part she plays in the dissolution of Eduard and Charlotte’s marriage. On the face of it, Beatrice’s circumstances differ radically from Ottilie’s – she does not drift into an extra-marital affair, but is born to a father who is determined to invent ever new ways of tormenting her. However, even in the corrupt world of The Cenci, female innocence remains an absolute virtue – or so Beatrice believes. ‘If Beatrice Cenci possesses a tragic flaw, it is her virginity, or, more exactly, her idealization of her virginity as the center of her moral life and nature,’ Stuart M. Sperry notes.233 When Cenci rapes her, he not only violates her body, he shatters her innocence. Beatrice explains how she sees her predicament in a dialogue with her lover Orsino, shortly after the rape:

Orsino
Accuse him of the deed, and let the law
Avenge thee.

Beatrice
Oh, ice-hearted counsellor!
If I could find a word that might make known
The crime of my destroyer; and that done,
My tongue should [...] lay all bare,
So that my unpolluted fame should be
With vilest gossips a stale mouthed story;
A mock, a byword, an astonishment. (III.i.152-60)

Beatrice’s dilemma arises from the very nature of Christian morality. By being raped, Beatrice loses her virginity and so the burden of guilt will fall on herself as an unchaste woman. Therefore, if she publicly accuses her father, the very accusation would at the same time implicate her in sexual guilt. Her continued preoccupation with her innocent appearance suggests that, for her, the rape is as much a crime against her public image as it is one against her body. ‘Do you know,’ she says to her stepmother Lucretia after the rape, ‘I thought I was that wretched Beatrice | Men speak of’ (III.i.42-4). The loss of her sense of self is coupled with a loss of her future fame: ‘Oh, what am I? | What name, what place, what memory shall be mine? | What retrospects, outliving even despair?’ (III.i.781)

At the scene of her arrest, Beatrice pleads with the officers to let her go in the name of her public image:

And yet, if you arrest me,
You are the judge and executioner
Of that which is the life of life: the breath
Of accusation kills an innocent name,
And leaves for lame acquittal the poor life
Which is a mask without it. (IV.iv.135-40)

An innocent name is for Beatrice the 'life of life' and thus she is concerned with protecting the purity of hers. However, turning to Benjamin's discussion of Ottilie's chastity shows that Beatrice's acceptance of the chastity ideal imprecates her in mythic guilt. Benjamin sees the idealisation of chastity as a variant manifestation of the mythic violence that chains sexuality in the marriage bond. Both the celebration of chastity and enforced monogamy are based on the idea that sexuality is guilty. According to the theology of the mythic world, '[sind] die Gründe einer mythischen Urschuld im bloßem Lebenstrieb der Sexualität zu suchen' (GS1, p. 174). By fettering sexuality, the chastity ideal seeks to contain the guilt that adheres to das bloße Leben, rather than denying it. Therefore, rather than symbolising innocence, the chastity ideal marks life as guilty. A miracle like the virgin birth is not a repudiation of, but a counterpart to, the guilt to which mythic Recht condemns das bloße Leben. 'Die heidnische wenn auch nicht mythische Idee dieser Unschuld verdankt zu mindest ihre äußerste und folgenreichste Formulierung im Ideal der Jungfräulichkeit dem Christentum.' (GS1, p. 174) Rather than confirming Jesus’ divinity, the virgin birth lets the heathen notion of bare life as guilty enter Christianity so that the Christian chastity ideal becomes the hallmark of Christianity’s failure to overcome the mythic forces which antecedent it.234 The chaste woman denies the highest expression of her life, her sexuality, but a truly innocent woman would break free of the guilt that attaches to her bare life. It follows that the chastity ideal offers a mere semblance of innocence, not innocence itself.

77. Expressionless.
As Beatrice’s remark to Orsino indicates, she can find no word to name the crime that Cenci has committed that would not at the same time turn her into his accomplice. As the scene unfolds, Beatrice makes clear that without being able to name her crime, she cannot expect retribution through the usual legal means. 'I pray | That you put off, as garments

234 Benjamin’s divine violence is also a messianic violence that counters and destroys the reign of myth. If the virgin birth is a remnant of this myth, it would indicate why Jesus Christ cannot be the Messiah: if his purity is proven by his miraculous birth, this purity is marked by the heathen guilt that adheres to mere life.
overworn, | Forbearance and respect, remorse and fear, | And all the fit restraints of daily life', Beatrice says to Orsino and Lucretia in a later speech in the same scene (III.i.207-10). Her simile echoes the preface's sartorial imagery to separate the historically contingent laws of 'daily life' from a higher moral law according to which Beatrice wishes to be judged. Ordinary moral standards '[w]ould be a mockery to my holier plea' (III.i.212) she asserts and continues: 'I have endured a wrong, | Which, though it be expressionless, is such | As asks atonement' (III.i.213-5). Beatrice's designation of the crime committed against her as 'expressionless' names it with a word whose German equivalent, ausdruckslos, runs as a red thread through Benjamin's thought and also appears in his discussion of Ottilie, more precisely her silence. Ottilie’s silence is the silence of her conscience in the face of her transgression, metonymic of her passive submission to her fate which turns her into a trauervoll rather than tragic heroine. According to Benjamin, the question that grants 'Einsicht in die innersten Zusammenhänge des Romans' is one asked by Julian Schmidt, namely 'wie begreift sich dies Verstummen des Gewissens?' (cited GS1, p. 177) That is, although Ottilie’s silence marks her out as a trauervoll heroine, it is key to the mythic, which is to say tragic, forces that Goethe’s novel dresses in contemporary guise. In his definition of ausdruckslose Gewalt in the Goethe essay, Benjamin states that ‘Solche Gewalt ist kaum je deutlicher geworden als in der griechischen Tragödie [...] als Verstummen des Helden.’ (GS1, p. 182) The silence of a tragic hero is the expressionless moment of tragedy. However, Ottilie’s silence is part and parcel of her passive submission to her fate, which makes her trauervoll rather than tragisch. Therefore it is not her silence as such that is the expressionless, rather her place within the novel’s choreographed relations equals the position of the expressionless in Benjamin’s discussion of tragedy. To situate Ottilie as the expressionless of Goethe’s novel, Benjamin turns to a discussion of her beauty – which he termed the the Grundbedingung of the novel (GS1, p. 179). ‘Mit diesem Schweigen,’ he writes of Ottilie’s silence, ‘hat verzehrend im Herzen des edelsten Wesens sich der Schein angesiedelt.’ (GS1, p. 177) As I have already noted, for Benjamin Schein, semblance, is the veil in which the beautiful appears:

Den dieser [Schein] gehört ihm [dem wesentlich Schönen] als die Hülle und als das Wesensgesetz der Schönheit zeigt sich somit, daß sie als solche nur im Verhüllten erscheint. [...] Mag daher Schein sonst überall Trug sein – der schöne Schein ist die Hülle vor dem notwendig Verhülltesten. Denn weder die Hülle noch der verhüllte Gegenstand ist das Schöne, sonder dies ist der Gegenstand in seiner Hülle. (GS1, pp. 194-5)

Benjamin calls this a pflanzenhaftes Stummsein, plantlike muteness (GS1, p. 175; SW1, p. 336), recalling his discussion of the silent mourning of nature in the essay ‘Über Sprache,’ and anticipating his treatment of the theme the Trauerspiel-book.
Ottilie is essentially muffled by the beautiful semblance that she is veiled in. This is what makes beauty ‘das Erste und Wesentliche’ in ‘Ottilie’s Dasein’ (GS1, p. 178). Furthermore, Benjamin sees fictional characters as conjured rather than created. In the case of Ottilie, what is conjured is precisely beauty: ‘Beschworen nämlich wird stets nur ein Schein, in Ottilien die lebendige Schönheit.’ (GS1, p. 179) However, as I argued in my discussion of erstarrte Unruhe as a trope in Benjamin’s work, such semblance of life is not life. Therefore, Benjamin claims, this semblance must be shattered and the agent of this destruction is das Ausdruckslose. Here is the citation once more:

...kein Kunstwerk [darf] gänzlich ungebunden lebendig scheinen ohne bloßer Schein zu werden und aufzuhören Kunstwerk zu sein. Das in ihm wogende Leben muß erstarrt und wie in einem Augenblick gebannt erscheinen. Dies in ihm Wesende ist bloße Schönheit, bloße Harmonie, die das Chaos – und in Wahrheit eben nur dieses, nicht die Welt – durchflutet, im Durchfluten aber zu beleben nur scheint. Was diesem Schein Einhalt gebietet, die Bewegung bannt und der Harmonie ins Wort fällt ist das Ausdruckslose. (GS1, p. 181)

Ottilie’s beauty is but the semblance of living beauty just as her chaste innocence is but the semblance of true innocence. Such semblance is petrified or arrested by the expressionless, which in Goethe’s Wahlverwandtschaften manifests itself as Ottilie’s silence (how can someone devoid of conscience be beautiful we may wonder). Ottilie’s trauervolle silence, or, what amounts to the same thing, her beautiful semblance, is the expressionless that interrupts and shatters Goethe’s Wahlverwandtschaften. But it is precisely by shattering the novel’s Wahlverwandtschaften, elective relations, that Ottilie’s beauty completes Wahlverwandtschaften, the novel, as a work of art: it is the expressionless that ‘erst vollendet das Werk, welches es zum Stückwerk zerschlägt, zum Fragment der wahren Welt, zum Torso eines Symbols.’ (GS1, p. 181) By destroying semblance, the expressionless attests to the truth of art: that it is not life, beauty, innocence, etc. Ottilie’s silence is therefore not the expressionless of Goethe’s Wahlverwandtschaften, Ottilie herself embodies this expressionless. With this we can return to Shelley’s Beatrice who has suffered a crime she names as ‘expressionless.’

78. Outside the law.
That the rape of Beatrice is ‘expressionless’ is a practical consideration, it would be impossible to have the words ‘incestuous rape’ uttered on a London stage in 1819, but the act is described in the preface and no one was in doubt about the unnameable act that generates the action. Early critics remarked on Shelley’s foolhardiness in structuring a drama around something unnameable – but this is in fact the very moral core of the play. It is the expressionless nature of the crime that Beatrice has suffered that justifies an
extrajudicial response and thus generates the conflict between individual and social moral norms. While the thought that the expressionless nature of Beatrice’s wrong is a structural necessity did not occur to many of Shelley’s first readers, it is by now not new. Paul Endo, for instance, sees this as an example of the Shelleyan sublime:

Shelley often stages silence, choosing not to mediate. The namelessness of The Cenci is just such an instance: it is not symptomatic of a daemonic, pathological ‘incapacity,’ but must be regarded as a calculated attempt [...] to postpone naming and the propagating of a high sublime meaning or ‘moral purpose.’²³⁶

Shelley’s choice of a nameless crime allows him to represent a sublime moral law, a law that escapes the categories of our legal language. However, the choice also carries a more practical, political signification. The drama makes clear that by the mere fact of being a woman, Beatrice is excluded from the law from the outset: ‘is it that I sue not in some form | Of scrupulous law, that ye deny my suit?’ she asks the noblemen of Rome during the banquet scene at the end of Act I (I.iii.135-6). Their refusal to aid Beatrice can be contrasted with the Pope’s willingness to help her brothers when they appeal to him. The ‘expressionless’ violence that she suffers does not propel Beatrice beyond the reach of legal institutions, rather it propels her insight into her position outside the law; she realises that ‘in this mortal world | There is no vindication and no law | Which can adjudge and execute the doom | Of that through which I suffer’ (III.i.134-7). Therefore Beatrice takes the atonement that she believes her wrong requires into her own hands. After having ‘prayed | To God, and [...] talked with [her] own heart’ (III.i.218-9) Beatrice sentences her father to death – ‘Mighty death! | Thou double-visaged shadow! Only judge! | Rightfullest arbiter!’ (III.i.177-9) The educative task Shelley sets his audience is to pass judgment on Beatrice’s sentence. It is to this end that he has Beatrice asks her auditors to put off the ‘restraints of daily life’ and act as jury in the higher hearing she holds with her own heart and her God. But Beatrice’s claim on divine sanction clashes with the authority of God’s representative on earth, the Catholic Church. When the Pope’s servants arrest her for the parricide, Beatrice refuses to acknowledge their legal right to do so:

What! will human laws,
Rather will ye who are their ministers,
Bar all access to retribution first,
And then, when heaven doth interpose to do
What ye neglect, arming familiar things
To the redress of an unwonted crime,

During her arrest and throughout her trial, Beatrice not once stoops to defend herself by offering mitigating circumstances for her crime. Rather her defence takes the form of a challenge to a legal system that fails to offer a name and thus an avenue for redress when a certain type of crime is committed against a woman. 'Unless | The crimes which mortal tongue dare never name | God therefore scruples to avenge.' (Beatrice, IV.iv.123-5) For Beatrice it is inconceivable that God would scruple to avenge a crime like Cenci’s and her case can be viewed as a form of precedent that establishes a new moral law: incestuous rape is a crime for which death is the punishment. Thus, where the expressionless of Goethe’s Wahlverwandtschaften has to do with Ottilie’s beauty and questions of aesthetics, the ‘expressionless’ of The Cenci concerns the law and its relation to justice. It marks a crime that cannot be represented and thus sentenced within the language of the law; in other words, the ‘expressionless’ of this play marks the limit of the law.

79. Sacrifice.

The ‘expressionless’ nature of Cenci’s crime is only half the story – it is not simply because her wrong is expressionless that Beatrice’s extrajudicial measure is justified, but because the crime ‘is such | As asks atonement’ (III.i.214-5). For Benjamin, atonement is characteristic of the mythic realm and he reads Ottilie’s death as a sacrifice that atones for the married couple’s guilt:

Ihr steht mächtig genug die verletzte Satzung entgegen, um zur Sühne der gestörten Ehe das Opfer zu fordern. Unter der mythischen Urform des Opfers also erfüllt sich die Todessymbolik in diesem Geschick. Dazu vorbestimmt ist Ottilie. [...] Also nicht allein als »Opfer des Geschicks« fällt Ottilie – geschweige daß sie wahrhaft selbst »sich opfert« – sondern unerbittlicher, genauer, als das Opfer zur Entsühnung der Schuldigen. Die Sühne nämlich ist im Sinne der mythischen Welt, die der Dichter beschwört, seit jeher der Tod der Unschuldigen. (GS1, p. 140)

The mythic nature of this sacrifice demands that the sacrificed be innocent: an innocence that is guaranteed by Ottilie’s chastity. When Beatrice demands Cenci’s death to atone for her lost innocence, she turns her father into a sacrifice, and, just then, however incongruously, Cenci appears to be innocent: ‘We dare not kill an old and sleeping man’, Olimpio reports after the hired assassins lost heart in their first assassination attempt. ‘His thin gray hair, his stern and reverent brow, | His veinèd hands crossed on his heaving breast, | And the calm innocent sleep in which he lay, | Quelled me. Indeed, indeed, I cannot do it.’ (IV.iii.9-13) This assertion of Cenci’s innocence in the moment he is about to
die in atonement for his crime does not vindicate him, but it shows that anyone sentenced to death is sentenced unjustly and thus dies a victim to a lawless law.

80. The limit.

Beatrice clings to her faith in the patriarchal system even in the face of the fate that condemns her to be her father's daughter. 'I have borne much, and kissed the sacred hand | Which crushed us to the earth, and thought its stroke | Was perhaps some paternal chastisement!' she says of her father in the first act (I.iii.111-3). In the second act she still insists that Cenci's depravity is not enough to make her implicate the 'great God, | Whose image upon earth a father is' (II.i.16-7) in her own father's crimes. The rape is a turning point. After it she can no longer conceive of Cenci's violence against her as 'paternal chastisement,' but neither can she accuse God for not curbing Cenci. Thus, according to her own casuistry, the rape annuls Cenci's paternal rights. 'I have no father' Beatrice says after the act (III.i.40), but adds that not even this atrocity suffices to destroy her faith in God: 'Many might doubt there were a God above | Who sees and permits evil, and so die: | That faith no agony shall obscure in me.' (III.i.100-2) However, this is precisely what happens in the course of the play. The progress of The Cenci is the gradual obscuration of Beatrice's faith which culminates in Beatrice's final realisation that God will not deliver her from the death sentence the court pronounces on her. When it becomes clear that Beatrice will not escape sentencing, she turns from accusing the 'culprits' who arrested her to accusing the God that determined her fate. To the Judge's final question 'Art thou not guilty of thy father's death?' (V.iii.77) she answers:

Or wilt thou rather tax high-judging God
That he permitted such an act as that
Which I have suffered, and which he beheld;
Made it unutterable, and took from it
All refuge, all revenge, all consequence,
But that which thou hast called my father's death? (V.iii.78-83)

This accusation of God marks the limit of Beatrice's faith and she comes to realise that not God but her father was 'alone omnipotent | On Earth, and ever present' (V.iv.68-9). At the end of her trial, Beatrice no longer feels herself justified by a higher power. Beatrice's acceptance of her fate comes at the price of renouncing her faith in the moral order she has been brought up in and with this renunciation she also foreswears the language in which she is being tried. Referring to the parricide as what her Judge 'hast called my father's death' she says that it

... is or is not what men call a crime,
Which either I have done, or have not done;
Say what ye will. I shall deny no more.
If ye desire it thus, thus let it be.
And so an end of all. Now do your will (V.iii.84-8)

This speech is a retraction of speech. Beatrice refuses to place her actions within the terms that her Judges employ – not only do they speak a language in which the wrong she suffered is expressionless, here it further becomes clear that its atonement is also impossible to express within the terms of this language – it ‘is or is not what men call a crime.’ This is the expressionless moment of Shelley’s play. That is, while Beatrice views her wrong as expressionless and requiring atonement, the expressionless of the play as a whole includes both the rape and the parricide, both of which are expressionless within the legal code of Papal Rome. Benjamin writes that ‘in der Tragödie besinnt sich der heidnische Mensch, daß er besser ist als seine Götter, aber diese Erkenntnis verschlägt ihm die Sprache, sie bleibt dumpf.’ (GS2, pp. 174-5) Beatrice’s refusal to speak embodies a comparable realisation that she surpasses the justice shown by her God and His Church. In this silent resignation at the limit of her faith, she breaks out of the juridical framework she has lived in and is therefore what Benjamin would call a tragic rather than traurisch heroine. Beatrice’s silence of moral indignation is fundamentally different from Ottilie’s pflanzenhaftes Stummsein, plant-like silence, muffled in the veil of her beauty.

81. Caesura.

The difficulty of Benjamin’s idea partially arises from his mixed metaphors. Schein is a ‘wogende Leben’ yet Benjamin repeatedly represents Schein with figures of veiling. But when he speaks of the destruction of Schein, it is not rent or unravelled, rather he returns to the undulating metaphor and speaks of Schein being erstarrt and bannt. Furthermore, it is petrified by the expressionless – a sonic metaphor that indicates the absence of sound or a semiotic metaphor that indicates the absence of signs. One way to resolve this contradiction is to read Benjamin’s figures of Schein as linguistic figures for language akin to Shelley’s glimmering veils that are both woven and torn by the feet of poetry. A poetic foundation for Benjamin’s discussion of the expressionless in tragedy is found in Hölderlin’s notes to his translation of Oedipus.237 Benjamin cites Hölderlin to illustrate what he means by the expressionless:

»Der tragische Transport ist nemlich eigentlich leer, und der ungebundenste. – Dadurch wird in der rhythmischen Aufeinanderfolge der Vorstellungen, worin der Transport sich darstellt, das, was man im Sylbenmaasse Cäsur heißt, das reine Wort, die gegenrhythmische Unterbrechung notwendig, um nemlich dem reißenden Wechsel der

237 With regards to the expressionless, Benjamin reads Hölderlin’s lyric poetry and Goethe’s novel as analogous: ‘Tritt in jener [Hölderlin’s] Lyrik das Ausdruckslose, so in Goethescher die Schönheit bis zur Grenze dessen hervor, was im Kunstwerk sich fassen läßt.’ (GS1, p. 182)
Vorstellungen, auf seinem Summum, so zu begegnen, daß alsdann nicht mehr der Wechsel der Vorstellung, sondern die Vorstellung selber erscheint« (cited in GS1, pp. 181-2)

The expressionless is akin to a caesura, a prosodic break in the rhythm of a line. Just like the caesura interrupts the poem’s measure so the expressionless interrupts the flow of representations that appears in this measure. Thus it simultaneously cuts through the semantic and the prosodic levels of the text. While there are verse forms that incorporate caesurae as part of their prosodic principle, Benjamin insists on reading the caesura as a violent interruption that destroys the rhythmic order of the line. However, even as the caesura shatters the line, it arranges the shattered fragments into a harmonious order around itself (i.e. the metric feet on both sides of the caesura):

...jene Cäsur, in der mit der Harmonie zugleich jeder Ausdruck sich legt, um einer innerhalb aller Kunstmittel ausdruckslosen Gewalt Raum zu geben. Solche Gewalt ist kaum je deutlicher geworden als in der griechischen Tragödie einer-, der Hölderlinschen Hymnik andererseits. In der Tragödie als Versstummen des Helden, in der Hymne als Einspruch im Rhythmus vernehmbar. (GS1, p. 182)

In the caesura expression gives room to the expressionless – and through this word the prosodic breaks of Hölderlin’s hymns become equivalent to the silence of the tragic hero. However, the silence of the tragic hero is not only an interruption or lacuna in the rhythm of his speeches as the comparison with prosodic caesurae may suggest. It is a moral silence in which the tragic hero realises that he is better than his gods and therefore refuses to defend him or herself in their language. This points to the moral dimension of the expressionless. ‘Im Ausdruckslosen erscheint die erhabne Gewalt des Wahren, wie es nach Gesetzen der moralischen Welt die Sprache der wirklichen bestimmt.’ (GS1, p. 181)

Benjamin’s description of the violence of the expressionless follows the same model that he fashions for the divine violence that interrupts mythic violence. It is a violence that interrupts and destroys, but this destruction at the same reveals a higher truth, in accord with the law of the moral world – a world where divine Gerechtigkeit rather than mythic Recht sets the law. The violence of the expressionless erupts into the mythic world of tragedy in accordance with the laws of divine Gerechtigkeit and shatters the semblance of justice in which the mythic law is veiled. It can be read as a linguistic variation of the divine violence that suspends mythic Recht in the name of Gerechtigkeit. This violence is necessarily expressionless: the truly moral word cannot be found in the language of the mythic law and can only become manifest as expressionless, an absence, in the words of this language. ‘Ja, man könnte jenen Rhythmus nicht genauer bezeichnen als mit der Aussage, daß etwas jenseits des Dichters der Dichtung ins Wort fällt,’ Benjamin says about Hölderlin’s hymns (GS1, p. 182). In an analogous manner, the moral law enters the
language of myth from its outside and pinpoints the absence in language where justice ought to be. The silence of the hero attests to an insight into a law that is higher, juster, than that of his gods – a law that cannot be uttered in the language of the legal codes he has been born into. This is Beatrice's insight at the end of her trial. Beatrice falls silent when she discovers the limits of a theological-juridical language in which the crime perpetuated against her and the atonement it requires cannot be named. But if it is the expressionless circumstances of the crime that determine Beatrice’s silent resignation at the end of her trial, it is her father, by conceiving of this crime, that first finds the limits of the Catholic Church’s legal code.
Payback time

82. 1819.

As a mirror held up to the reality that Shelley faced in 1819, *The Cenci* reflects two political problems that Shelley diagnosed in his society. The first of these is alluded to in the year’s first issue of *The Examiner*, where Leigh Hunt\(^{238}\) offers an analysis of ‘The State of the World:’

This is the commencement, if we are not much mistaken, of one of the most important years that have been seen for a long while. It is quiet; it seems peacable to us here in Europe; it may even continue so, as far as any great warfare is concerned; but a spirit is abroad, stronger than kings, or armies, or all the most predominant shapes of prejudice and force.\(^{239}\)

Hunt’s statement reads as an anticipation of the opening of *Das Kommunistische Manifest* [The Communist Manifesto], where Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels famously assert: ‘Ein Gespenst geht um in Europa – das Gespenst des Kommunismus. Alle Mächte des alten Europa haben sich zu einer heiligen Hetzjagd gegen dies Gespenst verbündet,’\(^{240}\) yet it would have seemed accurate to many radicals at the beginning of 1819. Many believed that a revolution in England was imminent; the question was not whether, but when.\(^{241}\)

And, more importantly, how to ensure that it does not terminate in the kind of terror followed by a restored empire that France witnessed. Much of Shelley’s most memorable political verse is written during this year including ‘The Mask of Anarchy,’ part of a planned ‘little volume of popular songs wholly political, destined to awaken and direct the imagination of the reformers.’ (*Letters* 2, p. 191) The dramas *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci* are also written in this year. All these works implicitly or explicitly address the state of England and the possibility of an imminent upheaval. The urgency of this question is hinted at in Hunt’s article: ‘So completely do all classes feel that something, as the phrase is, must be done [...] that the kings and their ministers would willingly persuade us of the commencement of a sort of millennium under their auspices.’ (p. 175) Hunt’s implication is, of course, that the new ‘sort of millennium’ will dawn under the auspices of radicals such as himself. Shelley places Hunt’s phrase in the mouth of Beatrice; ‘something must be done; | What, yet I know not’ (III.i.86-7) she says in deliberating her response to being...

---

\(^{238}\) During his exile in Italy *The Examiner*, issued by Shelley’s friend and champion Leigh Hunt, was one of Shelley’s main sources for news from England.

\(^{239}\) In *The Selected Writings of Leigh Hunt*, ed. by Greg Kucich and Jeffrey N. Cox (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003), ii, 173-7, p. 175; further references in text.

\(^{240}\) *Das Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei: Kommentierte Studienausgabe*, ed. by Theo Stammen and Alexander Classen (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2009), p. 66

\(^{241}\) Chandler’s *England in 1819*, seconds Hunt’s statement in arguing that the year 1819 was a significant one.
raped by her father and Shelley himself cites Beatrice's words in a letter on the political situation in England. (Letters 2, p. 513) Scrivener argues that:

[I]t is the rule, rather than the exception, perhaps especially during the English Romantic literary period, that transgressive discourse, whether of treason, sedition, or blasphemy, has unstable boundaries so that the very same words appear in different contexts and registers for different effects.242

These strategies were necessitated by the government’s prosecution of political dissent. The end of the Napoleonic wars may have removed the justification for a repressive regime that the wars had provided, but political oppression continued unabated. The government had been keeping an eye on Shelley since his political campaigning in Ireland and much of the political verse, including 'The Mask of Anarchy,' went unpublished because his editors feared prosecution.243 But if the phrase 'something must be done' relates Beatrice's dilemma to contemporary political rhetoric and invites a reading of The Cenci as a political allegory, one must not forget that the something that Beatrice does do


243 Most often, it was the old blasphemy laws that provided an excuse for political prosecution. In her examination of the legal rhetoric of Shelley's The Cenci, Victoria Myers explains how the blasphemy charge was employed in courts at the time:

> When launched against a state-supported religion, blasphemy allegedly weakens the ideological underpinning of the government by ridiculing the justification of its power. While the blasphemy charge had been used in England after the Restoration mainly to prosecute religious nonconformists, especially Unitarians, by 1812 the charge had become a favoured legal strategy to be used against radical reformers. Prosecutors held that disrespect for the Christian religion undermined the ability of the government to function because its legal institutions depended on belief in established religion to guarantee its oaths and declarations. 'Blasphemy Trials and The Cenci: Parody as Performative', in Spheres of Action: Speech and Performance in Romantic Culture, ed. by Alexander Dick and Angela Esterhammer (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2009), pp. 100–123 (p. 100)

Myers points to the political stakes of critising religion – something that Shelley himself learned the hard way when he lost the paternal rights to his children in a Chancery suit that cited his The Necessity of Atheism and the anti-religious statements of Queen Mab as evidence against his suitability to raise children. Michael Kohler offers an interesting reading of The Cenci in light of the Chancery case and relates the play to Shelley's poem 'To the Lord Chancellor,' i.e. Lord Eldon who was the presiding judge in Shelley's case. The poem is a father's curse of the judge who stripped him of his paternal rights and thematises the relation between judicial practices and justice. 'Shelley in Chancery: The Reimagination of the Paternalist State in “The Cenci”, Studies in Romanticism, 37 (1998), 545–589. It is also worth noting that while the poem was for a long time believed to be written in 1818 directly after the Chancery suit – as does Kohler, calling it 'a powerful and carefully-wrought poem seemingly composed during the later stages of the suit' (p. 556) – P. M. S. Dawson and Timothy Webb, editors of the notebook that contains the draft for 'To the Lord Chancellor', argue that since all the other contents of the notebook date from 1819-21, 'in its finished form the poem has to be considered as a work of 1820.' (BSM 14, p. xix) Therefore Kohler’s suggestion that the poem is a 'clear precedent text of the Promethean curse' (p. 556, n. 24) must be reversed: Prometheus' curse of Jupiter as well as Cenci’s curses of his children (with which Shelley was particularly pleased) are rather precedents and models for Shelley's ‘autobiographical’ poem. The poem’s curse is spoken in Shelley's own voice and refers to a court suit that Shelley was actually involved in, even as its similarity to the curses of Prometheus and Cenci indicates the degree of literary figuration going on in the poem.
is parricide, which thus can be read as a regicide in disguise. Scrivener reads Beatrice’s parricide as ‘seditious, treasonous, and blasphemous’ and points out that if England had indeed witnessed violent unrest in 1819, *The Cenci* and Shelley’s letters ‘could have been used as evidence in a treason or sedition trial.’ (*The Discourse of Treason,* §2) However, if Shelley invites the comparison between Beatrice’s parricide and a people’s regicide, his preface condemns the thought: ‘Revenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes’, he unequivocally states (PS2, p. 730). This pernicious mistake may make good tragedy, but Shelley clearly does not recommend revenge as political principle. Instead he prescribes forgiveness, ‘the fit return to make to the most enormous injuries is kindness and forbearance’ (PS2, p. 730). This lesson, given in the drama’s preface and explicated in the course of the play informs the political allegory of *The Cenci* and embodies Shelley’s analysis of the failure of the French Revolution: it was the revolutionaries’ inability to think freedom beyond the repressive structures of the ancien régime that plunged the revolution into terror. In the preface to *Laon and Cythna*, Shelley’s allegorical treatment of the French Revolution, he writes:

> The French Revolution may be considered as one of those manifestations of a general state of feeling among civilized mankind, produced by a defect of correspondence between the knowledge existing in society and the improvement or gradual abolition of political institutions. [...] Could they listen to the plea of reason who had groaned under the calamities of a social state, according to the provisions of which, one man riots in luxury whilst another famishes for want of bread? Can he who the day before was a trampled slave suddenly become liberal-minded, forbearing, and independent? This is the consequence of the habits of a state of society to be produced by resolute perseverance and indefatigable hope, and long-suffering and long-believing courage, and the systematic efforts of generations of men of intellect and virtue. (PS2, pp. 35-7)

In other words, the French were not yet spiritually ready for the liberty they suddenly gained during the revolution. Since he does not see the men of England as being better prepared, Shelley’s message to the masses of 1819, whom Shelley believes to be on the verge of an English Revolution, is identical with his recommendation to Beatrice: non-violent resistance. ‘But in bypassing the law, as Cenci’s self-appointed judge and executioner, Beatrice acts much like her father. She similarly evades all external authority in pursuing her rebellious designs. Like the agents of the Terror, she justifies suspending the law in the name of revolutionary action.’[^244] Suzanne Ferriss argues that Beatrice stages how any revolution is bound to fail if the revolutionaries take to the violent means of their oppressors. Stephen C. Behrendt presents a similar conclusion: ‘The revolution in *The

Cenci fails because it is the wrong revolution. Eliminating a tyrant by enlisting his own methods against him merely perpetuates the violent system of revenge and retribution.’

The political dilemma that Ferriss and Behrendt identify can be sketched out with the distinction between political and proletarian general strike that Benjamin borrows from Georges Sorel in his ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt’ (GS2, pp. 193-5). As an allegory of the French Revolution, Beatrice embodies its failure to break with the old order just like the political general strike ‘demonstriert, wie der Staat nichts von seiner Kraft verlieren wird, wie die Macht von Privilegierten auf Privilegierte übergeht, wie die Masse der Produzenten ihre Herren wechseln wird.’ (Sorel, cited in GS2, pp. 193-4) This is merely a redistribution of oppressive violence. In contrast, a proletarian strike seeks to abolish the state – ‘er [will] den Staat aufheben’ (Sorel, cited GS2, p. 194) – this form of strike is, according to Benjamin, ‘als reines Mittel, gewaltlos’ (GS2, p. 194) and gewaltlos precisely because it negates the violent means that perpetuate the reigning order. Benjamin’s translation of Sorel uses the Hegelian verb aufheben, with its triple meaning of repealing, suspending, and preserving. While a hundred years of political upheaval in France separate Benjamin’s citation of Sorel’s Reflections from Shelley’s analysis of the French Revolution’s failure, their conclusions are remarkably similar: a break with the ruling order cannot come by perpetuating the violence of its means.

83. Drama in the age of calculation.

If the imminent threat of revolution forms one strand of The Cenci’s political critique, the other refers to the corruption that characterises modernity more generally; in Shelley’s own term, calculation. Shelley’s ‘Defence of Poetry’ is a reply to Thomas Love Peacock’s ‘The Four Ages of Poetry.’ Playfully evoking the classical notion of ages, Peacock presents poetry as an anachronism in the dawning age of industrial capitalism: ‘While the historian and the philosopher are advancing in, and accelerating, the progress of knowledge, the poet is wallowing in the rubbish of departed ignorance, and raking up the ashes of dead savages to find gewgaws and rattles for the grown babies of the age.’246 The only use that poetry can have is ‘for the pleasure it yields’ (p. 21) but even then ‘[t]here are more good poems already existing than are sufficient to employ that portion of life which any mere reader and recipient of poetical impressions should devote to them.’ (p. 22) Shelley’s riposte accepts Peacock’s premise that the spirit of poetry is at odds with the ‘matter-of-fact and money-loving age’ they live in (Letter to Peacock, 8 November 1820, Letters 2, p. 244). His refutation of Peacock’s argument centres around the latter’s definition of utility:

'It is admitted that the exercise of the imagination is most delightful, but it is alleged that that of reason is more useful.' ('Defence,' SPP, p. 528) Shelley splits the concept of utility into the ‘durable, universal, and permanent’ utility which poetry administers and the ‘transitory and particular’ utilities of instrumental reason and technological progress. These two types of utility correspond to two uses of our mental faculties: imagination and calculation. Shelley identifies the problem of his time as the dominance of the calculating over the imaginative faculty. Echoing Peacock’s assertion that there is already more poems extant than needed for the pleasurable purpose they would fulfil, Shelley writes:

We have more moral, political and historical wisdom, than we know how to reduce into practise; we have more scientific and economical knowledge than can be accommodated to the just distribution of the produce which it multiplies. The poetry in these systems of thought, is concealed by the accumulation of facts and calculating processes. There is no want of knowledge respecting what is wisest and best in morals, government, and political economy, or at least what is wiser and better than what men now practise and endure. [...] We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life: our calculations have outrun conception; we have eaten more than we can digest. (SPP, p. 530)

In the modern age, calculation has quenched imagination. Shelley’s opposition between practical calculation and imaginative vision culminates in the rhetorical finale of the passage: ‘Poetry, and the principle of Self, of which money is the visible incarnation, are the God and the Mammon of the world.’ (SPP, p. 531) You cannot have both poetry and calculation, both the one mind in which poetry participates and the principle of self manifested in money. In periods of drama’s decay, the decay is caused by the calculating principle encroaching upon poetry – for Shelley exemplarily manifested in the drama of the Restoration: ‘At such periods the calculating principle pervades all the forms of dramatic exhibition and poetry ceases to be expressed upon them.’ (SPP, pp. 520-1) Calculation also corrupts Shelley’s own age and its spirit is reflected in The Cenci where monetary metaphors set the tone for the action of the play. Already in the preface Shelley informs us that the Pope’s motive in executing Beatrice is not justice, but revenge for depriving the Church of the financial benefit of selling indulgences to Cenci:

The old man [Cenci] had, during his life, repeatedly bought his pardon from the Pope for capital crimes of the most enormous and unspeakable kind, at the price of a hundred thousand crowns; the death therefore of his victims can scarcely be accounted for by the love of justice. The Pope, among other motives for severity, probably felt that whoever

247 Shelley’s reference is to Matthew 6:24: ‘No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.’
killed the Count Cenci deprived his treasury of a certain and copious source of revenue.
(PS2, p. 728)

The drama’s first speech picks up on the preface’s discussion of the calculating ethics of Papal Rome: ‘That matter of the murder is hushed up | If you consent to yield his Holiness | Your fief that lies beyond the Pincian gate,’ are the first words spoken in the play, by Cardinal Camillo to Count Cenci (I.i.1-3). The remark sets the standard against which Beatrice’s act is to be measured but it also indicates the dynamics that structure male relations within the play. As Linda C. Brigham notes, *The Cenci* ‘begins with Cardinal Camillo’s complaint that Count Cenci has reached his credit limit with the Church.’

Camillo continues:

[The Pope] said that you
Bought perilous impunity with your gold;
That crimes like yours if once or twice compounded
Enriched the Church, and respited from hell
An erring soul which might repent and live;
But that the glory and the interest
Of the high throne he fills, little consist
With making it a daily mart of guilt (I.i.5-12)

Camillo sees no conflict in equating ‘enriching the Church’ and ‘respiting souls from hell,’ Cenci, however does: ‘Respited me from Hell!’ he responds, ‘So may the Devil | Respite their souls from Heaven’ (I.i.26-7). ‘The cash nexus,’ Scrivener comments on this dialogue, ‘is so obviously the most essential component in Camillo’s speech that one admires Cenci’s honesty.’ *(Radical Shelley*, p. 190) Cenci’s only virtue may be his exposure of the Pope’s ‘daily mart of guilt:’

No doubt Pope Clement,
And his most charitable nephews, pray
That the Apostle Peter and the saints
Will grant for their sake that I long enjoy
Strength, wealth, and pride, and lust, and length of days
Wherein to act the deeds which are the stewards
Of their revenue. (I.i.28-33)

Cenci’s sins turn into profits for the Pope and his nephews – nephew being a common euphemism for son. The first scene of *The Cenci* stages how the Catholic Church converts guilt into money – as if deliberately punning on what Benjamin called ‘die dämonische

---

Zweideutigkeit’ of the German word Schuld, which means both moral guilt and monetary debt (GS6, pp. 101-2). While the sale of indulgences is at the root of the Reformation, The Cenci is not a Protestant critique of Catholicism; rather Shelley’s aim is directed on how financial values usurp spiritual ones. In the fragment ‘Kapitalismus als Religion,’ Benjamin targets the very same conflation when, building on Max Weber’s Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus [The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism] (1905), he claims that capitalism itself has become a religion. While Weber discusses how the development of capitalism is dependent on the protestant work ethic, Benjamin takes the argument further and says that ‘[i]m Kapitalismus ist eine Religion zu erblicken [...] Der Nachweis dieser religiösen Struktur des Kapitalismus, nicht nur, wie Weber meint, als ein religiös bedingten Gebildes, sonder als einer essentiell religiöser Erscheinung, würde heute noch auf den Abweg einer maßlosen Universalpolemik führen.’ (GS6, p. 100)

Therefore Benjamin offers some axioms about ‘der religiöse Struktur des Kapitalismus,’ ‘the religious structure of capitalism,’ but he does not undertake a comprehensive critique, which among other things would include a ‘Vergleich zwischen den Heiligenbildern verschiedener Religionen einerseits und den Banknoten verschiedener Staaten andererseits’ (p. 102). It is not my aim to speculate what such a comparison could entail, but Benjamin’s collocation intuits something which was in fact a hotly debated issue in Shelley’s time, namely the faith that the existence of banknotes on the market requires.249 While paper money had been in circulation for a while, in 1797 the Bank of England for the first time refused to issue gold in exchange for paper bills, which was taken as proof that there was less gold in the Treasury than the value of the paper money in circulation. If a pound note’s value could no longer be guaranteed by a corresponding amount of gold, it was only dependent on people’s faith in the equivalence between a £1 bank note and a £1 gold coin. ‘Faith is the evidence of things unseen, the substance of things hoped for. This faith must, however, receive it as a thing not to be questioned, that there is a substance, although it is not this moment visible,’ writes an anonymous pamphleteer in defence of the Bank of England.250 On the opposite extreme of this view is the radical William Cobbett, who saw paper money as fraud tout court. Shelley amusingly approved of Cobbett’s scheme to collapse the paper money economy by mass-scale forgery251 and much of what he says

---

249 Alexander Dick studies the gold standard debates that took place in the romantic era and suggests that they were central to any cultivated person’s mind. While often couched as complaints about the absence of a gold standard, Dick points out that the first gold standard was in fact only introduced in 1816. Romanticism and the Gold Standard: Money, Literature, and Economic Debate in Britain 1790-1830 (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)


251 And forgery in fact was another problem since there were not yet the technological means to produce paper money that was both easily (that is to say mechanically) reproducible and impossible to copy. Incapable of designing a mass-produced, irreproducible note, the authorities
about political economy in *A Philosophical View of Reform*, the trip ‘over the sandy desert of politics’ that he commenced after finishing *The Cenci* is indebted to Cobbett’s *Paper Against Gold: Containing the History and Mystery of the Bank of England*.252 Thus Shelley writes: ‘A man may write on a piece of paper what he pleases; he may say he is worth a thousand when he is not worth a hundred pounds. If he can make others believe this, he has credit for the sum to which his name is attached.’ (*Prose*, p. 244) Shelley opposes paper money because it is a system of sign circulation that rests on faith to guarantee that the sign corresponds to the signified amount. But such faith has as little material basis as the belief in the goodness of a divinity who created a world so full of misery as ours. This critique is the framework in which *The Cenci* shows the emptying out of religious signs (such as indulgences) and their replacement with financial signs – ‘that palace-walking devil, Gold,’ as Giacomo puts it (II.ii.68). In *The Cenci*, Shelley stages a Church that employs the mask of Catholic faith although the only god it serves is Mammon – that ‘principle of Self’ whose ‘visible incarnation’ is money.

84. Fathers and sons.

At the close of the first act, Cenci throws a banquet to celebrate the deaths of his sons. While this serves to show Cenci’s depravity, there is also a very rational reason behind his joy: his sons ‘will need no food or raiment more: | The tapers that did light them the dark way | Are their last cost,’ Cenci brags and invites his guests to ‘Rejoice with me – my heart is wondrous glad.’ (I.iii.46-8; I.iii.50) Money also governs Cenci’s conflict with his remaining son, Giacomo. In his first appearance on stage, we find Giacomo complaining that his father has deprived him of money and, like his brothers before him, he plans to petition the Pope to obtain provision for his needs. ‘There is an obsolete and doubtful law | By which you might obtain a bare provision | Of food and clothing,’ Camillo promises him (II.ii.1-3), but Giacomo wants more. ‘Nothing more? Alas! | Bare must be the provision which strict law | Awards, and aged, sullen avarice pays.’ (II.ii.3-5) Giacomo’s woes began when Cenci borrowed his wife’s dowry and then refused to return it. When Giacomo accused Cenci, ‘he coined | A brief yet specious tale, how I had wasted | The sum in secret riot’ (III.i.318-20). Giacomo’s wife believes the tale that Cenci *coins* and her consequent accusations make Giacomo’s home a hell. ‘And to that hell will I return no more | Until discouraged forgery by imposing the death sentence. Peacock reports on four forgery cases in a letter to Shelley:

> There have been four capital trials for forgery of Bank Notes, and the Jury has found the prisoners “Not Guilty”, expressly declaring that they could not believe the evidence of hired informers who betrayed men into crime; that they could not themselves distinguish the forged notes from the true; and that unless they were furnished with some certain criterion, they would not take the ipse dixit of the Bank Inspectors that the notes were forged. (cited in *Letters* 2, p. 70, n. 2)

mine enemy has rendered up | Atonement,’ he exclaims (III.i.331-3). Giacomo’s words echo Beatrice’s demand for atonement, spoken just before he arrives on the scene (III.i.213-5). That is, while the audience has just learnt that Beatrice has suffered a crime that is expressionless and requires atonement, Giacomo does not yet know this. Shelley’s staging emphasises parallels between the two siblings. Just as Beatrice just asserted that she has no father (III.i.40), Giacomo says of Cenci that ‘We | Are now no more, as once, parent and child, | But man to man; the oppressor to the oppressed.’ (III.i.281-3) The turn of phrase not only echoes Beatrice’s assertion but also uses a formulation, ‘the oppressor and the oppressed,’ that Beatrice will herself repeat during her trial (V.iii.88). The atonement that Giacomo seeks likewise perfectly matches Beatrice’s: ‘That word parricide, | Although I am resolved, haunts me like fear’ he confesses to Orsino (III.i.340-1). Orsino assures him that ‘what you devise | Is, as it were, accomplished’, explaining that ‘Cenci has done an outrage to his daughter’ that already constitutes his death warrant (III.i.345-6; III.i.348). ‘My doubts are well appeased,’ Giacomo replies. ‘There is a higher reason for the act | Than mine; there is a holier judge than me, | A more unblamed avenger.’ (III.i.362-5) While learning of Beatrice’s rape appeases Giacomo’s fear of parricide, he was resolved to commit it before hearing of Beatrice’s wrong. ‘O heart, I ask no more | Justification!’ (III.i.372-3) he exclaims at the end, indicating that for him the rape primarily serves to confirm him in his purpose. The scene establishes that both siblings are victims of Cenci’s wickedness, both believe that Cenci has forfeited his paternal rights, both demand atonement by death. However, these parallels also highlight the differences in their respective situations: Beatrice wants to avenge an expressionless sexual crime, whereas Giacomo wants revenge for a financial one. Giacomo rounds off his demand for atonement with the suggestive lines that ‘as he gave life to me | I will, reversing nature’s law’—(III.i.333-4). However, the law that Giacomo reverses is not the law of nature, but that of the Church. Whereas the Church absolves mortal crime by accepting gold, Giacomo will demand repayment of his gold through a mortal crime.

85. Compensation.

In his reply to Giacomo, Orsino equivocates between financial repayment and moral retribution ‘Trust me, | The compensation which thou seest here | Will be denied’ (III.i.334-6). Giacomo will get not get his money back nor will he get revenge. Orsino’s pun on the double meaning of the word ‘compensation’ could be translated into German as Vergeltung. In ‘Die Bedeutung der Zeit in der moralischen Welt,’ Benjamin presents the competing mythic and divine Gewalten in the monetarily tinged terminology of Vergeltung and Vergebung. ‘Die Vergeltung steht im Grunde indifferent der Zeit gegenüber, sofern sie durch die Jahrhunderte unvermindert in Kraft bleibt.’ (GS6, pp. 97-8) Vergeltung means retribution, and here Benjamin emphasises the temporality of this violence: it is
relentlessly pursuing its vengeance down the generations. But the word *Vergeltung* is etymologically related to money, *Geld*, and still echoes it phonetically. Vergeltung is retribution in terms of payback. Against this Benjamin sets *Vergebung*, forgiveness, that etynomogically relates to *Gabe*, gift, and *geben*, giving, and thus connotes a giving away, or writing off of debts. Just as the expressionless enters language from the outside, so there is no room for *Vergebung* within the mythic economy: ‘Diese Bedeutung erschließt sich nicht in der Welt des Rechts, wo die Vergeltung herrscht, sondern nur, wo ihr, in der moralischen Welt, die Vergebung entgegentritt.’ (GS6, p. 98) In other words, Benjamin uses the same model of violent interruption that I have already discussed, but here he applies it to what the fragments final formulation calls ‘der Ökonomie der moralischen Welt’, ‘the economy of the moral world’ (GS6, p. 98; my italics).

86. Hereditary guilt.

*A Philosophical View of Reform* has three parts: the first is a general history of the progress of liberty in Europe, the second concerns the state of England in Shelley's day, the third is meant to outline what is to be done but breaks off before a coherent position is developed. Thus, the second part is the most concrete one and it places political economy at the heart of England’s problems. Shelley begins with the foundation of the Bank of England in 1694. The Bank was founded to manage the debt that the government needed to take out to finance the wars that followed the 1688 Glorious Revolution. Shelley sees this event as a break in sovereign power in England: by indebting himself, the king became subject to his wealthy bond-holders, who 'made the Crown the mask and pretence of their own authority' (Prose, p. 243). The national debt is instrumental in binding together the rich and the rulers: when the government is indebted to the rich, they get to dictate policy, at the same time, the rich have an interest in the government’s preservation in order to ensure that they get their money back. But while the national debt serves to consolidate the sovereign power of the rich, it is financed by taxes and hence repaid by the whole of society. If the national debt were to be paid off at once, as Shelley advocates, ‘[i]t would be a mere transfer among persons of property’ (p. 249.) But since both debtors and creditors belong to the same elite, they all stand to gain by 'abstain[ing] from demanding the principal which they must all unite to pay, for the sake of receiving an enormous interest' (p. 250). By postponing repayment between themselves, the rich and the powerful ensure their right to the interest accruing from the loan and thus enrich themselves by transferring repayment into an indefinite future: They would both shift to

---

253 Hörisch comments on this etymological connection in *Kopf oder Zahl: Die Poesie des Geldes* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), p. 17

254 Philip Connell notes that during the romantic era consumer goods, but neither property, capital nor inheritance were taxed which means that taxes were disproportionately paid by the poor. *Romanticism, Economics and the Question of ‘Culture’* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)
the labor of the present and of all succeeding generations the payment of the interest on their own debt.’ (p. 250) The national debt becomes a national inheritance, which is to say a hereditary debt [Schuld] owed by the generations of ordinary Englishmen to their rulers. Benjamin describes the mythic economy as one where people are born condemned into Schuld: 'Das Recht verurteilt nicht zur Strafe, sondern zur Schuld. Schicksal ist das Schuldzusammenhang des Lebendigen.' (GS2, p. 175) With a slight equivocation on the German word Schuld the national debt can be read as the fate, Schuldzusammenhang, of the English and its 'vergeltende Gewalt' reaches 'bis in die Folge fernerer Geschlechter' (GS6, p. 96). The future thereby becomes indentured to the past as each generation has to pay for the expenditure of their predecessors. Robert Mitchell argues that this is at the heart of Shelley's critique of political economy: Shelley 'recognized that the conservative temporal structure of institutions such as paper money and the national debt – their tendency to locate the active source of events in past debts – directly opposed the expansion of time consciousness that his poetry sought to encourage.' (p. 164) The national debt chains the present to the past and the future to the present – thereby precluding the possibility of a truly different future. This also throws light on why the destruction of the mythic law requires the destruction of its concept of time – in Benjamin's vision of the moral world, time is no longer a medium in which guilt is preserved until Judgment Day, 'als den Termin, an welchem allem Aufschub Einhalt, aller Vergeltung Einbruch geboten wird.' (GS6, pp. 97-8) Both Shelley and Benjamin are opposed to a perception of time in which the past binds the future by means of guilt/debt relations. What is needed is a concept of time that is not a medium for vengeance, which is to say, a break with time past.

87. A bonfire on the Campagna.

If Beatrice’s assassination of her father can be read as cautionary tale for the oppressed, the male relations in The Cenci impersonate the encroachment of the calculating principle upon civil life in the upper strata of society. The play’s preface emphasises that religion in Italy ‘is interwoven with the whole fabric of life,’ but the play itself stages how the Catholic faith has become a ‘daily mart of guilt’ (I.i.12). In defiance of this perverse entanglement of capitalism and religion, Cenci challenges himself to a crime that transcends the moral economy that the Pope presides over. 'But much yet remains | To which they show no title’

---

255 Mitchell adds that, for Shelley, revenge is flawed for structurally the same reasons – it remains bound to past transgressions rather than anticipating a liberated future (p. 182). Mitchell discusses the role of the national debt in the creation of what he, with Benedict Anderson’s phrase, terms the ‘imagined community’ of Englishness. The postponed repayment of the debt creates a particular time-consciousness in which present and future generations are involved in financing a communal burden. 'Romantic theories of sympathy and identification emerged as responses to these perceptions of the contingency of the system of state finance, for these theories were attempts to understand the foundations and operations of social systems in ways that would explain, but also contain, the disruptive effects of finance.' (p. 5)
he says of the Pope and his nephews at the end of his opening dialogue with Camillo (I.i.33-4). A crime to which the Pope shows no title is a crime that stands outside of the jurisdiction of the Catholic Church, which is to say beyond its guilt economy. By the end of the scene, Cenci plots to use ‘close husbandry, or gold, the old man's sword | Falls from my withered hand.’ (I.127-8) Since he is too old to fight physically, losing his gold would mean losing his last lever in the social relations around him. Cenci’s ‘husbandry’ of his resources takes the grotesque form of raping his own daughter, but it also has a counterpart in the financial terms that structure his relations to his sons – as becomes evident in Cenci’s bequest to his sole remaining heir Bernardo. Planning his legacy in front of his wife Lucretia, Cenci first congratulates himself on the deaths of his two sons and the plotted ruination of Giacomo and Beatrice. Then he continues:

When all is done, out in the wide Campagna
I will pile up my silver and my gold;
My costly robes, paintings, and tapestries;
My parchments and all records of my wealth;
And make a bonfire in my joy, and leave
Of my possessions nothing but my name (IV.i.55-60)

Cenci begrudges every penny that his sons spend, only to destroy all his accumulated wealth. The Cenci inheritance is reduced to nothing but the Cenci name, which Cenci vows ‘shall be an inheritance to strip | Its wearer bare as infamy.’ (IV.i.61-2) Whereas Giacomo’s insistence on compensation, Vergeltung, may reverse the moral economy of Papal Rome by claiming blood for gold, it does not release him from it. Cenci, on contrast, aims to break free of the Papal guilt economy by immolating all his earthly possessions. In destroying his wealth for the sake of its destruction, Cenci counters the calculating ethics of the Church and the greed that underpins them – its enchainment to the principle of self manifested in money.
Living on

88. Growing old.

‘As to my character for what men call crime, | Seeing I please my senses as I list, | And vindicate that right with force or guile, | It is a public matter’ Cenci brags in the opening scene (I.i.68-71). His first monologue offers an account of his past: describing how he escalated in crime from lust, to murder, to psychological torture. Yet by the end of the speech, we find him worrying that his powers are on the vane. He has reached an age when ‘Invention palls: aye, we must all grow old: | And but that yet there remains a deed to act | Whose horror might make sharp an appetite | Duller than mine – I’d do, – I know not what.’ (I.i.99-102) Cenci is not only on the look-out for a crime to which the Pope ‘show[s] no title,’ his decision to rape Beatrice is a form of challenge to himself – to construct a crime that will manage to stir his ageing appetites. Curran argues that subduing Beatrice’s will is part of ‘the greater battle’ that Cenci wages in ‘his unflinching, titanic struggle with mortality.’ (p. 85) That is, Cenci does not merely want to surpass the crimes of lust, revenge, and murder that have satiated him thus far – he seeks a crime that resists and reverses the passage of time, a crime that makes him young again. Cenci rebels against what Martin Hägglund, in his reading of Derrida, terms the ‘time of life.’ According to Hägglund, Derrida distinguishes between immortality and survival. ‘The deconstructive notion of life entails that living is always a matter of living on, of surviving […] this notion of survival is incompatible with immortality, since it defines life as essentially mortal and as inherently divided by time.’256 In other words, survival is a living on as mortal with the ever-present possibility of death. Hägglund does not seek to affirm living on over immortality, but rather state that we do, de facto, live on and therefore our desire for immortality is a misuse of words.

The desire to live on after death is not a desire for immortality, since to live on is to remain subject to temporal finitude. The desire for survival cannot aim at transcending time, since the given time is the only chance for survival. There is thus an internal contradiction in the so-called desire for immortality. If we were not attached to mortal life, there would be no fear of death and no desire to live on. But for the same reason, the idea of immortality cannot even hypothetically appease the fear of death or satisfy the desire to live on. On the contrary, the state of immortality would annihilate every form of survival, since it would annihilate the time of mortal life. (p. 2)

Hägglund terms this stance ‘radical atheism:’ since immortality is associated with God, a turn away from immortality in favour of a living on as mortal is a turn away from God.

256 Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 33-4; further references in text.
Shelley's own statements on the subject often evoke immortality – a typical example would be the second note to *Hellas* where Shelley sets immortality as the task of poets: ‘it is the province of the poet to attach himself to those ideas which exalt and ennoble humanity [therefore] let him be permitted to have conjectured the condition of that futurity towards which we are all impelled by an inextinguishable thirst for immortality.’ (SPP, p. 462) Like Shelley's poetry as a whole, Cenci can be said to rebel against a temporality that condemns him to age and die: he wishes for immortality rather than survival or 'living on.' But as I have argued, Derrida's use of the term 'living on' is also a midway step in his translation and transformation of Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life' into Benjamin's *Überleben*. In that context 'living on' refers to the dissemination of literary works among future readers, and here Derrida's thought touches on Shelley's conception of immortality. In *Adonais*, Shelley directly addresses the question of literary remains: 'till the Future dares | Forget the Past, his fate and fame shall be | An echo and a light unto eternity!' Shelley writes in the opening stanza (ll. 7-9). Throughout the poem he posits an eternal realm 'beyond mortal thought' where poets of the past wait 'robbed in dazzling immortality' to greet new arrivals (l. 398; l. 409). The immortality so represented, however, is not the eternal life of the soul, but pertains to the afterlife of the poet's work which participates in 'that cyclic poem written by Time upon the memories of men.' ('Defence,' SPP, p. 523) In other words, Shelleyan immortality is an intertextual condition. As Luke Donohue argues in a reading of Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' that sees the poem's comparison of 'dead thoughts' to 'withered leaves' that can 'quicken a new birth' under the force of the West Wind (ll. 63-4) as a condensed statement of Shelley's poetics overall:

> The living meaning of his poems might be destroyed, but this very destruction is precisely what allows them to have a future. Only if they cannot be exhaustively read now, can they be read in the future; and only because they cannot be exhaustively read in the future, can they have a future beyond any foreseeable future, beyond what one might call the future present. The death of poetry's full meaning offers it an afterlife. ('Romantic Survival,' p. 220)

Since Shelley, not unlike Benjamin, places the life of poetry in its subsequent readings, his formulation of immortality anticipates what Derrida in his essay on Shelley will term the 'triumphant translation' of a text into later texts. As Derrida puts it, 'triumphant translation is neither the life nor the death of the text, only or already its living on, its life after life, its life after death. The same thing will be said of what I call writing, mark, trace, and so on.' ('Living On,' pp. 102-3) Hägglund's reading of Derrida emphasises precisely this sameness whereby living on, writing, mark, trace, etc. form a structure that can be adapted in different spheres. Living on, then, is a trace structure, folded between no longer
future and not yet past. It is an immanent process, a differential between future and past in which one survives rather than the static and inapproachable immortality of God. Shelley thus falls on both sides of Hägglund’s divide between survival and immortality: immortality is his own name for an eternal life, wholly other to lived life, in which poets participate even as their writings live on or survive in later readings. Wilson’s study of life and living in Shelley offers a different perspective on Derrida’s ‘living on.’ Wilson foregrounds the ‘identity and non-identity of “living on” with living’ found in Derrida’s text (Shelley and the Apprehension of Life, p. 3) and uses it to distinguish between ‘mere life – life as it is when, often for socially, politically and economically specific reasons, we do not feel that we are alive at all’ and ‘“the apprehension of life” that is missing from life in its reduced condition.’ (p. 19) Wilson’s citation is taken from Shelley’s own attempt at answering the question ‘What is Life?:’

What is Life? Thoughts and feelings arise, with or without our will and we employ words to express them. We are born, and our birth is unremembered and our infancy remembered but in fragments. We live on, and in living we lose the apprehension of life. (SPP, p. 506)

Mere ‘living on’ blunts the apprehension of life and in that sense poetry, which rejuvenates our apprehension of life, kills off mere life or, in Shelley’s formulation, ‘living on.’ Thus it is doubly ironic that Shelley’s own work lives on in Derrida’s phrase ‘living on:’ firstly because Shelley himself rejects living on and prefers apprehending life, and, secondly, because Derrida’s engagement with Shelley’s text grants Shelley the kind of immortality that Shelley desires even as Derrida himself, pace Hägglund, rejects the desire for immortality. However, it can be objected, this irony arises from inexact transitions between terms: Shelley’s phrase ‘live on’ does not refer to the same thing as Derrida’s ‘living on’ nor does his ‘immortality’ mean the same thing as the phrase does in Hägglund’s reading of Derrida. But rather than unpacking these various formulations of ‘living on,’ I want to highlight Wilson’s reading of the Shelleyan opposition between ‘living on’ and ‘the apprehension of life’ as ‘a critique of mere life’ (p. 19). The phrase is common in contemporary criticism and often traces its origin in Benjamin’s discussion of tragedy.257

In tragedy mere life is condemned to guilt, the Schuldzusammenhänge of faith. This is precisely what the tragic hero breaks out of: ‘in der Tragödie wird das dämonische Schicksal durchbrochen.’ (GS2, pp. 174-5) Cenci, however, does not rebel against a theology that ascribes guilt to life, he rebels against the mere life within him. Whether conceived as ‘living on’ or ‘the time of life,’ or ‘mere life,’ it is precisely what Cenci does not

257 Particularly after it was taken up by Agamben in Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (1998); Wilson for his part does not refer to Benjamin, but mentions Adorno as a hidden presence in his argument: ‘many of the features of Shelley’s work that I investigate […] find an Adornian complement, so to speak: the refusal to accept that what passes for “life” is really living.’ (p. 12)
want – he desires immortality and the kind of immortality he desires is fame. Cenci’s will was, after all, to immolate all his wealth ‘and leave | Of my possessions nothing but my name; | Which shall be an inheritance to strip | Its wearer bare as infamy.’ (IV.i.59-62) Cenci’s atrocities are aimed to ensure that he will not be forgotten. ‘And what will triumph above them and their dishonored name will be not just a crime, not just a white-haired criminal, but an everlasting symbol of Cenci’s potency – his greatest work of art. Francesco Cenci will not grow old.’ (Curran, pp. 78-9) Cenci escapes aging by passing from the time of life to the immortal time of art – a passage completed by Shelley’s drama The Cenci. By giving voice to the historical character Cenci, Shelley grants Cenci the immortality that he craves for in the speeches that Shelley puts into his mouth. That is, as Shelley gives voice to the long dead Francesco Cenci and lets him utter a will to leave no possession but an infamous name, Shelley’s prosopopoeic drama is in the process of fulfilling this bequest: Cenci’s rebellion against the time of life is completed in The Cenci’s afterlife.

89. The Cenci name.
If conventional wisdom consoles us with the idea that we live on through our progeny, Cenci’s rebellion against mortality, against the condition of living on, plays out precisely on his progeny: he refuses to live on as mortal by destroying the children through whom he would live on. This opens onto the central ironic crux of the play – it is that very progeny which Cenci seeks to destroy that ends up destroying him, but in so doing, completes his rebellion against the time of life. Cenci’s destruction of his children can thus be understood as an auto-destruction and Beatrice is the vehicle for this auto-destruction. But, importantly, in killing her father Beatrice acts to vindicate the Cenci name – Cenci has to be purged to protect the family’s honour. Beatrice’s commitment to the Cenci name is a mirror image of Cenci’s wish to leave ‘nothing but my name; | Which shall be an inheritance to strip | Its wearer bare as infamy’ (IV.i.60-2). ‘Think, I adjure you, what it is to slay | The reverence living in the minds of men | Towards our ancient house, and stainless fame!’ Beatrice demands of Marzio during the trial (V.ii.144-7). It is also in the name of Cenci that she accuses Lucretia and Giacomo for having confessed (under torture) to their crime:

Ignoble hearts!
For some brief spasms of pain, which are at least
As mortal as the limbs through which they pass,
Are centuries of high splendour laid in dust?
And that eternal honour which should live
Sun-like, above the reek of mortal fame,
Changed to a mockery and a byword? What! (V.iii.27-33)
The fall of the Cenci name also informs Beatrice’s final words to her brother Bernardo at the end of the play: ‘ill tongues shall wound me, and our common name | Be as a mark stamped on thine innocent brow’ (V.iv.150-1). Although Beatrice tries to protect the name that Cenci willfully profanes, she shares her father’s concern with the name. Tellingly, her last words to Bernardo exactly correspond to Cenci’s bequest of a name that brands its bearer with infamy. The fact that Beatrice up until the end acts to protect the ‘eternal honour’ of her family name makes it even more tragically ironic that it is her own actions that guarantee the immortal infamy of the Cenci name. Thus even in killing her father, Beatrice fulfils his wish: she renders their family history fit for dramatic treatment, for an eternal afterlife as ‘episodes of the cyclic poem written by Time upon the memories of men.’ (‘Defence,’ SPP, p. 523) As Shelley writes: ‘it is in the superstitious horror with which they contemplate alike her wrongs and their revenge, that the dramatic character of what she did and suffered, consists.’ (PS2, p. 731) It not merely Francesco Cenci’s crimes nor Beatrice’s stained innocence, but the interplay, Wechselwirkung, between father and daughter – his crimes and her revenge – that constitutes the dramatic character of The Cenci.

90. Father and daughter.

From the outset it is clear that Beatrice is unlike anyone else whom Cenci has ever encountered. In the first act, Cenci echoes Shelley’s preface in telling us that there is nothing to check him – ‘I have no remorse and little fear, | Which are, I think, the checks of other men.’ (I.i.84-5) The word – surely not coincidentally the homonym of a monetary cheque – echoes throughout the play. ‘Will none among this noble company | Check the abandoned villain?’ an anonymous guest exclaims at the banquet, but no one does (I.iii.91-2). Camillo reports to Beatrice that he has ‘urged [the Pope] then to check | Your father’s cruel hand’ but the Pope professes to keep a ‘blameless neutrality’ in ‘the great war between the old and young’ and refuses to intervene (II.ii.30-1; II.ii.38-40). Instead it is Beatrice who ‘alone stood up, and with strong words | Checked his [Cenci’s] unnatural pride’ as Lucretia puts it (II.43-4). Lucretia alludes to the end of the banquet scene, when Beatrice interrupts Cenci’s festivities and sends him to his room like a disobedient child:

*Cenci*

Retire to your chamber, insolent girl!

*Beatrice*

Retire thou impious man! Aye, hide thyself

Where never eye can look upon thee more! (I.iii.145-47)

The exchange, although it comes at the end of the banquet scene that closes the first act is in fact the play’s first direct exchange between Beatrice and Cenci. Thus it is worth noting
that in her first speech directed at her father, Beatrice begins by echoing his use of the word ‘retire.’ Although he keeps up appearances long enough to dismiss the assembled company, as soon as Beatrice is off stage he admits that Beatrice’s defiance has unsettled him. ‘I feel my spirits fail’ Cenci confesses as he is about to down a goblet of wine (I.i.171). Cenci’s words acknowledge that Beatrice has managed to do what no one else has: check him. But, of course, this is not something that he shows in public. ‘I know a charm shall make thee meek and tame, | Now get thee from my sight!’ (I.i.167-8) he retorts to Beatrice’s command that he retire. The charm referred to is the rape, whose German equivalent, Vergewaltigung, points to what is at stake here: Cenci seeks to subdue his daughter to the force of his Gewalt – thereby establishing the supremacy of his will over its last check. His address to the wine that is to give him the courage to overcome Beatrice makes clear that his conflict with Beatrice is also a conflict with his own aging:

Be thou the resolution of quick youth
Within my veins, and manhood’s purpose stern.
And age’s firm, cold, subtle villainy;
As if thou wert indeed my children’s blood
Which I did thirst to drink. The charm works well;
It must be done; it shall be done, I swear! (I.i.173-8)

In order to do the deed that he has determined on, that is, raping his own daughter, Cenci must first restore his youth by an act of transubstantiation in which wine turns into his children’s blood. By thus symbolically devouring his children, Cenci will become young again and the rape of Beatrice is therefore a symbol for Cenci’s overcoming of his own age. However, Cenci, who is otherwise notable for his brief transitions from word to deed, remains remarkably indecisive with regards to the rape. Although the first act ends with his assertion: ‘It must be done; it shall be done, I swear!’ (I.i.178) when the next act opens the deed is still undone. Act II is set the following morning. Beatrice appears ‘disordered’ after the events of the preceding night, but she also makes clear that Cenci has done no more than to threaten her with ‘one word […] one little word; | One look, one smile. […] He said, he looked, he did, – nothing at all | Beyond his wont, yet it disordered me’ (II.i.63-77). Even unbeknownst to herself, she has in fact checked Cenci again – despite the wine, Cenci did not manage to do what he set out to do. As he appears on stage, he confronts Beatrice with new determination:

Why, yesternight you dared to look
With disobedient insolence upon me,
[…]
Then it was I whose inarticulate words
Fell from my lips, and who with tottering steps
Fled from your presence, as you now from mine.

[...]

Never again,

[...]

Shalt thou strike dumb the meanest of mankind;

Me least of all. (II.i.106-20)

'Beatrice commits the unforgivable sin. She overpowers her father,' Curran writes, pointing out that Cenci’s ‘purpose is not to kill her, not pointlessly to torture her, but to “extort concession”’. (Scorpions Ringed with Fire p. 85; p. 84). The rape is not meant to gratify Cenci’s lust (whatever Shelley has to say about incestuous passion in the preface), but as retaliation for Beatrice’s daring to rebel against him. ‘A rebel to her father and her God’ (IV.i.90) Cenci calls her, conveniently forgetting that he himself is a rebel to his God. Cenci seeks to subdue Beatrice even though, or perhaps exactly because, she mirrors him in his own rebellion against all imposed authority. But the rape does not work the charm that Cenci expects of it. Even afterwards we still find Cenci insisting that ‘For Beatrice, worse terrors are in store, | To bend her to my will’ (IV.i.75-6). Although he has already raped her, the greater aim of bending Beatrice’s will is still not achieved. At the opening of the scene Cenci muses on what physical terrors he could submit Beatrice to and concludes ‘Yet so to leave undone | What I most seek! No, ‘tis her stubborn will, | Which, by its own consent, shall stoop as low | As that which drags it down.’ (IV.i.9-12) Cenci wishes to bring Beatrice to his level. Which is to say that she was vergewaltigt, but does not submit to Cenci’s Gewalt. Instead, rather than acknowledging his superiority, Beatrice decides to trump her father’s crime. Her response is to do a

something which shall make

The thing that I have suffered but a shadow

In the dread lightning which avenges it;

Brief, rapid, irreversible, destroying

The consequence of what it cannot cure. (III.i.87-91)

Parricide is a crime so heinous that incestuous rape fades into insignificance in comparison. In other words, Beatrice outdoes Cenci at his own violent game. It is precisely the recognition of Beatrice as his equal that makes Cenci attack her. Whereas the curse of his sons is put within the monetary framework of saving on his expenses, Cenci’s curse of Beatrice is grounded in their shared flesh:

God!

Hear me! If this most specious mass of flesh,

Which thou hast made my daughter; this my blood,

This particle of my divided being;
Or rather, this my bane and my disease,
Whose sight infects and poisons me (IV.i.114-9)

Beatrice is a particle of Cenci’s divided being that infects and poisons him. If Beatrice can check Cenci’s Gewalt, she does so as part of his own being: in her, his violence turns in upon itself. But it also implies that Cenci directs his violence against the younger version of himself that lives on in Beatrice. Roberts sees a ‘Eucharistic symbolism’ in the sanguine imagery of the play: ‘Christ’s redemptive blood flows out dispersively from his crucifixion; the Count incorporatively retains his.’ (p. 357) An example of Cenci’s dark parody of Christian ritual is seen in his conjuration of the wine that he drinks at the end of Act I: ‘Oh, thou bright wine [...] Could I believe thou wert their mingled blood,’ he says, referring to the sons whose death he celebrates (I.iii.77-81). And then again, when left alone at the very end of the scene: ‘Fill up this goblet with Greek wine. [...] As if [it] wert indeed my children’s blood | Which I did thirst to drink.’ (I.iii.169-77) Ultimately, Cenci’s desire to incorporate his children’s blood testifies to what Roberts sees as Cenci’s intolerance to difference, arguing that for Shelley ‘the essence of the nature of tyranny: [is] its paranoid hostility to differentiation’ (p. 355). Thus the self-division of Cenci’s being represented by Beatrice as a ‘particle of his divided being’ is ‘intolerable’ to Cenci (p. 355) and his curse is aimed at ‘incorporating the recalcitrant “particle of his divided being” back into the body’ (p. 356) – an effacement of difference which becomes evident as Cenci arrives at the climax of his curse:

That if she ever have a child – and thou,
Quick Nature! I adjure thee by thy God,
That thou be fruitful in her, and increase
And multiply, fulfilling his command,
And my deep imprecation! – may it be
A hideous likeness of herself; that, as
From a distorting mirror, she may see
Her image mixed with what she most abhors,
Smiling upon her from her nursing breast. (IV.i.141-9)

Cenci curses Beatrice to give birth to a child which is ‘a hideous likeness of herself,’ a ‘distorting mirror’ in which she find her own face ‘mixed with what she most abhors’ – which is himself. This is a child that will be the image of the same father whose image its mother is. ‘Hence the nature of his curse [is] that she should bring forth a child who will be a mirror to himself and to her, confirming the extent to which the rape has reincorporated

258 ‘Particle of one divided being’ is a formulation that Shelley uses in describing the relationship between lovers, the relation between all minds in the one mind as well as in reference to Jesus as a particle of God’s divided being.
Beatrice into the paternal body,’ Roberts writes (p. 355). My only difference with Roberts’s otherwise very insightful reading regards the relation between Beatrice and Cenci as manifested in this child, who is mirror to both his parents. Like most readers of the play, Roberts implies that Beatrice is essentially innocent and drawn into Cenci’s depravity through no fault of her own. ‘The ultimate irony of Shelley’s play is that Beatrice, in seeking to preserve her integrity, to keep control of her material and spiritual identity, will end up being entirely swallowed by the identity of the Count, as he aspires to swallow all identities in his god-like self-sufficiency.’ (p. 356) I would on the contrary suggest that Cenci has no need to ‘swallow’ Beatrice’s identity, because they share their identity from the outset. Compare, for instance, Cenci’s relation to his sons and to Beatrice: whereas he wishes to drink the blood of his sons, he acknowledges her blood as his own – as does Beatrice herself shortly after the rape: ‘Oh blood,’ she exclaims, ‘which art my father’s blood, | Circling through these contaminated veins’ (III.i.95-6). In raping Beatrice, Cenci rapes his own divided being, and by praying for a child, he conjures a further subdivision of this being (rather than, as Roberts writes, an re-incorporation of this division). The main difference between Beatrice and Cenci is not essential – not in their being – but in their age. Beatrice is a younger version of Cenci that has the power to check him – and thus confirm that he is indeed growing old. Cenci’s revenge for checking him is thus that Beatrice gives birth to a progeny such as she is to him – a yet younger subdivision of the Cenci being that, in its turn, will check her. Since this incestuous trinity of father, daughter/mother, and child is all part of one divided being, Cenci’s destruction of Beatrice through their offspring is an involuted form of auto-destruction. Curran’s interpretation of Cenci’s ‘driving compulsion’ picks up on his destructive drive:

[Cenci] pits himself against the Cenci mind, the Cenci resolution, the Cenci presence […] His attitude toward his family is marked by its singularity: he wishes not merely to subject them, but to obliterate them, to destroy his seed, to eradicate from the earth himself and his extensions, himself through his extensions, forever. He will have immortality, his negative absolute, at any price. (p. 86)

Cenci’s destruction of his children is a drive for immortality at the expense of living on through his progeny. But, this too leaves a trace. If raping Beatrice is a spiritual equivalent to the material destruction of his possessions in a bonfire on the Campagna that Cenci plans, it would serve to eradicate his child but not his seed; on the contrary, the child born out of his union with Beatrice would generate another progeny out of the very destruction of Beatrice that in turn would be doomed to check and repeat Beatrice’s violence and so on ad infinitum – and it is precisely this potential for a self-repeating Cenci image that Cenci both conjures and attacks when he rapes a particle of his divided being. This allows him to live on, immortally, through his auto-destruction. In Derridean terms, however, this would
not be survival or living on but autoimmunity, a term borrowed from biology where it
denotes a body that becomes allergic to and begins to destroy itself.

91. Mists.
As a father Cenci is an earthly image of the Father. By assaulting his own image in Beatrice,
Cenci symbolically attacks God’s image in himself. On Cenci’s casuistry, raping Beatrice is a
way to set his will against God’s and it is by obscuring Beatrice’s faith in divine justice that
Cenci brings her to consummate the spiritual deicide that he himself initiated as he leapt
up, thrust his fist at heaven and exclaimed: ‘He does his will, I mine!’ (IV.i.139). Cenci’s
defiance reaches even that first act of creation: God’s separation of light from darkness. ‘It
is a garish, broad, and peering day,’ Cenci complains as he plots his crime, ‘every little
corner, nook, and hole, is penetrated with the insolent light.’ (II.i.177-80) But soon Cenci
realises that the light of day matters little to him: ‘Yet, what is the day to me? And
wherefore should I wish for night, who do | A deed which shall confound both night and
day?’ (II.i.181-3) In this speech, Cenci sets up an extended metaphor of meteorological
imagery which structures Shelley’s figuration of the Cenci family’s crimes. I have argued
that Shelley customarily uses the morphology of clouds as figures for language on account
of their shaped shapelessness; here cloudy imagery becomes a vehicle for the Cencis’
nameless distortion – which both father and daughter participate in. Cenci is the first to
style himself in a ‘cloud of total negation’ (Curran, p. 116). In his curse he says:

...she shall grope through a bewildering mist
Of horror: if there be a sun in heaven
She shall not dare to look upon its beams,
Nor feel its warmth. Let her then wish for night;
The act I think shall soon extinguish all
For me: I bear a darker, deadlier gloom
Than the earth’s shade, or interlunar air,
Or constellations quenched in murkiest cloud,
In which I walk secure and unbeheld (II.i.184-92)

Beatrice’s first speech after the rape perfectly mirrors Cenci’s intentions: ‘The beautiful
blue heaven is flecked with blood! | The sunshine on the floor is black! The air | Is changed
to vapours such as the dead breathe | In charnel pits! Pah! I am choked!’ (III.i.13-6) The
divine day has been turned into a blood-stained night as the blue heaven turns red and the
sunshine turns black. Beatrice goes on to describe the mist that envelops her in this day-
turned-night:

259 Critics sometimes note that Cenci is the first to utter the word ‘parricide’ in the play and insofar
as Beatrice’s act is ‘a consequence of what it cannot cure’ it is Cenci who incites a parricide that is,
on different symbolic levels, readable as deicide, regicide, or – as I am trying to show – suicide.
– ’tis substantial, heavy, thick;
I cannot pluck it from me, for it glues
My fingers and my limbs to one another,
And eats into my sinews, and dissolves
My flesh to a pollution, poisoning
The subtle, pure, and inmost spirit of life! (III.i.18-23)

The mist that clings to Beatrice would be the ‘darker, deadlier gloom’ or ‘murkiest cloud’ in which Cenci has styled himself. But as Beatrice outlines how Cenci’s mist eats into and poisons her flesh, she repeats Cenci’s perception of herself as a ‘most specious mass of flesh [...] my blood [...] particle of my divided being’ that is a ‘bane’ and a ‘disease’ which ‘poisons’ him. Father and daughter acknowledge their shared flesh and react with autoimmunity in the biological sense of the word: they are mutually allergic, attacking each other as poisons although they are in fact particles of one being, one flesh. It is this one-ness that is represented by the Cencian cloud – which still clings to Beatrice as she decides for the parricide: ‘All must be suddenly resolved and done. | What is this undistinguishable mist | Of thoughts, which rise, like shadow after shadow, | Darkening each other?’ (III.i.169-72) she says before she retires to unravel her will and eventually determine that Cenci must die. Thus Shelley figuratively represents how the decision to kill her father is taken out of the mists that her father’s gloom has enveloped her in, mists which on Beatrice’s own testimony form the fateful circumstances that entrap her innocent character: ‘I, | Though wrapt in a strange cloud of crime and shame, | Lived ever holy and unstained’ (V.iv.147-49) she says in the final scene. It is also the idea of being enveloped in her father’s spirit that informs Beatrice’s vision when she, for the first time, loses her faith in God:

If there should be
No God, no Heaven, no Earth in the void world;
The wide, grey, lampless, deep, unpeopled world!
If all things then should be – my father’s spirit,
His eye, his voice, his touch, surrounding me;
The atmosphere and breath of my dead life! (V.iv.57-62)

The Cencian ‘atmosphere’ quenches the world of faith, and is a variation on the ‘darker, deadlier gloom’ in which Cenci envelops himself to confound day and night, the ‘substantial, heavy, thick’ mist that sticks to her after the rape, the ‘undistinguishable mist’ out of which her decision to kill her father is taken, and the ‘strange cloud of crime and shame’ in which Beatrice lived her life. ‘[D]ie Tragödie war es, in der das Haupt des Genius aus dem Nebel der Schuld sich zum ersten Mal erhob, denn in der Tragödie wird das dämonische Schicksal durchbrochen,’ Benjamin argues (GS2, pp. 174-5). Not so in The
Cenci. Here father and daughter remain enveloped in a gloomy mist in which the moral distinctions between them blur. The crowning piece of Cenci’s auto-destruction is to be destroyed by his own progeny. Moreover, his death is determined in the moment when she is most clearly enveloped in his own atmosphere – the moment when Beatrice fully becomes the image of Cenci’s divided being.
Rebellion

92. Extrajudicial violence.

In ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt,’ Benjamin addresses how the monopolisation of violence is necessary to institutions that preserve the law. While he discusses institutions of state and the police, in the world of The Cenci the Catholic Church serves the same role of upholding public order. If an individual, such as Cenci, takes violence into his own hands, he not merely breaks the law, he publicly shows his disregard for the authority that upholds the law, in Cenci’s case the Church. Benjamin asks us to consider the possibility that ‘die Gewalt, wo sie nicht in den Händen des jeweiligen Rechtes liegt, ihm Gefahr droht, nicht durch die Zwecke, welche sie erstreben mag, sondern durch ihr bloßes Dasein außerhalb des Rechts.’ (GS2, p. 183) That is, extrajudicial violence is not problematic because of the consequences in any particular situation but because it in principle flaunts its disregard for the authority of the law. Violence is not outlawed to prevent negative consequences (in which case extrajudicial violence for good ends would be allowed), but because, by openly flaunting the law, extrajudicial exercise of violence threatens the authority of the law and, by implication, the entire social order upheld by the law. Therefore Benjamin concludes that ‘das Recht die Gewalt in den Händen der einzelnen Person als eine Gefahr ansieht, die Rechtsordnung zu untergraben.’ (GS2, p. 183) Cenci’s violent outbursts threaten the Rechtsordnung represented by the Church. However, the indulgences that he is forced to pay in absolution for his crimes signal Cenci’s ultimate submission to the superior authority of the Church: his violence is contained by the Pope’s ‘daily mart of guilt’ where spiritual guilt [Schuld] is converted into monetary debt [Schuld]. The important point from the Pope’s point of view is that Cenci pays for his disobedience, thereby acknowledging the Pope’s superior title as arbiter of the law. The central dramatic irony of the play, and a detail not present in Shelley’s source manuscript, is the arrival of the Papal legate Savella with the order for Cenci’s execution moments after Cenci’s death. Sperry reads it as ‘a single crux of such importance that it crystallizes in itself the vital interpretive problems’ of the play (p. 416). And indeed interpretations of this scene have been radically different: at one extreme Savella’s arrival has been read as a vindication of the Papal justice system – had Beatrice shown a little bit more forbearance, the Pope would have rescued her – and on the other extreme it confirms the irrational and arbitrary ways of the Church as there is no apparent reason for the Pope to order Cenci’s execution. Brigham’s reading of the play’s financial motifs offers what is to my mind the most convincing motivation for the arrest. She locates the pivotal moment in the banquet scene where Cenci celebrates the accidental death of his sons. ‘God, | I thank thee! In one night didst thou perform, | By ways inscrutable, the thing I sought. | My disobedient and rebellious sons | Are dead!’ (I.iii.40-4)
One of his sons, ‘Rocco | Was kneeling at the mass, with sixteen others, | When the church fell and crushed him to a mummy; | The rest escaped unhurt’ (I.iii.58-61). Cenci’s other son, ‘Cristofano | Was stabbed in error by a jealous man, | Whilst she he loved was sleeping with his rival’ (I.iii.61-3). Since this takes place ‘in the selfsame hour of the same night’ (I.iii.64), Cenci infers a divine intervention, adding that God’s ‘most favoring Providence was shown | Even in the manner of their deaths. [...] Which shows that Heaven has special care of me.’ (I.iii.57-65) ‘Not only does Cenci exempt himself from the Church’s credit control,’ Brigham writes, ‘he threatens the very units of its control, its monopoly on the representation of God.’ (p. 350) It is by publicly usurping the Church’s claim on an immediate relation to God that Cenci signs his own death warrant – and Savella is dispatched with an order for his arrest and execution soon after. Which is to say that it is not by killing or torturing or stealing from this or that person that Cenci breaks his contract with the Church, it is by claiming God’s favour, the very Recht which underwrites the Church’s power, that Cenci commits the unpardonable crime. The violence that he exercises in the banquet scene is thus not the physical violence which the Church can easily accommodate within its ‘daily mart of guilt,’ it is a spiritual violence that assaults the very foundations of the Papal Rechtsordnung.

93. Defiance.
In an aside in his discussion of how Recht feels its foundations undermined by the extrajudicial exercise of violence, Benjamin states that this assumption also serves to explain how it is that we find villains fascinating:

Drastischer mag die gleiche Vermutung durch die Besinnung darauf nahegelegt werden, wie oft schon die Gestalt des »großen« Verbrechers, mögen auch seine Zwecke abstoßend gewesen sein, die heimliche Bewunderung des Volkes erregt hat. Das kann nicht um seiner Tat, sondern nur um der Gewalt willen, von der sie zeugt, möglich sein. In diesem Fall tritt also wirklich die Gewalt, welche das heutige Recht in allen Bezirken des Handelns dem einzelnen zu nehmen sucht, bedrohlich auf und erregt noch im Unterliegen die Sympathie der Menge gegen das Recht. (GS2, p. 183)

Villains gain our sympathy because they resist the Recht to which all must submit. We can admire and even envy the villain’s opposition to the Recht at the same time as we disapprove of his villainy because his very villainy is hallmark of his moral integrity vis-à-vis the Recht that binds us all. This way of evaluating morality, however, is a romantic construct. Any person who upholds his own moral standards is heroic, regardless of the content of these moral standards. From this perspective, Satan also can appear heroic – as he does in Shelley’s paradigmatically romantic reading of Milton’s Paradise Lost:
Milton’s Devil as a moral being is as far superior to his God as one who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture, is to one who in the cold security of undoubted triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy, not from any mistaken notion of inducing him to repent of a perseverance in enmity, but with the alleged design of exasperating him to deserve new torments. (‘Defence,’ SPP, pp. 526-7)

From the point of view of Benjamin’s reflections, what makes Satan heroic is the way in which this figure allows us to sympathise against a vindictive God who punishes His own creation for not being more perfect than he made it. The just-cited sentence from the ‘Defence’ also appears verbatim in Shelley’s satirical ‘Essay on the Devil and Devils’ probably written in late 1819, that is shortly after Shelley finished The Cenci. In the Devils essay, Shelley indicts a God ‘who took the trouble to create [man], and then to invent a system of casuistry by which he might excuse himself for devoting him to external torment.’ (Prose, p. 269) The casuistry in question is free will, a concept that would ‘reconcile omnipotence, and benevolence, and equity in the Author of an Universe, where evil and good are inextricably entangled, and where the most admirable tendencies to happiness and preservation are forever baffled by misery and decay.’ (Prose, p. 266)

The word ‘casuistry’ also returns in Shelley’s discussion of Milton’s Satan in the preface to Prometheus Unbound. Again commending the moral superiority of Milton’s Satan over his God, Shelley explains that if he chose Prometheus over Satan as the hero for his lyrical drama it is because Prometheus is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement, which in the Hero of Paradise Lost interfere
with the interest. The character of Satan engenders in the mind a pernicious casuistry which leads us to weigh his faults with his wrongs and to excuse the former because the latter exceed all measure. (SPP, p. 207)

The ‘pernicious casuistry’ of Paradise Lost turns its villain into its hero; Shelley’s expression refers to the same process that Benjamin identifies when he speaks about villains being able to stir ‘die Sympathie der Menge gegen das Recht.’ (GS2, p. 183) By choosing Prometheus, Shelley presumably steers clear of such casuistry, however, engendering casuistry in the reader’s mind is exactly the aim set out in the preface of The Cenci. Shelley began work on The Cenci straight after finishing Prometheus Unbound. After completing The Cenci, he returns to Prometheus Unbound and writes that ‘sublime afterthought’ (in Dowden’s famous phrase) the lyrical drama’s fourth post-apocalyptic act. Neil Fraistat has shown that the composition of Prometheus Unbound was not as neatly bisected by The Cenci as the received account suggests, Nonetheless the works’ critical reception has tended to emphasise how the tragedy of The Cenci is an ‘entr’acte’ to the sublime lyricism of Prometheus Unbound. By using the term casuistry in the prefaces to both dramas, Shelley puts the moral lessons that his dramas teach in a supplemental relation to one another. Cenci’s defiance of the Church bears comparison to the ‘courage and majesty and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force’ that Shelley ascribes to Milton’s Satan. But where Prometheus is a hero exempt from Satan’s flaws (‘the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement’), Cenci is one that shares them. Nonetheless, for all his vices, we can still respect Cenci’s opposition to the corrupt Church – as seen for instance in Scrivener’s suggestion that ‘one admires Cenci’s honesty’ in rejecting the Pope’s pretence at saving souls while enriching himself (Radical Shelley, p. 190).

94. Niobe.

To illustrate his concept of mythic violence, Benjamin mentions the story of Niobe.

According to the legend, Niobe boasts of her beauty, power and many children – her happy fate in short. However, in the world of tragedy, there is no such thing as a happy fate.

In der griechischen klassischen Ausgestaltung des Schicksalsgedankens wird das Glück, das einem Menschen zuteil wird, ganz und gar nicht als die Bestätigung seines unschuldigen Lebenswandels aufgefaßt, sondern als die Versuchung zu schwerer Verschuldung, zur Hybris. (GS2, pp. 173-4)

---

262 See editorial commentary in SPP, pp. 202-3
Niobe’s happiness is an incitement to hubris and she accordingly transgresses by claiming that she is more worthy of worship than the absentee gods. Apollo and Artemis punish Niobe’s transgression by killing her children and turning her to stone. On Benjamin’s interpretation, Apollo and Artemis’ actions are less about taking revenge on Niobe and more about establishing their authority. In other words, Apollo and Artemis’ violence is not strictly speaking punishment, but a manifestation of them being there. ‘Die mythische Gewalt in ihrer urbildlichen Form ist bloße Manifestation der Götter. Nicht Mittel ihrer Zwecke, kaum Manifestation ihres Willens, am ersten Manifestation ihres Daseins.’ (GS2, p. 197) By means of this manifestation of presence, the gods establish their authority, which is to say, their will as law, Recht. This is a law that is underpinned by a manifestation of violence – and violence becomes inextricable to it:

Die Funktion der Gewalt in der Rechtsetzung ist nämlich zweifach in dem Sinne, daß die Rechtsetzung zwar dasjenige, was als Recht eingesetzt wird, als ihren Zweck mit der Gewalt als Mittel erstrebt, im Augenblick der Einsetzung des Beziweckten als Recht aber die Gewalt nicht abdankt, sondern sie nun erst im strengen Sinne und zwar unmittelbar zur rechtsetzenden macht, indem sie nicht einen von Gewalt freien und unabhängigen, sondern notwendig und innig an sie gebundenen Zweck als Recht unter dem Namen der Macht einsetzt. Rechtsetzung ist Machtsetzung und insofern ein Akt von unmittelbarer Manifestation der Gewalt. Gerechtigkeit ist das Prinzip aller göttlichen Zwecksetzung, Macht das Prinzip aller mythischen Rechtsetzung. (GS2, pp. 197-8)

_Gewalt_ is the means to posit the law, Recht. But before any given law is posited, its position is preceded by the positing of the right to set the law. The primordial right that is being posited by the manifestation of _Gewalt_ is therefore the right to set the law; ‘die Rechtsetzung ist zwar dasjenige, was als Recht eingesetzt wird.’ Violence is the _means_ to posit the right to _Rechtsetzung_, the right to posit the law. However, having posited this right to _Rechtsetzung_, violence is not expanded, but only in this moment, ‘nun erst im strengen Sinne,’ transforms into its second function – violence itself becomes _rechtsetzend_, law-positing. No longer merely a means to posit the law, _Rechtsetzung_, it becomes the very foundation of the law, _Recht_. The basis of this _Recht_ is therefore not justice, but _Gewalt_.

The violent manifestation of the mythic gods is a manifestation of a _rechtsetzende Gewalt_ in which they establish their right to set the _Recht_ that governs the humans of their realm. In _The Cenci_, the Church upholds the _Recht_ and serves as an earthly representative of God’s _Recht zur Rechtsetzung_ over humans. That is, since its authority rests on God’s sanction, God is the source of _rechtsetzende Gewalt_. When Cenci defies Pope and Church he is ultimately defying the _Recht_ set by God. ‘He does his will, I mine!’ Cenci exclaims, ‘*Leaping up, and throwing his right hand towards Heaven.*’ (IV.i.139, and stage direction). Beatrice likewise rejects the Church’s judicial authority. ‘Oh! in this mortal world | There is
no vindication and no law,’ Beatrice exclaims after the rape, suggesting that the Church’s legal system (which is to say God’s law on earth) cannot accommodate the ‘atonement’ that her wrong requires (III.i.134-7; III.i.215). This authorises a different kind of hearing, one that reaches beyond the bounds of ‘this mortal world:’

I have prayed
To God, and I have talked with my own heart,
And have unravelled my entangled will,
And have at length determined what is right. (III.i.218-21)

While Beatrice will come to claim divine sanction for the decision that her father must die, there is no evidence that her prayer has been answered – not even such as provided by the ‘miraculous deaths’ of her brothers. On the contrary, as she explicitly puts it in this speech, Beatrice has ‘unravelled [her] entangled will’ and ‘determined what is right.’ With or without divine intervention, it is her will that determines the right, Recht, according to which Cenci’s atonement requires his death.264 I have already noted the similarities between Beatrice and Cenci and it is thus not surprising that Beatrice’s decision to kill her father follows in her father’s footsteps: just like Cenci claimed that Heaven showed special care of him in the manner of his sons’ deaths, so Beatrice claims an unmediated authorisation from Heaven for her actions. Both father and daughter usurps the Church’s privileged relation to God and the Church orders both of them executed.

95. Auto-destruction.
I have suggested that we can read the Cenci violence as auto-destructive: Cenci destroys himself by destroying his own image in Beatrice. Hamacher’s reading of ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt’ locates a comparable moment of self-destruction in the final movement of Benjamin’s essay. On Benjamin’s scheme violence posits and imposes the law, then it upholds and preserves it. Towards the end of the essay, Benjamin addresses how rechtsetzende Gewalt, law-positing violence, turns into rechtserhaltende Gewalt, law-preserving violence and traces the dynamics of these two types of violence:

Dessen Schwankungsgesetz beruht darauf, daß jede rechtserhaltende Gewalt in ihrer Dauer die rechtsetzende, welche in ihr repräsentiert ist, durch die Unterdrückung der feindlichen Gegengewalten indirekt selbst schwächt. [...] Dies währt so lange, bis

264 Beatrice’s case may be an example of Benjamin’s provocative contention that the commandment ‘thou shalt not kill’ is a guideline for action but not a basis for judgment, leaving the individual free to take on the responsibility for breaking it: ‘Dieses [Gebot] steht nicht als Maßstab des Urteils, sondern als Richtschnur des Handelns für die handelnde Person oder Gemeinschaft, die mit ihm in ihrer Einsamkeit sich auseinanderzusetzen und in ungeheueren Fällen die Verantwortung von ihm abzusehen auf sich zu nehmen haben.’ (GS2, pp. 200-1). For his part, Shelley condemns Beatrice not because she violates the divine commandment not to kill as such, but because her action is retributive. ‘Revenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes.’ (PS2, p. 730)
entweder neue Gewalten oder die früher unterdrückten über die bisher rechtsetzende Gewalt siegen und damit ein neues Recht zu neuem Verfall begründen. (GS2, p. 202)

The Schwankungsgesetz, ‘oscillation-law’, of violence shows how, over time, violence turns against itself. In the present context this oscillation can be mapped onto the Wechselwirkung, interaction, between Cenci and Beatrice that I am exploring. On the one hand, both father and daughter oppose the rechtserhaltende Gewalt represented in the Church – both set their own wills against the will of God as manifested in the figure of the Pope and the Church’s juridical apparatus. But at the same time as resisting the Church, father and daughter are also engaged in a conflict with one another. The Pope himself hypocritically professes a ‘blameless neutrality’ in ‘the great war between the old and young’ (Camillo, II.ii.38-40) even as he ‘holds it of most dangerous example | In aught to weaken the paternal power, | Being, as ’t were, a shadow of his own’ (Camillo, II.ii.54-6). In other words, the Pope is on Cenci’s side. Although Cenci and the Pope are contesting their right to a ‘monopoly on the representation of God’ (Brigham, p. 350), they are also allied on one side in the patriarchal and generational struggle represented in the conflict between Cenci and his daughter. The situation offers competing manifestations of violence that all stake a claim at being rechtsetzend – each actor wants to impose his Recht over he others. They thus illustrate what Benjamin terms the feindliche Gegengewalten that the rechtserhaltende Gewalt at the heart of the legal order must suppress. In the play, this suppression is manifested in everyone’s submission to the financial terms of the Pope’s ‘daily mart of guilt.’ But, Benjamin claims, by suppressing these would-be rechtsetzende Gegengewalten, the rechtserhaltende Gewalt undermines the Rechtsetzung that is the basis of its own authority. Eventually a new Gewalt, or one of the previously suppressed Gegengewalten will prevail and establish itself as the new Recht. Hamacher glosses it thus:

Thus, the law on which the dialectic of historical forms of violence is based is the law of an indirect suppression of violence, which nevertheless itself rests on the structure of positing – a suppression of violence that posits. Violence is suppressed not by another violence but by its own positing.265

The relation between Cenci and that ‘particle’ of his ‘divided being’ represented by his daughter can be read as an exemplification of such self-suppression of violence by its own positing. Beatrice’s youth, in contrast to Cenci’s age, signals the temporal succession in question and Cenci turns against her because she, or his younger image in her, would over time surpass him. Destroying Beatrice would be a victory over his own aging. However, Beatrice responds by having him assassinated, the parricide, in what is surely the most

---

inexpressible irony of the play, both ends his life and secures for him the immortal fame that Cenci desires. In Hamacher’s terms, Cenci’s assault on Beatrice and Beatrice’s parricide are two acts of violence that meet each other in a simultaneous positing and deposing that he terms affirmative: ‘if one further calls the dialectic of positing and decay a dialectic of performance, it seems reasonable to term the “deposing” of acts of positing and their dialectic, at least provisionally, as an absolute imperformative or affirmative political event, as depositive, as political a-thesis.’ (p. 1133) However, I stop the analogy between the Cenci violence and Hamacher’s discussion of affirmative strike before its conclusion: ‘Pure violence does not posit, it “deposes”; it is not performative, but affirmative. If the pure violence of de-posing exists even beyond the sphere of law, this pure, and this nonviolent, noninstrumental violence may at any time […] break through the cycle of laws and their decay.’ (pp. 1133-4) Even if I have argued that the Cencis set up their own violent economy, this is not one that corresponds to Benjamin’s conception of divine violence and in the following sections I will address the differences between Shelley’s tragedy and Benjamin’s reflections on tragedy and violence.
Last line of resistance

96. Political theology.
At the outset I noted Dempsey’s reading of The Cenci with the categories provided by Benjamin’s discussion of the baroque Trauerspiel. My own reading has positioned The Cenci as a tragedy rather than a Trauerspiel and here I would like to highlight the main significance of seeing the play as a tragedy rather than a Trauerspiel, particularly with regards to the play’s exercise of extrajudicial violence. In his article, Dempsey foregrounds Benjamin’s discussion of sovereignty, in which he draws on Carl Schmitt’s Politische Theologie [Political Theology] (1922).266 ‘Souverän ist, wer über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet,’ is the first sentence of Schmitt’s book.267 The Ausnahmezustand, state of exception or state of emergency, is one when the law is suspended, either to protect the law (e.g. when habeas corpus is suspended in times of civil unrest)268 or in order to impose a new law (e.g. in a revolution). A key aim of Schmitt’s theory is to position the state of exception and the sovereign who decides on it in relation to the framework of the judicial order. ‘Er [der Souverän] steht außerhalb der normal geltenden Rechtsordnung und

---

266 Dempsey does not directly address how the Schmittean concept of sovereignty, as applied by Benjamin to the baroque German drama relates to the world of The Cenci, particularly given the very different political-theological framework that Shelley operates in compared to the baroque as Benjamin characterises it. Potential correspondences may be found in a close reading of Schmitt’s Politische Romantik [Political Romanticism] (1919), where he argues that the French Revolution was a shift in the concept of the political: political action became based on affect and imagination rather than objective moral standards. In Die Diktatur [Dictatorship] (1921) Schmitt discusses the rise of totalitarian states in his own time. Samuel Weber discusses Benjamin’s use of Schmitt, and Adorno’s attempts to cover up the ‘moral contamination of Benjamin by Schmitt’ in ‘Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt’, Diacritics, 22 (1992), 5–18 (p. 6); Marc de Wilde focuses on the intellectual exchange between the Benjamin and Schmitt in ‘Meeting Opposites: The Political Theologies of Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt’, Philosophy and Rhetoric, 44 (2011), 363–81.

267 Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von Der Souveränität, 8th edn (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2004), p. 13; further references in text.

268 Shelley refers to this sense of Ausnahmezustand in A Philosophical View of Reform when he rejects the government’s appeal to a state of national emergency (in this case the war against Napoleonic France) to justify increasing the national debt: ‘The usual vindication of national debts is that, [since] they are contracted in an overwhelming measure for the purpose of defence against a common danger, for the vindication of the rights and liberties of posterity, it is just that posterity should bear the burden of payment. This reasoning is most fallacious. The history of nations presents us with a succession of extraordinary emergencies, and through their present imperfect organisation their existence is perpetually threatened by new and unexpected combinations and developments of foreign or internal force.’ (Prose, p. 252) That is, the government declares the war against Napoleonic France to be such an extraordinary emergency that it justifies indebting posterity and thereby suspending the (financial) freedom of future generations of Englishmen. ‘The problem with this argument, Shelley argued, was that it assumed that “states of exception” were in fact exceptional,’ Mitchell writes (Sympathy and the State, p. 177). Rather than accepting that war is a national emergency that justifies spending money to be repaid by future generations, Shelley sees the appeal to emergency as a convenient excuse for the government to ‘assume’ whenever it suits its aims (Prose, p. 252). To add insult to injury, the wars thus financed are, in Shelley’s term, ‘liberticide wars’ (Prose, p. 252) – rather than securing liberty for the future, they cement current oppression, and it is the present and future oppressed who, via the national debt and taxation, are made to pay for wars that cement their own political and financial bondage.
gehört doch zu ihr, denn er ist zuständig für die Entscheidung, ob die Verfassung in toto suspendiert werden kann.’ (p. 14) Since the state of exception suspends the legal order, the sovereign is outside of it. However, insofar as the political person or entity deciding on the state of exception is authorised by the legal order to do so, the sovereign position is within the legal order. ‘Being-outside and yet belonging: this is the topological structure of the state of exception,’ Giorgio Agamben glosses the sentence just cited, ‘and only because the sovereign, who decides on the exception, is, in truth, logically defined in his being by the exception, can he too be defined by the oxymoron ecstasy-belonging.’\footnote{State of Exception, trans. by Kevin Attell (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2005), p. 35.} It is this borderline position both inside and outside of the juridical order that inspires Benjamin. He interprets the crux of the baroque sovereign as his being both above and within creation, he is elected by God to be the ‘Gipfel der Kreatur,’ ‘the lord of creatures,’ but he himself remains a mere creature. This untenable situation leads to an eruption of auto-destructive force: ‘der Souverän des XVII. Jahrhunderts, der Gipfel der Kreatur, [bricht] in der Raserei wie ein Vulkan [aus] und mit allem umliegenden Hofstaat sich selber vernichtend.’ (GS1, p. 250; cf. Dempsey, p. 885) Through his self-destruction, the sovereign goes down as a victim to his borderline position, ‘er fällt als Opfer eines Mißverhältnisses der unbeschränkten hierarchischen Würde, mit welcher Gott ihn investiert, zum Stande seines armen Menschenwesens.’ (GS1, p. 250) As I noted above, Dempsey posits Benjamin’s typology of sovereign/tyrant, martyr, and plotter onto Cenci, Beatrice, and Orsino. Cenci’s destruction of himself and his family would reflect the baroque sovereign’s eruption of Raserei, fury. In her commitment to seeing Cenci as the earthly image of the divine Father, Beatrice would also be victim of the contradictory status of the sovereign. ‘Beatrice commits her “pernicious mistake” [...] due to the fact that she is unable to separate her perception of the creaturely man that her father is, from the idealized sovereign position that he embodies.’ (Dempsey, p. 886) The destruction of the Cenci family would thus originate in Cenci’s position as more than a man yet less than God.

Count Cenci is a clear example of such a tragic tyrant and his compulsive need for closure and self-certainty manifests itself as a willingness to eliminate anything that threatens his sense of wholeness. He murders, desires the death of his sons, and rapes his daughter – that “particle” of his “divided being” [...] – all so he can be certain who he is and be secure in his position as master of all. (Dempsey, p. 885)

That is to say, Cenci runs amok to confirm his sovereign status, a status that, for the baroque, was granted to the ruler by God. On my reading, on contrast, Cenci is not sovereign in the world of the play – he has to submit to the Church’s God-granted authority. Any authority which he himself has, even within his own family, is ultimately
derived from his being an earthly image of God. Alternatively it springs from his wealth that allows him to act on the Pope’s ‘daily mart of guilt’ where divine authority is replaced by monetary authority (I.i.12). Rather than occupying a position above other creatures, Cenci has to submit to the God and Mammon of his society. And it is this that Cenci rebels against. When he attacks his own image in Beatrice, he metonymically attacks God’s image in himself and with it the entire Christian patriarchal hierarchy that it holds up. Thus even though he himself is a beneficiary of this system, Cenci seeks to destroy it in the name of setting his own prerogatives. And it is precisely this spirit of defiance that separates the mourning, creaturely world of the Trauerspiel from the mythic realm of tragedy on Benjamin’s scheme. Where the baroque mourns the fall of creation, tragedy rebels against its gods.

97. Beatrice’s gaze.

Both Cenci and Beatrice rebel against imposed authority to set a new law. However, there is an important difference between father and daughter. Whereas Cenci openly shakes his fist at heaven, Beatrice claims to uphold divine justice by her exercise of extrajudicial violence: ‘She [...] Stands like God’s angel ministered upon | By fiends; avenging such a nameless wrong | As turns black parricide to piety’ (Giacomo, V.i.42-5). The crime that Beatrice avenges is not the physical violence done to her, but the symbolic violence done to the earthly image of God that Cenci himself, in his role as father, embodies. Cenci’s violation of his own child also violates, in the words of Giacomo, ‘a father’s holy name.’ (II.ii.73) ‘A father who is all a tyrant seems,’ Orsino responds, ‘Were the profaner for his sacred name’ (II.ii.80-1) – and it is this profanity that the Cenci children will purge: they kill their father to vindicate the Father. ‘Beatrice asks retribution – not mere vengeance, but the re-establishment of moral values through the destruction of an evil man,’ as Curran puts it (p. 94), or, in the words of Scrivener: ‘By punishing the bad father, Beatrice will vindicate the benevolence of the patriarchal system and reestablish her innocence.’ (Radical Shelley, p. 194) Since Beatrice’s exercise of extrajudicial violence is committed in the name of divine justice it has an affinity to what Benjamin terms divine violence. Divine violence destroys Recht in the name of Gerechtigkeit. In like manner, Beatrice can be said to defy the Recht enshrined in the Church and the patriarchal guilt economy it presides over. Young-ok An reads Beatrice’s actions in terms drawn from Benjamin’s ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt’ and argues that Beatrice cuts across and destroys the juridical framework that she finds herself in much like divine violence cuts across and destroys the mythic Recht: ‘the subject position delineated through Beatrice evokes the Benjaminian “divine strike,”
instrumental and Messianic, which tears apart the existent moral scheme.\textsuperscript{270} I fundamentally disagree with An's reading; in my view Beatrice does not tear apart the existent moral scheme, but rather perpetuates its violence. An is interested in how ‘complex operations of violence, law and desire [...] intersect with gender issues’ (p. 27), a focus that places Beatrice outside the ‘rule of reciprocity in violence’ (p. 34) that goes on between the male characters, and that leaves An curiously blind to the fact that Beatrice resists the patriarchal violent economy with its own violent means. Beatrice may be excluded from the language of the law, as exemplified by Beatrice’s question of the noblemen of Rome during the banquet scene: ‘is it that I sue not in some form | Of scrupulous law, that ye deny my suit?’ (I.iii.135-6) However, she is perfectly capable of hiring Marzio and Olimpio to assassinate her father and thus participate in the ‘daily mart of guilt’ where blood and gold are exchanged. Marzio’s self-characterisation ‘As one who thinks | A thousand crowns excellent market-price | For an old murderer’s life,’ suggests that Beatrice is well aware of the price of murder in Papal Rome (IV.ii.18-20). That is, as a woman Beatrice may be excluded from the patriarchal economy, but she finds a means to enter it by hiring Marzio to execute the crime she wants done. In this sense she perpetuates the violence characteristic of the men in her surroundings. But An’s primary focus, however, is the trial scene. ‘Beatrice’s testimonies at the “Hall of Justice” fundamentally challenge the presumptions, normalities, and “law” of the trial system – all of which occupy the regime of truth and the center of authority.’ (p. 56) I have argued that Beatrice’s designation of her crime as expressionless places it outside the law ‘of this mortal world.’ In this sense it is true that Beatrice challenges the law of the trial system. I have further suggested that Beatrice’s case can be read as a precedent in setting a new law by which incestuous rape is punished by death. But if the positing of a new law indeed underlines what An identifies as the ‘arbitrariness of law-making and law-imposing forces’ (p. 56), Beatrice does not cancel out but reiterates this arbitrariness of law-positing (\textit{Rechtsetzung}) by positing her own unraveled will as the foundation of a new law. ‘[I] have unravelled my entangled will, | And have at length determined what is right,’ as she explains her decision (III.i.220-1). So if Beatrice ‘tears apart the existent moral scheme’ it is only to put in place another, equally arbitrary one – one may think of Benjamin’s distinction between the political and the proletarian general strike that I applied to the political allegory of the play; Beatrice merely redistributes violence, whereas a genuine ‘divine strike’ would destroy the law and even violence itself. Contrary to An, I believe that the trial scene is moment when Beatrice’s subjection to the mythic guilt economy is more

\textsuperscript{270} ‘Beatrice’s Gaze Revisited: Anatomizing “The Cenci”, \textit{Criticism}, 38 (1996), 27–68 (p. 56); further references in text.
evident than at any other point in the play; it is here that her conception of divine justice is shown to barely differ from the violence that founds mythic Recht.

98. The trial scene.

The trial scene often poses a problem in readings of The Cenci. Throughout the play Beatrice is presented as the image of virtue, an innocent victim to her father’s atrocities who is brought to the point of parricide by his actions. In the trial scene, however, Beatrice appears in a more dubious light. She lies. Moreover, she indicts Marzio to save her own skin. Historically, even readers who are sympathetic to Beatrice’s plight find the limit of their sympathies in her treatment of Marzio – they can pardon the parricide but not the lie. Hunt’s defence of the lie in his partisan review of The Cenci has set the tone for those who maintain the essential innocence of Beatrice’s character in spite of the evil circumstances she finds herself in:

She is naturally so abhorrent from guilt, – she feels it to have been so impossible a thing to have killed a FATHER, truly so called, that what with her horror of the deed and of the infamy attending it, she would almost persuade herself as well as others, that no such thing had actually taken place... It is a lie told, as it were, for the sake of nature, to save it the shame of a greater contradiction.271

However, Beatrice’s deliberate behaviour at the trial belies Hunt’s appeal to her nature. When Beatrice enters the scene of the trial Marzio has just confessed, under torture, that he assassinated Cenci on Beatrice, Lucretia, Giacomo, and Orsino’s instigation. Beatrice’s defence strategy has two parts: firstly, she contests the use of torture to procure evidence to discredit Marzio’s confession. It is at this juncture that she appeals to Cardinal Camillo to attest to her innocence:

Cardinal Camillo,
You have a good repute for gentleness
And wisdom: can it be that you sit here
To countenance a wicked farce like this?
When some obscure and trembling slave is dragged
From sufferings which might shake the sternest heart,
And bade to answer, not as he believes,
But as those may suspect or do desire
Whose questions thence suggest their own reply
[...]

Speak now
The thing you surely know, which is, that you,

If your fine frame were stretched upon that wheel,  
And you were told: 'Confess that you did poison  
Your little nephew; that fair blue-eyed child  
Who was the lodestar of your life:'  
[...]  
you would say, 'I confess any thing:'  
And beg from your tormentors, like that slave,  
The refuge of dishonorable death. (L.ii.36-60)

Beatrice's eloquent critique of torture subtly alerts the Cardinal to her own likeness to his beloved nephew and reminds the play's readers of the portrait described by Shelley in the play's preface and quite likely reproduced in their edition of the play. Doing so Beatrice makes use of the only currency available to as a woman: her beautiful appearance. As I have already noted, the Cardinal is 'much moved' by her speech, likens her to the 'most perfect image of God's love' embodied in his nephew and concludes that he 'would pledge [his] soul | That she is guiltless.' As the Cardinal falls for Beatrice's innocent Schein, it can well be argued that she here breaks through the patriarchal guilt economy. But the audience knows that Beatrice lies. Regardless of how innocent she appears to be, she is guilty of the crime for which she will be sentenced to death. When Beatrice convinces Camillo of her innocence by appealing to her beautiful appearance, it becomes clear that the appearance of innocence manifested in blond hair and a pair of blue eyes is a delusion. 'Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted,' Shelley writes in the 'Defence,' and in like manner Beatrice's beauty is a beautiful distortion of a murderous nature.

Having procured the Cardinal's declaration of her innocence, the second part of Beatrice's defence is to make Marzio retract his confession. At first Beatrice pretends to never have seen him before. 'You know me too well, Lady Beatrice,' Marzio says, to which Beatrice exclaims: 'I know thee! how? where? when?' (V.ii.23-4) When Marzio persists in his accusation, 'Beatrice advances towards him; he covers his face, and shrinks back.' (V.ii.30, stage direction) This stage direction indicates that what makes Marzio cower is not anything that Beatrice says but something that Beatrice does. As his later comments make clear, it is the gaze that Beatrice turns on him that intimidates him. It is this gaze that An reads as the symbol of the 'divine strike' 'delineated' through the figure of Beatrice: 'what seems to be a most significant insight in The Cenci is an "unacknowledged" configuration of the radical tour de force of annihilation against institutional legislative power, which is epitomized in the voiding force of Beatrice's gaze.' (p. 55) Certainly Beatrice's gaze is powerful: 'Oh dart | The terrible resentment of those eyes | On the dead earth! Turn them away from me!' (V.ii.30-2), Marzio cries and before long we find him begging his judges to
save him from Beatrice’s gaze: ‘Take me away! Let her not look on me! [...] I have said all I know; now, let me die!’ (V.ii.91-3) When Beatrice again turns to him after another appeal to her judges, he interrupts her with the words: ‘Oh, spare me! Speak to me no more!’ That stern yet piteous look, those solemn tones, ‘Wound worse than torture’ he says to her and then turns to his judges: ‘For pity’s sake lead me away to death’ (V.ii.109-12). The ‘voiding force of Beatrice’s gaze’ is not directed ‘against institutional legislative power’ but against Marzio, who has himself just been tortured by the legal institution. For Marzio, however, the force of Beatrice’s gaze surpasses the torture of the Church: ‘Torture me as ye will,’ Marzio finally says, ‘A keener pang has wrung a higher truth | From my last breath. She is most innocent!’ (V.ii.164-6) The ‘keener pang’ refers precisely to Beatrice’s gaze and the ‘higher truth’ is elicited by her higher mode of torture. Just moments after she has criticised torture for producing the answers the questioners want, Beatrice’s gaze elicits the result she desires: Marzio, who more than anyone gets to suffer for her guilt, declares her innocence. In other words, the Gewalt of Beatrice’s gaze trumps the Inquisition’s brute torture. However, this reading is complicated by the fact that Beatrice’s gaze produces the play’s only departure from its sad reality. After asserting Beatrice’s innocence, Marzio is led off for further torture to see if he will reiterate his confession. As the torturers return, the Judge asks: ‘What did he say?’ to which the officer replies: ‘Nothing. As soon as we | Had bound him on the wheel, he smiled on us, | As one who baffles a deep adversary; | And holding his breath, died’ (V.ii.181-4). Marzio’s miraculous suicide is a bloodless death akin to the example of divine violence that Benjamin offers in ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt:’


Like the Levites in Benjamin’s example, Marzio dies a bloodless death. Since it is the ‘higher truth’ elicited by Beatrice’s gaze that makes Marzio rather suffocate than retract his assertion of her innocence, and, furthermore, since Beatrice’s violence allegedly vindicates ‘a father’s holy name’ (II.ii.73) and seeks to restore divine justice on earth – Giacomo describes her as an ‘unblamed avenger’ (III.i.365) while she herself refers to Cenci’s murderer as ‘A sword in the right hand of justest God’ (IV.iv.121) – Marzio’s bloodless death would confirm the righteousness of Beatrice’s actions. Nonetheless, Beatrice’s gaze still does not fulfil the primary condition of Benjamin’s concept of divine violence: that it be forgiving, entsühnend. On the contrary, by demanding, first, Cenci’s death to carry out God’s justice and, second, Marzio’s sacrifice to uphold her own
innocence, the violence of Beatrice's gaze remains bound to the mythic economy. Whereas An argues that the force of Beatrice's gaze crystallises the play's annihilation of institutional power, the fact is that her gaze merely reiterates the tribunal's torturous methods on a higher level of sophistication – as proven by the fact that the force of Beatrice's gaze is not directed at the judges who represent the institutional power but at Marzio whom they have also tortured. Marzio becomes the scene of a contest between two modes of torture, two competing manifestations of mythic violence: Beatrice sets the 'voiding force' of her gaze against the physical torture of the Church, but she still stays within its modes of operation where truth is procured by violence and validated by pain. The force of her gaze is a last-ditch attempt to assert the Recht that she has set by unravelling her will over the law of the Church. 'Refusing to be compelled to accept the truth of either Beatrice's religious ideology or the self-justifying machinery of state power, Marzio checks the authority of both,' Dempsey writes (p. 900) and reads Marzio's 'indecision' as a reversal of Schmitt's formula that 'sovereign is he who decides on the exception' (p. 900). That is to say, Marzio occupies a subject position outside the violent guilt economy. I would suggest, on contrast, that we read Marzio as a sacrifice demanded by the mythic nature of Beatrice's violence. His death is the manifestation of Beatrice's Recht, that thereby serves to annul her Gerechtigkeit.


The violence of the divine is a forgiving violence whereas the violence of the Cencis, both father and daughter, is vindictive and self-serving. Even when Beatrice seeks to vindicate the Father by purging his distorted image in her own father, the wish for revenge runs counter to the mercy characteristic of divine justice, Gerechtigkeit. Therefore I propose that the Cenci violence is neither pure manifestation like that of the ancient gods, nor divine destruction, but rather violence of a third kind hinted at in Benjamin's second example of mythic violence:

Wie wenig solche göttliche Gewalt im antiken Sinne die rechtserhaltende der Strafe war, zeigen die Heroensagen, in denen der Held, wie z. B. Prometheus, mit würdigem Mute das Schicksal herausfordert, wechselnden Glücks mit ihm kämpft: und von der Sage nicht ohne Hoffnung gelassen wird, ein neues Recht dereinst den Menschen zu bringen. Dieser Heros und die Rechtsgewalt des ihm eingeborenen Mythos ist es eigentlich, die das Volk noch heute, wenn es den großen Missetäter bewundert, sich zu vergegenwärtigen sucht. (GS2, p. 197)

Prometheus and the villain share the ambition to defy fate, which is to say the reign of mythic Recht, in the hope of establishing a new Recht. What may be termed Promethean violence is the manifestation of resistance to the mythic reign of fate – and this is what
awakens the audience’s admiration. It is from this perspective that we sympathise with Cenci’s honest defiance of the corrupt Church, and even more so with Beatrice’s parricide – the pernicious casuistry induced by her case let her circumstances extenuate her crime. The Promethean villain-hero refuses to submit to ‘das Schicksal, das der Rechtsgewalt in allen Fällen zugrunde liegt’ (GS2, p. 197) and seeks to break the Schuldzusammenhänge of fate precisely by challenging its right to posit Recht by counter-posing his own. However, since it still employs the same violent means, it cannot truly break free of the mythic economy. The violence of the Cencis is Promethean – a manifestation of resistance against a corrupt theological-juridical order. The pernicious mistake that both Cencis make is that they resist it with violent means. If Shelley’s Prometheus will learn that the force of his forgiveness is stronger than his curse, this is precisely the lesson withdrawn from the Cenci family.

100. Non-violence.

In the preface to Prometheus Unbound Shelley writes that the ‘moral interest’ of the Promethean myth ‘would be annihilated if we could conceive of him as unsaying his high language’ – that is, apologising before Jupiter and begging to be released (PS2, p. 472). ‘For thine own sake unsay those dreadful words. | When high God grants, he punishes such prayers,’ Lucretia warns Cenci when she hears his will (IV.i.137–8), thereby establishing a link between Cenci’s curse of his children and Prometheus’ curse of Jupiter. But, of course, Cenci does not unsay his high language and the ‘sad reality’ of The Cenci is permeated by the desire for revenge. Beatrice is no more capable of breaking free of the pernicious mistake of vindictive violence than is her father. The Cenci is written for immediate performance on the London stage and in anticipation of instant success. Its companion piece, Prometheus Unbound, on contrast, is written with the purpose to ‘familiarise the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence’ (PS2, p. 475). Prometheus, unlike the Cencis, does overcome his pernicious mistake, the desire for ‘revenge, atonement, retaliation,’ manifested in his curse. As Jerrold E. Hogle puts it, in the opening of Prometheus Unbound ‘Shelley’s Titan is “discovered bound to the Precipice” of his own hateful tendencies, poised on the discovery that “fear and self-contempt” come from the depths of himself [...] and can be reversed forever by a single choice in the psyche.’ This choice takes place already in his first monologue when Prometheus apostrophises his oppressor:

Disdain? ah, no, I pity thee.

[...]

272 Shelley’s Prometheus, as representative of mankind, is actually further from the romantic staple hero than Benjamin’s allusion to him in this passage.
I speak in grief,
Not exultation, for I hate no more
As then, ere misery made me wise. The curse
Once breathed on thee I would recall. (153-9)

Jacobs's has shown the triple sense of recall at stake in the drama's opening scene. Prometheus has to remember, repeat, and revoke the words he spoke:

For recall, here as often in Shelley, performs with all the complexity – and none of the ordered control – of the Hegelian term Aufhebung. It suggests a calling back to memory and even more a general summoning back, a restoration, making a present once again. How to reconcile this with its sense as revoking or annulling the purport of a text – and this again with its sense as “re-call,” to call again, a second time? (Uncontainable Romanticism, p. 25)

The reconciliation that Jacobs's question asks for is not possible; rather, Shelley's text keeps the three meanings of the word 'recall' in suspension. If Jacobs here in a certain sense translates the Shelleyan recall into a Hegelian Aufhebung, all the while noting its difference from Hegel, it can further be translated into Benjamin's use of the concept as designation of the erstarnte Unruhe in which ‘im Werk das Lebenswerk, im Lebenswerk die Epoche, und in der Epoche der gesamte Geschichtsverlauf aufbewahrt ist und aufgehoben.’ (GS1, p. 703) This is, in its turn, a concept systematically connected to how divine violence interrupts and suspends mythic violence in Benjamin’s thought. Shelley's The Cenci stages the failure of such an interruptive suspension of an unjust Recht through violence. The way to justice is instead indicated in Prometheus Unbound, where Prometheus' recall of his curse redeems both himself and the entire course of history during which he was enchained. The recall is also a violent refusal of language. The Phantasm of Jupiter is summoned to repeat the curse so that Prometheus’ can revoke it – a ploy that lets Shelley physiognomically represent Prometheus’ insight into his own hatred: ‘I see the curse on gestures proud and cold, | And looks of firm defiance, and calm hate, | And such despair as mocks itself with smiles, | Written as on a scroll…’ Prometheus says as he faces the Phantasm of his oppressor (I.258-61). While the Phantasm does speak the curse, words are no longer necessary as the Phantasm itself embodies the identity of Prometheus' violent words and Jupiter's violent reign. But even as he sees this, Prometheus does not, in fact, remember. 'For no sooner does he bring about a repetition of the originary linguistic act [...] than Prometheus admits its failure to provide the sense of recognition he sought in hearing the voice that he gave forth: “Were these my words, O Parent?”' (p. 23) Jacobs here cites Prometheus' first utterance after hearing the curse (I.302). The Promethean recall is a forgetting of his own lust for revenge and the language in which it was spoken. With Benjamin's use of the Prometheus legend in mind one can say that Shelley's Prometheus renounces precisely his Promethean violence: he no longer seeks to violently rebel against
Jupiter, but to forgive him. 'It doth repent me: words are quick and vain;' Prometheus says upon seeing the phantom, 'I wish no living thing to suffer pain.' (l.303, l.305) The force of Promethean forgiveness is stronger than all of Jupiter's violence and it is the recall that sets in motion the chain of events that leads to Jupiter's overthrow and the new millennium of Act IV. This is the moment in Shelley's work that comes closest to Benjamin's concept of the messianic: it is in forgiveness that Shelley's thought meets Benjamin's notion of divine violence, which is essentially gewaltlos, a non-violent violence. Where revenge, like debt, keeps the present and future chained to the past, forgiveness, a recall or writing off of moral debts is a destructive yet emancipatory moment that leaves the past behind, in the interest of a different future.
Bibliography


---. *Gesammelte Schriften: Minima Moralia*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), iv


----. *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972-1999), i–vii


---. *Versuche über Brecht*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981)


---. *Hölderlin's Sophocles* (Highgreen, Tarset: Bloodaxe Books, 2001)


---. 'Service Abroad: Hölderlin, Poet-Translator, A Lecture', *Translation and Literature*, 20 (2011), 79–97


Donohue, Joseph W. ‘Shelley’s Beatrice and the Romantic Concept of Tragic Character’, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 17 (1968), 53–73


Faflak, Joel, ‘The Difficult Education of Shelley’s “Triumph of Life”’, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 58 (2009), 53–78

Farnell, Gary, ‘Rereading Shelley’, *ELH*, 60 (1993), 625–650


Fraser, Jennifer, ‘Intertextual Turnarounds: Joyce’s Use of the Homeric “Hymn to Hermes”’, *James Joyce Quarterly*, 36 (1999), 541–557


Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von *Sämtliche Werke, Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche: Faust Texte*, ed. by Albrecht Schöne (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994), vii


---. *Entferntes Verstehen: Studien zu Philosophie und Literatur von Kant bis Celan* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998)


Hörisch, Jochen, Kopf oder Zahl: Die Poesie des Geldes (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp,
1996)


Huxley, Aldous, Point Counter Point (London: Chatto and Windus, 1974)

Ivey White, Newton, The Unextinguished Hearth: Shelley and His Contemporary Critics (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1938)


Kaufman, Robert, ‘Aura, Still’, in Walter Benjamin and Art, ed. by Andrew Benjamin


Marx, Ursula, and others, eds., *Walter Benjamins Archive: Bilde, Texte und Zeichen*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006)


Maxwell, Catherine, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness*


McLane, Lucy Neely, ‘Sound Values in “The Cloud”’, *The English Journal*, 22 (1933), 412–414


---. 'I Don't Want to Know That I Know: The Inversion of Socratic Ignorance in the
Knowledge of the Dogs', in Philosophy and Kafka, ed. by Brendan Moran and Carlo
Salzani (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books,
2013), pp. 19–31

---. Literarische Vexierbilder: Drei Versuche zu einer Figur (Eggeningen: Edition Isele, 2001)

---. Theatre, Theory, Speculation: Walter Benjamin and the Scenes of Modernity (Baltimore

Nietzsche, Friedrich, Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft, in Friedrich Nietzsche: Werke, ed. by Karl
Schlechta (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Ullstein, 1984), ii, pp. 281-548

---. The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs, ed. by
Bernard Williams, trans. by Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 2001)

O'Neill, Michael, The Human Mind's Imaginings: Conflict and Achievement in Shelley's Poetry

Osborne, Peter, 'Small-Scale Victories, Large-Scale Defeats: Walter Benjamin's Politics of
Time', in Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience, ed. by Andrew
Benjamin and Peter Osborne (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), pp. 57–107

Peacock, Thomas Love, 'The Four Ages of Poetry', in The Works of Thomas Love Peacock,
ed. by H. F. B. Brett-Smith and C. E. Jones (London: Constable & Company, Ltd.,
1934), viii, 3–25

Peterfreund, Stuart, 'The Color Violaceous, Or, Chemistry and the Romance of
Dematerialization: The Subliming of Iodine and Shelley's “Adonais”', Studies in
Romanticism, 42 (2003), 45–54

Phelan, Anthony, 'Fortgang and Zusammenhang: Walter Benjamin and the Romantic
Novel', in Walter Benjamin and Romanticism (London and New York: Continuum,
2002), pp. 69–82

Polonsky, Rachel, “Revolutionary Etudes: The Reception of Shelley in Russia”, in The
Reception of P.B. Shelley in Europe, ed. by Susanne Schmid and Michael Rossington
(London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 229–46

Pyle, Forest, The Ideology of the Imagination: Subject and Society in the Discourses of
Romanticism (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995)


Nibbrig (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), pp. 38–79


Schmitt, Carl, Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität, 8th edn (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2004)


Shelley, Lady Jane, ed., Shelley Memorials: From Authentic Sources (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1859)


Steiner, Uwe, 'Exemplarische Kritik: Anmerkungen zu Benjamins Kritik der Wahlverwandtschaften,’ in *Benjamins Wahlverwandtschaften: zur Kritik einer programmatischen Interpretation*, ed. by Helmut Hühn, Jan Urblich, and Uwe Steiner (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015), pp. 37-67


Tagliacozzo, Tamara, 'Walter Benjamin und die Musik’, *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 13 (2006), 278–92


Tiedemann, Rolf, 'Einleitung des Herausgebers,’ in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften: Das Passagen-Werk*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982), v, pp. 11-41


Vico, Giambattista, *New Science: Principles of the New Science Concerning the Common*


Weidner, Daniel, *Life after Life: A Figure of Thought in Walter Benjamin*, Afterlife. Writing and Image in Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg (Belo Horizonte, Brazil, 2012)

Weigel, Sigrid, *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit: Walter Benjamins Theoretische Schreibweise* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997)


---. ‘Walter Benjamin's Image of Interpretation’, *New German Critique*, 17 (1979), 70–98


Appendix: Translations from the German

**Introduction**

p. 13  There are books whose fate has been settled long before they even exist as books, Benjamin’s unfinished *Passagen-Werk* is just such a case. (Tiedemann, ‘Dialectics at a Standstill: Approaches to the *Passagen-Werk*’, AP, p. 929)

p. 14  ...21 volumes where ‘the works published in [Benjamin’s] lifetime as well as planned, but not completed, books each appear in a volume, which also includes all early versions, notes, and drafts. All volumes include a comprehensive apparatus with detailed explanations and a line-by-line commentary that notes variants in the composition and transmission of the text. (Blurb for Walter Benjamin, *Werke und Nachlass: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*; my translation)

pp. 17-8  ‘A man who dies at the age of thirty-five [...] is at every point of his life a man who dies at the age of thirty-five.’ Citing this line in ‘The Storyteller,’ (SW3, p. 156) Benjamin adds: ‘Nothing is more dubious than this sentence – but for the sole reason that the tense is wrong. A man – so says the truth that was meant here – who died at thirty-five will appear to *remembrance* at every point in his life as a man who dies at the age of thirty-five.’ (‘The Storyteller,’ SW3, p. 156)

p. 18  Yet, characteristically, it is not only a man’s knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life – and this is the stuff that stories are made of – which first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end – unfolding the views of himself in which he has encountered himself without being aware of it – suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges, and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in the act of dying possesses for the living around him. This authority lies at the very origin of the story. (‘The Storyteller,’ SW3, p. 151)

p. 19  ‘One might, for example, speak of an unforgettable life or moment even if all men had forgotten it,’ Benjamin says in his deliberations on translation (‘The Task of the Translator,’ SW1, p. 254).

p. 19  The idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity. [...] 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. (‘The Task of the Translator’, SW1, p. 255)

p. 19 The history of the great works of art tells us about their descent from prior models, their realization in the age of the artist, and what in principle should be their eternal afterlife in succeeding generations,’ Benjamin continues (‘The Task of the Translator’, SW1, p. 255).

p. 20 …Benjamin’s claim of the ‘eternal afterlife’ of literary works that where ‘[it] manifests itself, it is called fame.’ (‘The Task of the Translator’, SW1, p. 255)

p. 21 Translation is removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations. Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract ideas of identity and similarity. (‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,’ SW1, p. 70)

p. 25 ‘What are phenomena rescued from?’ he rhetorically asks in the methodological convolute of The Arcades Project, ‘Not only, and not in the main, from the discredit into which they have fallen, but from the catastrophe represented very often by a certain strain in their dissemination, their “enshrinement as heritage.” [N9,4]

p. 29 This tale shows what true storytelling is. The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its energy and is capable of releasing it even after a long time. […] It is like those seeds of grain that have lain for centuries in the airtight chambers of the pyramids and have retained their germinative power to this day. (‘The Storyteller,’ SW3, p. 148).

In the beginning was the name

p. 38 When I was born, it occurred to my parents that I might perhaps become a writer. If that happened, it would be a good idea if people did not immediately notice I was a Jew. This is why they gave me two names in addition to my first name (‘Agesilaus Santander,’ SW2, p. 714).

p. 39 After all, according to a legend in the Talmud, the angels – who are born anew every instant in countless numbers – are created in order to perish and to vanish into the void, once they have sung their hymn in the presence of God. It is to be hoped that the name of the journal will guarantee it contemporary relevance,
which is the only true sort. (‘Announcement of the journal Angelus Novus,’ SW1, p. 296).

p. 40 Everlasting angels like, say, the archangels or Satan, [...] were evidently less important for Benjamin than the talmudic theme of the formation and disappearance of angels before God, of whom it is said in a kabbalistic book that they “pass away as the spark on the coals.” (Scholem, ‘Walter Benjamin and His Angel’, p. 65)

p. 48 No, this much is clear: experience has fallen in value, amid a generation which from 1914 to 1918 had to experience some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world. [...] For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly: strategic experience has been contravened by positional warfare; economic experience, by the inflation; physical experience, by hunger; moral experiences, by the ruling powers. A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which noting was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body. (SW3, ‘Experience and Poverty.’ p. 731-2; cf. SW4, ‘The Storyteller,’ p. 143-4)

p. 48 Divine violence, which is the sign and seal but never the means of sacred dispatch, may be called [heissen, lit. be named] "sovereign" [waltende] violence. (‘Critique of Violence,’ SW1, p. 252)

p. 50 For him the view that ‘the word has an accidental relation to its object, that it is a sign for things (or knowledge of them) agreed by some convention,’ is thoroughly fallacious: ‘Language never gives mere signs.’ (‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,’ SW1, p. 69).

p. 50 The translation of the language of things into that of man is not only a translation of the mute into the sonic; it is also the translation of the nameless into name. It is therefore the translation of an imperfect language into a more perfect [vollkommenere, lit. more fulfilled, complete] one. (‘On Language,’ SW1, p. 70)

p. 50 Therefore sound forms the symbol of ‘the incomparable feature of human language’ (‘On Language,’ SW1, p. 67)

p. 50 For God created things; the creative word in them is the germ of the cognizing [erkennen] name, just as God, too, finally, named each thing after it was created. (‘On Language,’ SW1, p. 70)
This means that God made things knowable \([\text{erkenntbar}]\) in their names. Man, however, names them according to knowledge \([\text{Erkenntnis}]\). ('On Language,' SW1, p. 68)

Of all beings, man is the only one who names his own kind, as he is the only one whom God did not name. ('On Language,' SW1, p. 69)

...‘the proper name is the word of God in human sounds,’ Benjamin states and a few lines later adds ‘[t]he proper name is the communion of man with the \textit{creative} word of God.’ ('On Language,' SW1, p. 69)

**Poetic nature**

The entry for \textit{ruach} in Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann’s \textit{Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament} explains that ‘the basic meaning of \(\text{rūaḥ}\) is both “wind” […] and “breath,” […] but neither is understood as essence; rather it is the power encountered in the breath and the wind, whose whence and whither remains mysterious.’ (R. Albertz, and C. Westermann, ”\(\text{روح rūaḥ spirit}\),” p. 1203)

The incomparable feature of human language is that its magical community with things is immaterial and purely mental, and the symbol of this is sound. The Bible expresses this symbolic fact when it says that God breathes his breath into man: this is at once life and mind and language. ('On Language,' SW1, p. 67)

Things are denied the pure formal principle of language – namely, sound \([\text{das reine sprachliche Formprinzip – der Laut}]\). ('On Language,' SW1, p. 67)

Children’s play is everywhere permeated by mimetic modes of behavior, and its realm is by no means limited to what one person can imitate in another. The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher, but also a windmill and a train. ('Doctrine of the Similar,' SW2, p. 694)

Benjamin’s biographical anecdote is part of an attempt to develop an ‘understanding’ of language which ‘is of course related in the most intimate way to mystical or theological theories of language, without, however, being alien to empirical philology.’ ('Doctrine of the Similar,' SW2, p. 696)

The example is one of many for this kind of childish misunderstanding or defiguration of the original word; through such revocation and mistaking they make a gestural-expressive dimension become perceptible in what is meant \([\text{das Gemeinte}]\). (Brüggeman, \textit{Walter Benjamin}, p. 84; my translation)
‘This [mimetic] faculty has a history, however, in both the phylogenetic and in the ontogenetic sense.’ (‘Doctrine of the Similar,’ SW2, p. 694)

Thus, the nexus of meaning which resides in the sounds of the sentence is the basis from which something similar can become apparent out of a sound, flashing up in an instant. (‘Doctrine of the Similar,’ SW2, p. 697)

Benjamin describes the dialectical ‘image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. [...] Only dialectical images are genuine [...] and the place where one encounters them is language.’ [N2a,3]

History is the subject of a construction whose site is formed not homogenous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [Jetztzeit]. (‘On the Concept of History,’ XIV, SW4, p. 395)

Rather, everything mimetic in language is an intention which can appear at all only in connection with something alien as its basis: precisely the semiotic or communicative element of language. Thus, the literal text of the script is the sole basis on which the picture puzzle can form itself. (‘Doctrine of the Similar,’ SW2, p. 697)

I have made an effort to get hold of the images in which the experience of the big city is precipitated in a child of the middle class. I believe it possible that a fate expressly theirs is held in reserve for such images. No customary forms await them yet, like those that, over the course of centuries, and in obedience to a feeling for nature, answer to the remembrances of a childhood spent in the country. (‘Preface’ to Berlin Childhood, 1938 version, SW3, p. 344)

‘To educate the image-making medium within us,’ is an imperative that Benjamin will cite from Rudolf Borchardt [N1,8] in his methodology for history, and the image-making medium is precisely the imagination.

Violets

Just as translation is a form of its own, so, too, may the task of the translator be regarded as distinct and clearly differentiated from the task of the poet. (‘The Task of the Translator,’ SW1, p. 258)

In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. (‘The Task of the Translator,’ SW1, p. 253)
The relationship between life and purposiveness, seemingly obvious yet almost beyond the grasp of the intellect, reveals itself only if the ultimate purpose toward which all the individual purposivenesses of life tends is sought not in its own sphere but in a higher one. [...] Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the innermost relationship of languages to one another. (‘The Task of the Translator,’ SW1, p. 255; translation amended)

It cannot possibly reveal or establish this hidden relationship itself; but it can represent it by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form. (‘The Task of the Translator,’ SW1, p. 255)

Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original – not so much from its life as from its afterlife [Überleben]. For the translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life. (‘The Task of the Translator,’ SW1, p. 254)

...Benjamin writes on a ‘peculiar convergence’ between them, this consists in the fact that ‘languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express.’ (‘The Task of the Translator,’ SW1, p. 255)

The limit: music needs no translation. Lyric poetry: closest to music – and posing the greatest difficulties for translation. (‘Translation – For and Against,’ SW3, p. 250)

...the word rather than sentences are the primary element of the translator. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade. (‘The Task of the Translator,’ SW1, p. 260; translation amended)

Rainer Nägele has termed this a ‘complementary language harmony’ that ‘is not phenomenologically perceptible’ precisely because this language harmony is not audible. (‘Echolalie,’ p. 23, n. 11; my translation)

In them, Benjamin writes, ‘the harmony of the languages is so profound that sense is touched by language only the way an Aeolian harp is touched by the wind.” (‘The Task of the Translator,’ SW1, p. 262)

...[that] the gates of a language thus expanded and modified may slap shut and enclose the translator in silence. Hölderlin’s translations from Sophocles were his
last work; in them meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language. (‘The Task of the Translator,’ SW1, p. 262)

p. 67 Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like on another. In the same way a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (‘The Task of the Translator,’ SW1, p. 260)

p. 67 ‘...the great motif’ of translation is ‘an integration of many tongues into one true language [...] in which [...] the languages themselves, supplemented and reconciled in their way of meaning, draw together. (‘The Task of the Translator,’ SW1, p. 259; translation amended)

p. 67 Rather, all suprahistorical kinship between languages consists in this: in every one of them as a whole, one and the same thing is meant. Yet this one thing is achievable not by any single language but only by the totality of their intentions supplementing one another: the pure language. (‘The Task of the Translator,’ SW1, p. 257)

p. 67 Even though the way of meaning in these two words is in such conflict, it supplements itself in each of the two languages from which the words are derived; to be more specific, the way of meaning in them is supplemented in its relation to what is meant. (‘The Task of the Translator,’ SW1, p. 257)

p. 68 For in the individual, unsupplemented languages, what is meant is never found in relative independence, as in individual words or sentences; rather, it is in a constant state of flux – until it is able to emerge as the pure language from the harmony of all the various ways of meaning. (‘The Task of the Translator,’ SW1, p. 257)

p. 68 Irving Wohlfarth describes these fragments as parts of the ‘pre-established harmony of all language spheres under one another.’ (‘Das Medium der Übersetzung,’ p. 95; my translation)

p. 68 The harmony heard out of the interplay of two languages is that of ‘language as such.’ (Wohlfarth, ‘Das Medium der Übersetzung,’ p. 111; my translation)
...a border-walker. He follows the dividing line along which two languages are separated and that separates them. He collects them like two shards into a larger fragment [*Bruchstück*]. (Wohlfarth, ‘Das Medium der Übersetzung,’ p. 116; my translation)

The translator must aim at reversing the direction of the Fall, the collapse of languages into a shoreless expanse, their drop into an abysmal depth. (Wohlfarth, ‘Das Medium der Übersetzung,’ p. 105; my translation)

Motifs of a Judaic messianism and elements of an anti-bourgeois critique of language and society also cross one another at this juncture. To be sure, this is about alienated *language* and not, as in Marx, about alienated labour, but the Fall also had, if not *alienated*, then *accursed* labour as its consequence. (Wohlfarth, ‘Das Medium der Übersetzung,’ p. 104; my translation)

Profane *signs*, whose multiplicity is a superfluity, displace auratic *names*. (Wohlfarth, ‘Das Medium der Übersetzung,’ p. 101; my translation)

...our poverty of experience is not merely poverty on the personal level, but poverty of human experience in general. Hence, a new kind of barbarism. (‘Experience and Poverty,’ SW2, p. 732)

Barbarism? Yes, indeed. We say this in order to introduce a new, positive concept of barbarism. For what does poverty of experience do for the barbarian? It forces him to start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further, looking neither left nor right. (‘Experience and Poverty,’ SW2, p. 732)

Don’t start from the good old *things* but the *bad new ones*. (Understanding Brecht, p. 121)

To cultivate fields where, until now, only madness has reigned. Forge ahead with the whetted axe of reason, looking neither left nor right so as not to succumb to the horror that beckons from deep in the primeval forest. [N1,4]

...the radical assertion of the multiplicity of languages, that is, the recognition of the irreducible otherness of the foreign language. (Gagnebin, *Geschichte und Erzählung*, p. 33; my translation)

...in his words, ‘the figure that reverses and redeems Babel,’ allows Gagnebin to affirm the multiplicity of languages. (Gagnebin, *Geschichte und Erzählung*, p. 33; my translation)
...language 'is not the return to the Eden of an erewhile Adamic language, but the multiplication and the complete understanding of all languages.' (Gagnebin, *Geschichte und Erzählung*, p. 35; my translation)

...*Odem* [breath, spirit] that Benjamin viewed as 'at once life and mind and language.' ('On Language,' SW1, p. 67)

...the harmony of the languages is so profound that sense is touched by language only the way an Aeolian harp is touched by the wind. [...] For this very reason, Hölderlin's translations in particular are subject to the enormous danger inherent in all translations: the gates of a language thus expanded and modified may slap shut and enclose the translator in silence. ('The Task of the Translator,' SW1, p. 262)

For if words meaning the same thing in different languages are arranged about that signified as their center, we have to inquire how they all -- while often possessing not the slightest similarity to one another -- are similar to the signified at their center. ('Doctrine of the Similar,' SW3, p. 696)

Two words

There is an old nursery rhyme that tells of Muhme Rehlen. Because the word *Muhme* meant nothing to me, this creature became for me a spirit: the mummerehlen. The misunderstanding disarranged [*verstellte*] the world for me. But in a good way: it lit up the paths to the world's interior. The cue could come from anywhere. Thus, on one occasion, chance willed that *Kupferstichen* [copperplate engravings] were discussed in my presence. The next day, I stuck my head iut from under a chair; this was a *Kopf-verstich* [a head-stickout]. If, in this way, I distorted [*entstellte*] both myself and the word, I did only what I had to do to gain a foothold in life. Early on, I learned to disguise myself in words, which really were clouds. ('The Mummerehlen,' SW3, p. 390)

In a letter to Scholem of 28th February 1933 Benjamin reports on "a new theory of language ... formulated while I was doing research for the first piece of the *Berliner Kindheit*." (Correspondence, pp. 402-3).

A cloud that is not one

The misunderstanding disarranged [*verstellte*] the world for me. ('The Mummerehlen,' SW3, p. 390)
Benjamin condemns linguistic theories that claim that 'the word has an accidental relation to its object, that it is a sign for things (or knowledge of them) agreed by some convention.' (‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,’ SW1, p. 69)

‘The new, dialectical method of doing history presents itself as the art of experiencing the present as waking world, a world to which that dream we name the past refers in truth.’ [K1,3]

For the beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil. (‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities,’ SW1, p. 351)

Murmuring sounds

Language communicates the linguistic being of things. The clearest manifestation of this being, however, is language itself. The answer to the question “What does language communicate?” is therefore “All language communicates itself.” The language of this lamp, for example, communicates not the lamp (for the mental being of the lamp, insofar as it is communicable, is by no means the lamp itself) but the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression. (‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,’ SW1, p. 63)

And the now-vanished ability to become similar reached far beyond the narrow world of perception in which we are still able to perceive similarity. […] And am I mistaken when I maintain that they have formed in me the image of chairs, stairwells, cupboards, net curtains, and even a lamp – objects that surrounded me in my childhood. (‘The Lamp,’ SW2, p. 692)

Here the lamp is fixed in position. Yet it was portable. And unlike our lighting systems, with their cables, cords, and electrical contacts, you could carry it through the entire apartment, accompanied always by the clatter of the tube in its casing and the class globe on its metal ring – a clinking that is part of the dark music of the surf which slumbers in the laborious toil of the century. When I bring the lamp close to my ear, I do not hear the noise of field artillery, or the sounds of Offenbach’s gala music, or factory sirens. Now the nineteenth century is empty. It lies there like a large, dead, cold seashell. I pick it up and hold it up to my ear. What do I hear? I do not hear the noise of field artillery or of Offenbach’s gala music… (‘The Lamp,’ SW2, p. 692)

The déjá vu effect has often been described. But I wonder whether the term is actually well chosen, and whether the metaphor appropriate to the process would not be far better taken from the realm of acoustics. One ought to speak of events
that reach us like an echo awakened by a call, a sound that seems to have been heard somewhere in the darkness of past life. Accordingly, if we are not mistaken, the shock with which moments enter consciousness as if already lived usually strikes us in the form of a sound. It is a word, a tapping, or a rustling that is endowed with the magic power to transport us into the cool tomb of long ago, from the vault of which the present seems to return only as an echo. (Berlin Chronicle, SW2, p. 634)

p. 92 Thus, like a mollusk in its shell, I had my abode in the nineteenth century, which now lies hollow before me like an empty shell. I hold it to my ear. What do I hear? I do not hear the noise of field artillery or of Offenbach's gala music... ('The Mummerehlen,' SW3, p. 392; translation amended)

p. 93 This is a feature of translation that basically differentiates it from the poet's work, because the intention of the latter is never directed toward the language as such, at its totality, but is aimed solely and immediately at specific linguistic contextual aspects. Unlike a work of literature, translation finds itself not in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one. Not only does the intention of a translation address of differ from that of a literary work – namely a language as a whole, taking an individual work in an alien language as a point of departure – but it is also qualitatively different altogether. The intention of the poet is spontaneous, primary, manifest; that of the translator is derivative, ultimate, ideational. ('The Task of the Translator,' SW1, pp. 258-9)

pp. 93-4 There is an old nursery rhyme that tells of Muhme Rehlen. Because the word Muhme meant nothing to me, this creature became for me a spirit: the mummerehlen. The misunderstanding disarranged [verstellte] the world for me. But in a good way: it lit up the paths to the world's interior. ('The Mummerehlen,' SW3, p. 390)

p. 94 The line is distorted [entstellte] – yet it contains the whole distorted [entstellte] world of childhood. ('The Mummerehlen,' SW3, p. 392)

p. 94 Muhme Rehlen, who used to have her place in the line, was already gone when I heard it recited for the first time. But it was even harder to find a trace of the mummerehlen. ('The Mummerehlen,' SW3, p. 392)
Not the noise of field artillery or of dance music à la Offenbach, or the howling of factory sirens, or the cries that resound through the Stock Exchange at midday – not even the stamping of horses on the cobblestones, or march music announcing the changing of the guard. No, what I hear is the brief clatter of the anthracite as it falls from a coal scuttle into a cast-iron stove, the dull pop of the flame as it ignites in the gas mantle, and the clinking of the lamp shade on its brass ring when a vehicle passes by on the street. And other sounds as well, like the jingling of the basket of keys, or the ringing of the two bells at the front and back steps. And, finally, there is a little nursery rhyme. “Listen to my tale of the mummerehlen.” (‘The Mummerehlen,’ SW3, p. 392)

... sounds like those that the cancelled déjà vu passage called ‘a word, a tapping, or a rustling that is endowed with the magic power to transport us into the cool tomb of long ago.’ (Berlin Chronicle, SW2, p. 634)

Benjamin’s Mummerehlen illustrates what he describes as ‘the old compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically.’ (‘The Mummerehlen,’ SW3, p. 391)

Hamacher rewrites Benjamin’s derivation of language from ‘the old compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically’ as a mimetic imperative to correspond to language. (‘The Mummerehlen,’ SW3, p. 391)

Strange distortion

We know that in his work Proust described not a life as it actually was but a life as it was remembered by the one who had lived it. (‘On the Image of Proust,’ SW2, pp. 237-8)

They were most at home in the chilliest spots, on occasional tables or little stands in the drawing room – leather-bound tomes with repellent metal hasps and those gilt-edged pages as thick as your finger, where foolishly draped or corseted figures were displayed: Uncle Alex and Aunt Riekschen, little Trudi when she was still a baby, Papa in his first term at university... and finally, to make our shame complete, we ourselves – as a parlor Tyrolean, yodelling, waving our hat before a painted snowscape, or as a smartly turned-out sailor, standing rakishly with our weight on one leg, as is proper, leaning against a polished door jamb. (‘Little History of Photography,’ SW2, p. 515)

This was the period of those studios – with their draperies and palm trees, their tapestries and easels – which occupied so ambiguous a place between execution and representation, between torture chamber and throne room, and to which an
early portrait of Kafka bears pathetic witness. There the boy stands, perhaps six years old, dressed up in a humiliatingly tight child’s suit overloaded with trimmig, in a sort of greenhouse landscape. The background is thick with palm fronds. And as if to make these upholstered tropics even stuffier and more oppressive, the subject holds in his left hand an inordinately large broad-brimmed hat, such as Spaniards wear. He would surely be lost in this setting were it not for his immensely sad eyes, which dominate this landscape predestined for them. (‘Little History of Photography,’ SW2, p. 515)

p. 104 There we would stand, wearing a loden jacket, in front of a screen depicting an Alpine scene; and our right hand, which [is] holding a little hat made of chamois leather, cast a shadow on the clouds and the snowfields depicted on the backdrop. Of this, nothing has remained. For the forced smile with which the little alpinist gazes out at us no longer concerns us. Unlike the other gaze – the one that falls on us from the earnest face in the shadow of the potted palm. I stand there bareheaded [Ich stehe barhaupt da]; in my hand, a large straw hat that I am holding nonchalantly, with carefully rehearsed gracefulness. My elbow leans anxiously on the edge of the little mahogany table. Behind me, but at a great distance, next to the heavy curtain covering the door, stands my mother, her narrow waist in a tight-fitting dress that matches my jacket, which is embroidered with naval emblems. (‘The Lamp,’ SW2, p. 693).

p. 105 ...Benjamin wrote that the photograph of Kafka is taken in one ‘of those studios – with their draperies and palm trees, their tapestries and easels – which occupied so ambiguous a place between execution and representation, between torture chamber and throne room[,]’ (‘Little History of Photography,’ SW2, p. 515)

pp. 105-6 Wherever I looked, I saw myself surrounded by folding screens, cushions, and pedestals which craved my image much as the shades of Hade craved the blood of the sacrificial animal. In the end, I was offered up to a crudely painted prospect of the Alps, and my right hand, which had to brandish a kidskin hat, cast its shadow on the clouds and snowfields of the backdrop. But the tortured smile on the lips of the little mountaineer is not as disturbing as the look I take in now from the child’s face, which lies in the shadow of a potted palm. The latter comes from one of those studios which – with their footstools and tripods, tapestries and easels – put you in mind of both a boudoir and a torture chamber. I am standing there bareheaded, my left hand holding a giant sombrero which I dangle with studied grace. My right hand is occupied with a walking stick, whose curved handle can be seen in the foreground while its tip remains hidden in a cluster of
ostrich feathers spilling from a garden table. Over to the side, near the curtained doorway, my mother stand motionless [starr, lit. petrified] in her tight bodice. As though attending to a tailor's dummy, she scrutinizes my velvet suit, which for its part is laden with braid and other trimming and looks like something out of a fashion magazine. I, however, am distorted [entstellt] by similarity to all that surrounds me here. Thus, like a mollusk in its shell, I had my abode in the nineteenth century, which now lies hollow before me like an empty shell. (‘The Mummerehlen,’ SW3, pp. 391-2)

p. 106 The gift of perceiving similarities is, in fact, nothing but a weak remnant of the old compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically. In me, however, this compulsion acted through words. Not those that made me similar to models of good breeding, but those that made me similar to dwelling places, furniture, clothes. Never to my own image though. And that explains why I was at such a loss when someone demanded of me similarity to myself. This would happen at the photographer’s studio. (‘The Mummerehlen,’ SW3, p. 391)

p. 107 …the picture ‘represents the pure compulsion towards disfiguration [Entstellung], the compulsion to disguise oneself without self, a self that is supposed to view this prefabricated costume person, this phantasmatic fashion-self, as one’s own picture. (Brüggeman, Walter Benjamin, pp. 85-6; my translation)

p. 107 What is fundamentally at stake is not one childhood photograph, as the subheading suggests [in the Kafka essay], but two. If we read ‘one’ not as number, but as an indefinite article, the ambiguity increases because it cannot be certainly determined about which picture we are talking; if we accept the existence of multiple pictures then it is also possible that the title relates to multiple ones. [...] The appearance of similarity between the two childhood photographs may have motivated the choice to describe this particular picture. [...] Thereby the objectively similar appears, that which reigned in the photographic studios of the nineteenth century. (Kramer, Rätselfragen und Wolkige Stellen, p. 82; my translation)

pp. 107-8 There is a childhood photograph of Kafka, a supremely touching portrayal of his “poor, brief childhood.” It was probably made in one of those nineteenth-century studios whose draperies and palm trees, tapestries and easels, placed them somewhere between a torture chamber and a throne room. At the age of about six the boy is presented in a sort of greenhouse setting, wearing a tight, heavily lace-trimmed, almost embarrassing child’s suit. Palm branches loom in the
background. And as if to make these upholstered tropics still more sultry and sticky, the subject holds in his left hand an oversized, wide-brimmed hat of the type worn by Spaniards. Immensely sad eyes dominate the landscape arranged for them, and the auricle [Muschel] of a large ear seems to be listening for its sounds. ('Franz Kafka,' SW2, p. 800)

Slight adjustments

p. 115 The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of the world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language. [...] the revolution of 1789 to 1814 draped itself alternately as the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire. (Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in Collected Works, xi, pp. 103-4)


p. 117, n. 135 'What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it [...] The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!' (Nietzsche, The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs, p. 194)

p. 118 ...Benjamin's 1931 sketch of 'The Destructive Character,' who 'knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away.' ('The Destructive Character,' SW2, p. 541)

p. 118 This clearing away is so thorough that '[t]he destructive character obliterates even the traces of destruction.' ('The Destructive Character,' SW2, p. 542)

p. 118 To cultivate fields where, until now, only madness has reigned. Forge ahead with the whetted axe of reason, looking neither right nor left so as not to succumb to the horror that beckons from deep in the primeval forest. Every ground must at some point have been made arable by reason, must have been cleared of the
undergrowth of delusion and myth. This is to be accomplished here for
the nineteenth century. [N1,4]

p. 119 If Benjamin said that history had hitherto been written from the standpoint of the
victor, and needed to be written from that of the vanquished, we might add that
knowledge must indeed present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and
defeat, but should also address itself to those things which were not embraced by
this dynamic, which fell by the wayside – what might be called the waste products
and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic. (Adorno, Minima Moralia, p. 151)

p. 119 What transcends the ruling society is not only the potentiality it develops but also
all that which did not fit properly into the laws of historical movement. Theory
must needs deal with cross-grained, opaque, unassimilated material, which as such
admittedly has from the start an anachronistic quality, but is not wholly obsolete
since it has outwitted the historical dynamic. (Adorno, Minima Moralia, p. 151)

p. 126 ‘images, not in the manner of general representations, but of images that,
according to the teachings of Epicurus, constantly detach themselves from things
and determine our perception of them.’ (Berlin Chronicle, SW2, p. 613)

p. 126 For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the
continuous flow of life. Here I am talking of a space, of moments and
discontinuities. For even if months and years appear here, it is in the form they
have at the moment of commemoration. (Berlin Chronicle, SW2, p. 612)

p. 127 Never to my own image though. And that explains why I was at such a loss when
someone demanded of me similarity to myself. (‘The Mummerehlen,’ SW3, p. 391)

p. 127 The little man preceded me everywhere. Coming before, he barred the way. But
otherwise, he did nothing more to me, this gray assessor, than exact the half part of
oblivion from each thing to which I turned. (‘The Little Hunchback,’ SW3, p. 385)

p. 127 ...his look is one ‘from which things receded – until, in a year's time, the garden had
become a little garden [Gärtlein], my room a little room [Kämmerlein], and the
bench a little bench [Bänklein]. They shrank, and it was as if they grew a hump.
(‘The Little Hunchback,’ SW3, p. 385)

p. 127 ...his voice, which is like the hum of the gas burner, whispers to me over the
threshold of the century” Dear little child, I beg of you, / Pray for the little
hunchback too.” (‘The Little Hunchback,’ SW3, p. 385)
This little man is at home in distorted life [des entstellten Lebens]; he will disappear with the coming of the Messiah, who (a great rabbi once said) will not wish to change the world by force but will merely make a slight adjustment in it.’

(Franz Kafka, SW2, p. 810)

If Benjamin, by taking the body, things, organic and anorganic material, foregrounds the material of disfiguration [Entstellung] […] then at the same time – in the context of a Kabbalistic reading of Kafka’s literature – disfiguration [die Entstellung] is interpreted in the sense of messianic conceptions.’ (Weigel, Entstellte Ähnlichkeit, p. 78; my translation)

The Hasidim have a saying about the world to come. … Everything will be the same as here – only a little bit different. Thus it is with imagination. It merely draws a veil over the distance. Everything remains just as it is, but the veil flutters and everything changes imperceptibly beneath it. (‘In the Sun,’ SW2, p. 664)

Speculations

‘If I write better German than most writers of my generation, it is thanks largely to twenty years’ observance of one little rule: never use the word "I" except in letters.’

(Berlin Chronicle, SW2, p. 603)

There is something that Proust has in common with Kafka and who knows whether this can be found anywhere else. It is a matter of how they use “I.” When Proust, in his Recherche du temps perdu, and Kafka, in his diaries, use I, for both of them it is equally transparent, glassy. Its chambers have no local colouring; every reader can occupy it today and move out tomorrow. (Notes for Kafka essay [manuscript fragment] in Walter Benjamin’s Archive, p. 41)

The justification for bringing in Novalis’ writings along with those of Schlegel is the complete unanimity of both as regards the premises and conclusions of the theory of criticism. […] This close companionship makes the investigation of mutual influences largely impossible; for the question at hand, it is completely superfluous. (The Concept of Criticism in Early German Romanticism, SW1, p. 119)

Friedrich Schlegel’s theory will be presented in the following as the Romantic theory of criticism. The justification for designating this theory as the Romantic theory rests on its representative character. (The Concept of Criticism in Early German Romanticism, SW1, p. 118)
p. 135-6  It [the dissertation] has become what it was meant to be: a pointer to the true nature of romanticism, of which the secondary literature is completely ignorant – and even that only indirectly, because I was no more allowed to get to the heart of romanticism, i.e. messianism, [...] than to anything else that I find very relevant. Had I attempted to get to the heart of romanticism, I would have cut myself off from any chance of achieving the expected complicated and conventional scholarly attitude [...] (Correspondence, pp. 139-40)

p. 136-7  ’The Romantics, in fact, took no offence at the infinitude rejected by Fichte’ ‘Benjamin asserts (The Concept of Criticism in Early German Romanticism, SW1, p. 126)

p. 137  The Romantics start from mere thinking-oneself, as a phenomenon; this is proper to everything, for everything is a self. For Fichte, a self belongs only to the “I”. (The Concept of Criticism in Early German Romanticism, SW1, p. 128)

p. 137  With this, the basic principle of the Romantic theory of object-knowledge is given. Everything that is in the absolute, everything real, thinks; ... All knowledge is self-knowledge of a thinking being, which does not need to be an “I”. Moreover the Fichtean “I,” which is set in opposition to the “not-I,” to nature, signifies for Schlegel and Novalis only an inferior form among an infinite number of forms of the self. For the Romantics, from the standpoint of the absolute, there is no “not-I,” no nature in the sense of a being that does not become itself. (The Concept of Criticism in Early German Romanticism, SW1, pp. 144-5)

p. 137  The Romantic intuition of art rests on this: that in the thinking of thinking no consciousness of the “I” is understood. Reflection without the “I” is a reflection in the absolute of art. (The Concept of Criticism in Early German Romanticism, SW1, p. 134)

p. 138  The concept of progressive universal poetry is easily exposed to modernizing misunderstanding if its connection with the concept of the medium of reflection is not considered. This misunderstanding would consist in seeing endless progression as a mere function of the indeterminate infinite of the task, on the one hand, and the empty infinity of time, on the other. [...] The essential is, rather, that the task of progressive universal poetry be given in medium of forms as the ever more exact and thorough regulating and ordering of that medium in the most determinate way. [...] It is a question, therefore, not of a progress into the void, a vague advance in writing ever-better poetry, but of a continually more comprehensive unfolding and enhancement of poetic forms. The temporal infinity
in which this process takes place is likewise a medial and qualitative infinity. *(The Concept of Criticism in Early German Romanticism, SW1, p. 168)*

p. 138 [T]hus the question arises [...] In what sense did they [the romantics] understand and indeed emphasize the infinitude of reflection? Obviously, for the latter to come about, reflection, with its thinking of thinking of thinking and so forth, had to be for them more than an endless and empty process ... To begin with, the infinity of reflection, for Schlegel and Novalis, is not an infinity of continuous advance but an infinity of connectedness. This feature is decisive, and quite separate from and prior to its temporally incompletable progress, which one would have to understand as other than empty. *(The Concept of Criticism in Early German Romanticism, SW1, p. 126)*

p. 139 Hölderlin – who without any contact with the various ideas of the early Romantics we will encounter here, had the last and incomparably most profound word – writes, in a passage he wants to give expression to an intimate, most thoroughgoing connection, “They hang together infinitely (exactly).” *(The Concept of Criticism in Early German Romanticism, SW1 p. 126)*

p. 139 Schlegel and Novalis had the same thing in mind when they understood the infinitude of reflection as a full infinitude of interconnection: everything in it is to hang together in an infinitely manifold way = “systematically,” as we would say nowadays, “exactly,” as Hölderlin says more simply. This interconnection can be grasped in a mediated way from the infinitely many stages of reflection, as by degree all the remaining reflections are run through in all directions. *(The Concept of Criticism in Early German Romanticism, SW1 p. 126)*

p. 139 ...Benjamin emphasises that ‘it should not be denied that in other contexts it is quite possible to insert one of the other designations – not art, say, but history – for that absolute, while only its character as a medium of reflection is preserved.’ *(The Concept of Criticism in Early German Romanticism, SW1, p. 138).*

p. 140 The concept of mankind’s historical progress cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must underlie any criticism of the concept of progress itself. (Thesis XIII, SW4, pp. 394-5)

p. 140 History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]. (Thesis XIV, SW4, p. 395)
p. 140, n. 156  'Thus, to Robespierre, ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time [...] The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate.' (SW4, p. 395)

Distorted reflections

p. 157  Describing is sensuous pleasure because the object returns the gaze of the observer, and every good description captures the pleasure with which two gazes seek each other out and find one another. ('Review of Keller,' SW2, p. 56)

p. 157  Eyes staring at one's back | Meeting of glances | Glance up (Walter Benjamin’s Archive, p. 45)

p. 157 n. 183  'In [Benjamin's] exile, it would seem, economic need dictated that everything he got his hands on be used (or re-used).’ (Walter Benjamin’s Archive, p. 31)

p. 158  Inherent in the gaze, however, is the expectation that it will be returned by that on which it is bestowed. Where this expectation is met [...] there is an experience of aura in its fullness. (‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,’ SW4, p. 338)

p. 158  Experience of the aura thus arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationship between humans and inanimate or natural objects. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us. (‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,’ SW4, p. 338)

Medusan gaze

p. 159  The gaze of his philosophy is Medusan. (Adorno, ‘Portrait of Benjamin,’ p. 233)

p. 159  By permitting thought to get, as it were, too close to its object, the object becomes as foreign as the everyday, familiar thing under a microscope [...] It is not his [Benjamin’s] glance as such which lays claim to the unmediated possession of the absolute; rather his manner of seeing, the entire perspective is altered. The technique of enlargement brings the rigid [erstarrte, lit. petrified] in motion and the dynamic to rest. (Adorno, 'Portrait of Benjamin,’ p. 240.)

p. 160  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 the standpoint of history rather than that
of nature, least of all by such tenuous factors as sensation and soul. (‘The Task of the Translator,’ SW1, p. 255)

p. 161  It [the work of art] emerges not from nothingness but from chaos. (‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities,’ SW1, p. 340)

p. 161  Yet the highest beauty, indeed the highest order, is still only that of chaos—namely, a chaos that awaits but the touch of love to unfold into a harmonious world. (Schlegel, cited in The Concept of Criticism in Early German Romanticism, SW1, p. 168)

p. 161  There he described the romantic Reflexionsmedium ‘as a continuum of forms, as a medium, whose manifestation through chaos as the scene of pervading governance’ is found in both Schlegel and Novalis. (The Concept of Criticism in Early German Romanticism, SW1, p. 168)

p. 161  Artistic creation neither “makes” anything out of chaos nor permeates it [...] Form however, enchants chaos momentarily into world. Therefore, no work of art may seem wholly alive, in a manner free of spell-like enchantment [ungebannt], without becoming mere semblance and ceasing to be a work of art. The life undulating in it must appear petrified [erstarrt] and as if spellbound in a single moment [in einem Augenblick gebannt, lit. spellbound in the blink of an eye]. That which in it has being is mere beauty, mere harmony, which floods through the chaos (and, in truth, through this only and not the world) but, in this flooding-through, seems only to enliven it. What arrests this semblance, spellbinds [bannt] the movement, and interrupts the harmony is the expressionless [das Ausdruckslose]. (‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities,’ SW1, p. 340)

p. 163  ‘A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’... (Thesis IX, Illuminations, p. 259)²⁷⁴

p. 163  He [the angel] grasps him who has attained a vision of him, who lets himself be tied [ihm bannen läßt,] eye to eye, firmly in his own eye. (Shoelme, ‘Walter Benjamin and His Angel,’ p. 76)

p. 163, n. 192  So, too, fifty years after the composition of his famous treatise on Goethe’s Elective Affinities, which represents a high point of the literature of aesthetics, one may be allowed to divulge the simple but hidden truth that this work – “altogether incomparable” as Hofmannsthal called it – and all its insights were possible only

²⁷⁴ I here use Harry Zohn’s original translation from Illuminations, rather than the revised version published in SW4 because I would like to highlight some of Zohn’s initial translation choices that were edited out in the later version.
because they were written by Benjamin in a human situation that corresponds
cannily to that of the novel. (Scholem, ‘Walter Benjamin and His Angel,’ p. 54)

p. 164 A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is
about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating [worauf er starrt].
His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one
pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we
perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling
wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to
stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. (Thesis IX,
Illuminations, p. 259)

p. 165 The course of history, seen in terms of the concept of catastrophe, can actually
claim no more attention from thinkers than a child’s kaleidoscope, which with
every turn of the hand dissolves the established order into a new array. There is
profound truth in this image. The concepts of the ruling class have always been the
mirrors that enabled an image of “order” to prevail. – The kaleidoscope must be
smashed. (‘Central Park,’ SW4, p. 164)

p. 166 Was like a Medusa-shield | Image of petrified unrest [erstarren Unruh] (Keller,
cited in [J50.5])

p. 166 In Blanqui’s view of the world, petrified unrest [erstarnten Unruhe] becomes the
status of the cosmos itself. The course of the world appears, accordingly, as one
great allegory. [J55a,4]

p. 166 Petrified unrest [erstarrte Unruhe] is, moreover, the formula for Baudelaire’s life
history, which knows no development. [J55a,5]

p. 167 The heroic bearing of Baudelaire is akin to that of Nietzsche. ... In Nietzsche, the
accent lies on eternal recurrence, which the human being has to face with heroic
composure. For Baudelaire, it is more a matter of "the new," which must be
wrested heroically from what is always again the same [Immerwiedergleiche].
[J60,7]

p. 167 ...to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history; thus he blasts a
specific life out of the era, a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this
method, the lifework is both preserved and sublated [aufge hoben] in the work, the
era in the lifework, and the entire course of history in the era. (Thesis XVII, SW4, p.
396)
Benjamin reads Shelley

p. 169 On the flight of images in allegory. It often cheated Baudelaire out of part of the return on his allegorical imagery. One thing in particular is missing in Baudelaire’s employment of allegory. This we can recognize if we call to mind Shelley’s great allegory of the city of London: the third part of “Peter Bell the Third,” in which London is presented to the reader as hell. The incisive effect of this poem depends, for the most part, on the fact that Shelley’s grasp of allegory makes itself felt. It is this grasp that is missing in Baudelaire. This grasp, which makes palpable the distance of the modern poet from allegory, is precisely what enables allegory to incorporate into itself the most immediate realities. With what directness this can happen is best shown by Shelley’s poem, in which bailiffs, parliamentarians, stock-jobbers, and many other types figure. The allegory, in its emphatically antique character, gives them all a sure footing, such as, for example, the businessmen in Baudelaire’s “Crépuscule du soir” do not have. – Shelley rules over allegory, whereas Baudelaire is ruled by it. [J81,6]

p. 169 ...Benjamin writes: ‘The modern is a principal accent of his [Baudelaire’s] poetry. [...] But precisely modernity is always citing primal history.’ (‘Exposé of 1935,’ AP, p. 10)

p. 170 And in fact, with Baudelaire, modernity is nothing other than the “newest antiquity.” [J59a,4]

p. 170 ...Benjamin observes that ‘[t]he correspondence between antiquity and modernity is the sole constructive conception of history in Baudelaire. With its rigid [starre, lit. petrified] armature, it excludes every dialectical conception.’ [J59a,5]

p. 170 ...Benjamin links Baudelaire’s citation of antiquity to ‘the appearance of dialectic in images, the law of dialectics at a standstill.’ (‘Exposé of 1935,’ AP, p. 10)

p. 170 ...it is marked with the fatality of being one day antiquity [...] The face of modernity itself blasts us with its immemorial gaze. Such was the gaze of Medusa for the Greeks. (AP, pp. 22-3)

p. 170 ‘To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts. Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions – there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought.’ [N10a,3]
p. 171  ...Shelley is not petrified the 'semblance of the new' of which Benjamin asserts that it is reflected 'like one mirror in another, in the semblance of the ever recurrent.' ('Exposé of 1935,' AP, p. 11)

p. 172  It is rare in French poetry that the big city is evoked through nothing but the immediate presentation of its inhabitants. This occurs with unsurpassable power in Shelley’s poem on London. (Wasn't Shelley's London more populous than the Paris of Baudelaire?) In Baudelaire, one encounters merely traces of a similar perception – though a good many traces. [J69,2]

p. 173  The deepest fascination of this spectacle lay in the fact that, even as it intoxicated him, it did not blind him to the horrible social reality. He remained conscious of it, though only in the way in which intoxicated people are “still” conscious of reality. This is why in Baudelaire the big city almost never finds its expression through a direct presentation of its inhabitants. The directness and harshness with which Shelley captured London through the depiction of its people could not benefit Baudelaire’s Paris. ('Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,' SW4, p. 34)

p. 173  For the flâneur, there is a veil over this picture. The veil is formed by the masses. ('Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,' SW4, p. 34)

p. 174, n. 202  Disappointing [...] to read Shelley’s poems [...] in which oppression and exploitation are lamented! Will people also read us in this manner, still oppressed and exploited, and say: already then...? (Brecht’s Work Journal, Werke 26, p. 319; my translation)

p. 174  The attempt was made to establish how far specific formal elements weaken the impact [Wirkung] of literary works, and transmit a false image of reality [Wirklichkeit]. (Brecht, ‘Breadth and Variety of the Realist Mode of Writing,’ p. 220)

p. 174  Realist writing can only be distinguished from non-realist writing by being confronted with the very reality it deals with. There are no specific formalities that have to be observed. (Brecht, ‘Breadth and Variety of the Realist Mode of Writing,’ p. 221)

p. 175  I wrote this short essay because I have the impression that we are specifying in too formal a way the realist mode of writing which we need in the struggle against Hitler, with the result that at the enemy’s front line we run the risk of getting embroiled in squabbling about form. I cannot believe, deep down, that Lukács really wants to propose just one single model for the realist mode of writing, that
of the bourgeois realist novel of the last century. (Brecht, ‘Breadth and Variety of the Realist Mode of Writing,’ p. 227)

p. 175 Brecht read to me some polemical texts he has written as part of his controversy with Lukács, studies for an essay which is to be published in Das Wort. They are camouflaged but vehement attacks. (Understanding Brecht, p. 119; translation expanded)

p. 175 Since I’m an innovator in my field, some always shout abroad that I am a formalist. (Brecht’s Work Journal, Werke 26, p. 319; my translation)

p. 176 It may be a good idea to introduce to the reader at this point a writer from the past, who wrote differently from bourgeois novelists and yet must still be called a great realist: the great revolutionary English poet P. B. Shelley. If it were the case that his great ballad The Mask of Anarchy [...] did not it the usual descriptions of a realist mode of writing, then we would need to make sure that the description of the realist mode of writing is indeed changed, broadened, and completed. (Brecht, ‘Breadth and Variety of the Realist Mode of Writing,’ p. 221)

pp. 175-6, n. 205 I would like to express some slight doubt as to whether the extraordinary stanza by Brecht is really indebted to Shelley. Directness and harshness are not exactly salient traits in Shelley’s work. At any rate, comparison with the original is needed. (Adorno letter to Benjamin, 1 February 1939, in SW4, p. 205)

p. 177 In this way, we follow the procession of anarchy towards London, and see great symbolic images, and know with every line that reality its having its say here. Not only is murder given its true name here, but also that which called itself law and order is unmasked as anarchy and criminality. (Brecht, ‘Breadth and Variety of the Realist Mode of Writing,’ p. 224)

p. 177 We must interrogate reality about literary forms, not aesthetics, not even the aesthetics of realism. The truth can be withheld in many ways, and it can be told in many ways. (Brecht, ‘Breadth and Variety of the Realist Mode of Writing,’ p. 227)

p. 177 This grasp, which makes palpable the distance of the modern poet from allegory, is precisely what enables allegory to incorporate into itself the most immediate realities. [J81,6]

p. 177 By stating that Shelley’s allegory has an ‘emphatically antique character’ [J81,6]
Tragic circumstances

p. 183 ...the distinction [between fate and character] is theoretically untenable. For it is impossible to form and uncontradictory concept of the exterior of an active human being whose core is taken to be character. [...] Between the active man and the external world, all is interaction; their spheres of action interpenetrate. (‘Fate and Character,’ SW1, p. 202)

p. 184 Thus, to mention a typical case, fate-imposed misfortune is seen as the response of God or the gods to a religious offense. Doubts concerning this are aroused, however, by the absence of any corresponding relation of the concept of fate to the concept that necessarily accompanies that of guilt in the ethical sphere, namely that of innocence. (‘Fate and Character,’ SW1, p. 203)

p. 185 In ‘Fate and Character’ Benjamin asserts that ‘in tragedy that the head of genius lifted itself for the first time from the mist of guilt, for in tragedy demonic fate is breached.’ (‘Fate and Character,’ SW1, p. 203)

p. 185 Fate is the guilt context [Schuldzusammenhang] of the living. (‘Fate and Character,’ SW1, p. 204)

p. 185 Fate shows itself, therefore, in the view of life, as condemned, as having essentially first been condemned and then become guilty. (‘Fate and Character,’ SW1, p. 204)

p. 186 Nowhere, certainly, is the mythic the highest material content, but it is everywhere a strict indication of it. As such, Goethe made it the basis of his novel. The mythic is the real material content of this book; its content appears as a mythic shadowplay staged in the costumes of the Age of Goethe. (‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities,’ SW1, p. 309)

p. 186 But an order whose sole intrinsic concepts are misfortune and guilt, and within which there is no conceivable path of liberation (for insofar as something is fate, it is misfortune and guilt) – such an order cannot be called religious, no matter how the misunderstood concept of guilt appears to suggest the contrary. (‘Fate and Character,’ SW1, p. 203)

p. 187 Another sphere must therefore be sought in which misfortune and guilt alone carry weight, a balance on which bliss and innocence are found too light and float upward. (‘Fate and Character,’ SW1, p. 203)

p. 187 Law condemns not to punishment but to guilt. (‘Fate and Character,’ SW1, p. 204)
p. 187  Just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythic violence is confronted by the
divine. (‘Critique of Violence,’ SW1, p. 249)

p. 190  Yet we know from older forms of law that the power of retribution was able to
extend its sway to succeeding, increasingly distant generations. (‘The Meaning of
Time in the Moral Universe,’ SW1, p. 286)

p. 190  ... divine violence is ‘the hand that obliterates the traces of his misdeeds, even if it
must lay waste to the world in the process. (‘The Meaning of Time in the Moral
Universe,’ SW1, p. 287)

Beatrice & Ottilie

p. 192 n. 230  What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique
apparition of a distance, however near it may be. (‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its
Technological Reproducibility,’ SW3, pp. 104-5)

p. 192  For one does not overstate the case if one says that the belief in Ottilie’s beauty is
the fundamental condition for engagement with the novel. (‘Goethe’s Elective
Affinities,’ SW1, p. 338)

p. 193  Benjamin adds a caveat on the limitations of moral judgment in reading fiction:
‘the characters in a fiction can never be subject to ethical judgment’ (‘Goethe’s
Elective Affinities,’ SW1, p. 304)

p. 194  The concept of creation does not enter the philosophy of art as a causal term .... the
work of art has not been “created.” It has “sprung” from something; those without
understanding may wish to call it something that has “arisen” or “become”; but it is
not a “created” thing under any circumstances. For a created object is defined by
the fact that its life – which is higher than that of what has “sprung” from
something – has a share in the intention of redemption. (‘Categories of Aesthetics,’
SW1, p. 220)

p. 194  And what is crucial in the case of fictional characters is not to make ethical findings
but rather to understand morally what happens. (‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities,’ SW1,
p. 304)

p. 194  From the start, the characters are under the spell [unter dem Banne] of elective
affinities. (‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities,’ SW1, p. 304)
Yet these are surely the mythic powers of the law [Recht], and in them marriage is only the execution of a decline that it does not decree. ('Goethe's Elective Affinities,' SW1, p. 301)

In Benjamin's words, Ottilie lives her life 'in her seeming and her becoming, subjected until her death to a fateful power, she vegetates without decision. ('Goethe's Elective Affinities,' SW1, p. 337)

Ottilie's 'decision to die remains a secret until the end, and not only to her friends; it seems to form itself, completely hidden, in a manner incomprehensible to her, too. ('Goethe's Elective Affinities,' SW1, p. 336)

This – her lingering, at once guilty and guiltless, in the precincts of fate – lends her, for the fleeting glance, a tragic quality. [...] Yet this is the falsest of judgments. For in the tragic words of the hero, the crest of decision is ascended, beneath which the guilt and innocence of the myth engulf each other as an abyss. On the far side of Guilt and Innocence is grounded the here-and-now of Good and Evil, attainable by the hero alone – never by the hesitant girl. Therefore, it is empty talk to praise her "tragic purification." Nothing more untragic can be conceived than this mournful end. ('Goethe's Elective Affinities,' SW1, p. 337)

According to the theology of the mythic world, 'the grounds of a mythic primal guilt are to be sought in the bare, vital drive of sexuality.' ('Goethe's Elective Affinities,' SW1, p. 335)

The pagan if not indeed the mythic idea of this innocence owes to Christianity at least its formulation – a formulation most extreme and fraught with consequences – in the ideal of virginity. ('Goethe's Elective Affinities,' SW1, p. 335)

...the question that grants 'insight into the innermost relations [Zusammenhänge] of the novel' is one asked by Julian Schmidt, namely 'how is this silence of conscience to be understood?' ('Goethe's Elective Affinities,' SW1, p. 337)

Such power [Gewalt] has rarely become clearer than in Greek tragedy [...] as the falling silent of the hero. ('Goethe's Elective Affinities,' SW1, p. 341)

'With this silence,' he writes of Ottilie's silence, 'the semblance has installed itself consumingly in the heart of the noblest being. ('Goethe's Elective Affinities,' SW1, p. 337)

For semblance belongs to the essentially beautiful as the veil and as the essential law of beauty, shows itself thus, that beauty appears as such only in what is veiled.
Therefore, even if everywhere else semblance is deception, the beautiful semblance is the veil thrown over that which is necessarily most veiled. For the beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil. (‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities,’ SW1, p. 351)

For what is conjured is always only a semblance – in Ottilie, a semblance of living beauty. (‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities,’ SW1, p. 339)

...no work of art may seem wholly alive, in a manner free of spell-like enchantment [ungebannt], without becoming mere semblance and ceasing to be a work of art. The life undulating in it must appear petrified [erstarrt] and as if spellbound in a single moment [in einem Augenblick gebannt, lit. spellbound in the blink of an eye]. That which in it has being is mere beauty, mere harmony, which floods through the chaos (and, in truth, through this only and not the world) but, in this flooding-through, seems only to enliven it. What arrests this semblance, spellbinds [bannt] the movement, and interrupts the harmony is the expressionless [das Ausdruckslose]. (‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities,’ SW1, p. 340)

...it is ‘only’ the expressionless that ‘completes the work, by shattering it into a thing of shards, into a fragment of the true world, into the torso of a symbol. (‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities,’ SW1, p. 340)

The violated law stand opposed to such choice, powerful enough to exact sacrifice for the expiation of the shattered marriage. In the mythic archetype of sacrifice, therefore, the symbolism of death fulfills itself through this destiny. Ottilie is predestined for it. [...] Thus, not only is it as a “victim of destiny” that Ottilie falls – much less that she actually “sacrifices herself” – but rather more implacably, more precisely, it is as the sacrifice for the expiation of the guilty ones. For atonement, in the sense of the mythic world that the author conjures, has always meant the death of the innocent. (‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities,’ SW1, p. 309)

Benjamin writes that ‘in tragedy pagan man becomes aware that he is better than his god, but the realization robs him of speech, remains unspoken. (‘Fate and Character,’ SW1, p. 203)

For the tragic transport is actually empty, and the least restrained. – Thereby, in the rhythmic sequence of representations wherein the transport presents itself, there becomes necessary what in poetic meter is called caesura, the pure word, the counter-rhythmic rupture – namely, in order to meet the onrushing change of representations at its highest point, in such a manner that not the
change of representation[s] but the representation itself very soon appears.
(Hölderlin, cited in ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities,’ SW1, pp. 340-1)

p. 205  ...that caesura, in which, along with harmony, every expression simultaneously comes to a standstill, in order to give free reign to an expressionless power inside all artistic media. Such power [Gewalt] has rarely become clearer than in Greek tragedy, on the one hand, and in Hölderlin’s hymnic poetry, on the other. Perceptible in tragedy as the falling silent of the hero, and in the rhythm of the hymn as objection. (‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities,’ SW1, p. 341)

p. 205  In the expressionless, the sublime violence [Gewalt] of the true appears as that which determines the language of the real world according to the laws of the moral world. (‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities,’ SW1, p. 340)

p. 205  Indeed, one could not characterize thus rhythm any more aptly than by asserting that something beyond the poet interrupts the language of the poetry. (‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities,’ SW1, p. 341)

Payback time

p. 207  ‘A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism. All the Powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre.’ (Marx and Engels, ‘Manifesto of the Communist Party,’ in Collected Works, vi, p. 481)

p. 210  ...the political general strike ‘demonstrates how the state will lose none of its strength, how power is transferred from the privileged to the privileged, how the mass of producers will change their masters.’ (Sorel, cited in ‘Critique of Violence,’ SW1, p. 246)

p. 210  ...seeks to abolish the state – ‘its intention [is] to abolish the state’ (Sorel, cited ‘Critique of Violence,’ SW1, p. 246) – this form of strike is, according to Benjamin, ‘as a pure means, non-violent [gewaltlos].’ (‘Critique of Violence,’ SW1, p. 246)

pp. 212-3  ...on what Benjamin called ‘the demonic ambiguity’ of the German word Schuld (‘Capitalism as Religion,’ SW1, p. 289)

p. 213  A religion may be discerned in capitalism [...] The proof of the religious structure of capitalism – not merely, as Weber believes, as a formation conditioned by religion, but as an essentially religious phenomenon – would still lead even today to the folly of an endless universal polemic. (‘Capitalism as Religion,’ SW1, p. 288)
A comparison between the images of the saints of the various religions and the banknotes of different states. (‘Capitalism as Religion,’ SW1, p. 290)

Retribution is fundamentally indifferent to the passage of time, since it remains in force for centuries without dilution. (‘The Meaning of Time in the Moral Universe,’ SW1, p. 286)

This significance is revealed not in the world of law [Recht], where retribution rules, but only in the moral universe, where forgiveness comes out to meet it. (‘The Meaning of Time in the Moral Universe,’ SW1, p. 286)

Law condemns not to punishment but to guilt. Fate is the guilt context [Schuldzusammenhang] of the living. (‘Fate and Character,’ SW1, p. 204)

...as the date when all postponements are ended and all retribution is allowed free reign. (‘The Meaning of Time in the Moral Universe,’ SW1, p. 286)

‘for in tragedy demonic fate is breached.’ (‘Fate and Character,’ SW1, p. 203)

In tragedy [...] the head of genius lifted itself for the first time from the mist of guilt, for in tragedy demonic fate is breached. (‘Fate and Character,’ SW1, p. 203)

...that violence [Gewalt], when not in the hands of the law, threatens it not by the ends that it may pursue but by its mere existence outside the law. (‘Critique of Violence,’ SW1, p. 239)

...law [Recht] sees violence [Gewalt] in the hands of individuals as a danger undermining the legal system. (‘Critique of Violence,’ SW1, p. 238)

The same may be more drastically suggested, for one reflects how often the figure of the “great” criminal, however repellent his ends may have been, has aroused the secret admiration of the public. This can result not from his deed but only from the violence [Gewalt] to which it bears witness. In this case, therefore, the violence [Gewalt] that present-day law is seeking in all areas of activity to deny the individual appears really threatening, and arouses even in defeat the sympathy of the mass against law [Recht]. (‘Critique of Violence,’ SW1, p. 239)
In the Greek classical development of the idea of fate, the happiness granted to a man is understood not at all as confirmation of an innocent conduct of life but as a temptation to the most grievous offence, hubris. ('Fate and Character,' SW1, p. 203)

Mythical violence in its archetypal form is a mere manifestation of the gods. Not a means to their ends, scarcely a manifestation of their will, but primarily a manifestation of their existence. ('Critique of Violence,' SW1, p. 248)

For the function of violence in law-positing is twofold, in the sense that law-positing pursues as its end, with violence as the means, what is to be established as law, but at the moment of instatement does not dismiss violence; rather, at this very moment of law-positing, it specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence, but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power. Law-positing is power making, assumption of power, and to that extent an immediate manifestation of violence. Justice is the principle of all divine end making, power the principle of all mythical law-positing ('Critique of Violence,' SW1, p. 248; translation amended)

It [the commandment] exists not as a criterion of judgment, but as a guideline for the actions of persons or communities who have to wrestle with it in solitude and, in exceptional cases, to take on themselves the responsibility to ignore it. ('Critique of Violence,' SW1, p. 251)

The law governing their oscillation rests on the circumstance that all law-preserving violence, in its duration, indirectly weakens the law-positing violence it represents, by suppressing hostile counterviolence, [...] This lasts until either new forces or those earlier suppressed triumph over the hitherto law-positing violence and thus found a new law, destined in its turn to decay. ('Critique of Violence,' SW1, p. 251; translation amended)

Sovereign is he who decides on the [state of] exception. (Schmitt, Political Theology, p. 5)

Although he [the sovereign] stands outside the normally valid legal system, he nevertheless belongs to it, for it is he who must decide whether the constitution needs to be suspended in its entirety. (Schmitt, Political Theology, p. 7)
Thus, ‘the seventeenth century sovereign, the summit of creation, erupting into madness like a volcano and destroying himself and his entire court’ (Trauerspiel, p. 70; translation amended).

...he falls victim to the disproportion between the unlimited hierarchical dignity, with which he is divinely invested and the humble estate of his humanity. (Trauerspiel, p. 70)

The legend of Niobe may be contrasted with God's judgment on the company of Korah, as an example of such violence. It strikes privileged Levites, strikes them without warning, without threat, and does not stop short of annihilation. But in annihilating it also expiates, and a profound connection between the lack of bloodshed and the expiatory character of this violence is unmistakable. For blood is the symbol of mere life [bloße Leben]. ('Critique of Violence,' SW1, p. 250)

How little such divine violence was, to the ancients, the law-preserving violence of punishment is shown by the heroic legends in which the hero – for example, Prometheus – challenges fate with dignified courage, fights it with varying fortunes, and is not left by the legend without hope of one day bringing a new law [Recht] to men. It is really this hero and the legal violence of the myth native to him that the public tries to picture even now in admiring the miscreant. ('Critique of Violence,' SW1, p. 248)

The Promethean villain-hero refuses to submit to ‘fate, which in all cases underlies legal violence’ ('Critique of Violence,' SW1, p. 248)

...the 'petrified unrest' in which 'the lifework is both preserved and sublated [aufgehoben] in the work, the era in the lifework, and the entire course of history in the era. (Thesis XVII, SW4, p. 396)