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## *Immanent Criticism and Exemplary Critique*

### **Introduction**

Benjamin's concern with rethinking and reconfiguring the activity of literary and cultural criticism underpins his doctoral dissertation, 'Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik' ('The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism'), written between June 1917 and June 1919.<sup>1</sup> Acutely aware of the intellectual compromises required in this work and their injurious consequences,<sup>2</sup> Benjamin nevertheless did not regard his dissertation as some arcane academic undertaking. Rather, he understood it as a timely, pointed attack upon prevailing interpretations of German Romanticism and the movement's intellectual legacy, a legacy with significant ramifications in the present. In a letter to Ernst Schoen dated 8 November 1918, Benjamin states clearly:

The work treats the romantic concept of criticism (art criticism). The modern concept of criticism has been developed from the romantic concept; but 'criticism' was an esoteric concept<sup>3</sup> for the romantics . . . which was based on mystical assumptions about cognition. In terms of art, it encapsulates the best insights of contemporary and later poets, a new concept of art that, in many respects is our concept of art. (COR, pp. 135–6)<sup>4</sup>

Benjamin's study was to insist on the modernity and actuality of Romanticism, and stress the profoundly mystical character of its critical practice.

For Benjamin, it was in the early writings of Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), which appeared in the Romantics' own *Athenaeum* publication (between 1798 and 1800),<sup>5</sup> and of Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg, 1772–1801), whose earliest philosophical fragments date from 1795, that the modern notion of literary criticism begins to take shape. These texts thus form the logical and necessary starting point for any serious attempt to 'recreate criticism as a genre'. Breaking with the prevailing artistic orthodoxies of neoclassicism, the early Romantics explored and developed new modes of aesthetic appreciation and a conceptual vocabulary appropriate to the modern spirit of intellectual critique and revolutionary transformation. Their ideas appeared against the backdrop of, and were attuned to, the unprecedented socio-historical, political, cultural and intellectual changes of the age: the French Revolution, incipient industrialization, nationalist fervour, European war. Such radical ambitions amid turbulent times clearly had a particular resonance for Benjamin, given his own youthful rejection of what he saw as the rigid hierarchies and obsolete values of bourgeois culture and the imminent collapse of Imperial Germany.

This forward-looking, pioneering sensibility of the Romantics was not that of Enlightenment thought, with its emphasis on the disenchantment of nature, scientific rationality and calculation. Rather – and for Benjamin this was of the utmost significance – early Romanticism retained a deeply mystical understanding of art and criticism as emanations and/or reminders of a pure, poetic original language (*Ursprache*). In the work of Novalis, for example, nature constitutes a universe of signs and hieroglyphs,<sup>6</sup> a hidden language which finds expression in the medium of art, such that 'the most perfect poetry will be that which, like a "musical fantasy" or like the "harmonies from an aeolian harp" makes us so forget the artistic medium that "nature itself" appears to speak' (Frank, 1989, p. 281). Similarly, Schlegel suggests, in fragments from 1804–5, that in the medium of art humanity could come to perceive the traces or intimations of divine Revelation.<sup>7</sup> Such mystical ideas may seem obscure to the contemporary reader, and the very opposite of rational modern thinking, but for Benjamin the 'esoteric' aspects of Romanticism had a particular fascination and relevance. Influenced by Judaic mysticism and the Kabbalah,<sup>8</sup> and by such marginal thinkers as the eighteenth-century anti-rationalist Johann Georg Hamann,<sup>9</sup> some of Benjamin's own earliest texts – most notably his impenetrable 1916 fragment, 'On Language as Such and on Human

Language' – speculate on the intricate connections between the act of divine creation and various orders of language: the creative word of God, which brings into being and suffuses the world; the original language of Adam, which names things according to divine intention; and the proliferation and confusion of human languages after the Fall.<sup>10</sup> For Benjamin, as for the Romantics, the view that external nature is inert material existing solely for human manipulation and exploitation is symptomatic of an impoverished human condition and inner nature, and of the failure to understand the genuine imperative for modern technology, which is, as Benjamin later insists in *Einbahnstrasse*, not the human control of nature, but control of humanity's *relationship* with nature.

Far from diminishing the critical potency of Romantic thought, such mystical tendencies formed its critical core. This is because – and it is absolutely crucial for Benjamin – early Romantic thought did not, unlike its later decadent manifestations, espouse and privilege forms of reactionary and irrationalist thinking: the cult of artistic genius, the mythical idolatry of nature, quasi- and pseudo-religious dogmas. Instead, early Romanticism combined an emphasis upon forms of mystical illumination and intuitive insight which were anathema to Enlightenment thought with an insistence upon critical rigour and sobriety that distinguished it from the irrationalism of more recent movements – in particular, the circle around the poet Stefan George (1868–1933), the so-called *Georgekreis*, a group with its own plan to recreate German criticism and culture. For Benjamin, the cool precision and lucidity which lent early Romantic writing such critical power stand in stark contrast to later, and even our own popular contemporary, understanding of 'Romanticism' as effusive emotionalism, sentimental pastoralism or self-indulgent nostalgia. Here the main purpose of Benjamin's doctoral dissertation becomes apparent: in recognizing early Romanticism as the ancestor of modern criticism, his study unmasked its many bastard offspring, and established a true heir in its rightful place: a new German criticism which captures the original iconoclastic impulses, critical energy and mystical insights of early Romanticism; a revitalized criticism which possesses 'infinite profundity and beauty in comparison to *all* late romanticism' (*COR*, p. 88); an immanent criticism which, concerned with unfolding the innermost tendencies of the work of art, is appropriate both to the artwork itself and to the changing circumstances in which it now exists.

This chapter provides an exposition of the main themes of Benjamin's doctoral dissertation. It takes as its point of departure Fichte's notion of reflection as an endless coming to consciousness of the self, and proceeds to indicate how the Romantics transposed this idea on to the domain of art. Criticism is to be conceived not as the recovery of some original authorial intention, but as an interpretative intervention in the afterlife of the artwork. Meaning is transformed and reconfigured as the artwork is read and understood in new contexts and historical constellations. As will become evident in this book, this notion of 'immanent criticism' lies at the very heart of Benjamin's work: not just his literary criticism, but also his studies of modern commodities, urban architectural forms and mass media. Benjamin's understanding of a number of key concepts in early Romanticism is then sketched – 'criticizability', ironic destruction, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, allegory and monadology, and, above all, the sober, prosaic character of criticism – and their significance outlined.

After a brief consideration of Benjamin's proposed, but never published, journal *Angelus Novus*, the remainder of the chapter focuses on Benjamin's most notable attempt to utilize the critical tools developed in the dissertation and illustrate how they might facilitate a new, critical appreciation of literary texts. Provocatively, Benjamin selects a text by the greatest figure of German literary *Kultur* and of the traditional *Bildungsbürgertum*: Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Wahlverwandschaften* (*Elective Affinities*). In this exemplary critique, Benjamin castigates the misappropriation of Goethe's work by the Georgekreis, and demonstrates how an immanent reading of the dialectical tensions in the narrative lead to a completely different – indeed antithetical – interpretation of the text. Far from celebrating the power of fate and mythical forces, Goethe's story extols resolute human action to overcome them. Benjamin goes on to argue that, in the death of one of the novel's central characters, Ottilie, Goethe's tale itself provides an allegorical figure of the process of immanent criticism – the demise of superficial appearances for the sake of an emerging truth. *Elective Affinities* thus anticipates its own immanent critique. In short, Benjamin not only wrests Goethe from the clutches of the Georgekreis and its irrationalist world-view, he also appropriates him for his own vision of criticism. Hence, it is not only in the writings of the early Romantics that Benjamin perceives the intimations of his own critical practice, but also in those of Goethe. One could claim no more illustrious forebear than this.

## Reflection in Fichte and early Romanticism

Concerned with establishing the 'epistemological presuppositions' (SW1, p. 116) of the Romantic concept of criticism, Benjamin's dissertation identifies the fundamental German idealist category of 'reflection' as 'Schlegel's basic epistemological conception' (SW1, p. 120).<sup>11</sup> This is 'the most frequent "type" in the thought of the early Romantics' (SW1, p. 121) and 'the style of thinking in which . . . the romantics expressed their deepest insights' (SW1, p. 121). More precisely, Schlegel's concept of criticism involved a particular interpretation and reformulation of Fichte's insights, expounded in his 1794 *Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre oder der sogenannten Philosophie*, as the subject's coming to self-consciousness through reflection.<sup>12</sup> For Fichte, it is through the process or medium of reflection that the 'subject', the 'I' or 'ego', is constituted and reconstituted through time. The individual subject thinks about and reflects upon itself, comes to know itself, and through this new awareness of self is changed. The subject is in a perpetual process of coming to know itself and of modification. For Fichte, the subject is not a fixed or static entity, but is formed and transformed through the act of the 'I' reflecting upon the 'I', and in so doing, moving to an ever higher state of self-consciousness.

This vision of the constitution of the self through reflection has a number of consequences. First, the 'self' is not something which exists independently of the reflecting 'I'; it is not a pre-formed 'thing' patiently awaiting exploration, but, as the product of the activity of reflection, is itself an activity. The self is a product of reflection, rather than reflection being a consequence of self; in short, 'reflection is logically the first and primary' (SW1, p. 134). Secondly, in reflection the distinction between the subject and object of knowledge is dissolved. The 'I' is both subject and object of knowledge. It is the subject/object of knowledge. Finally, this reflection is 'an infinite process' (SW1, p. 125), an endless becoming of the self, an endless becoming of knowledge of the self, the processual and incremental elevation of the self-consciousness of the subject. Benjamin cites Fichte thus: "'Thus we shall continue, *ad infinitum*, to require a new consciousness for every consciousness, a new consciousness whose object is the earlier consciousness, and thus we shall never reach the point of being able to assume an actual consciousness'" (SW1, p. 125). He then comments: 'Fichte makes this argument no less than three times here in order to come to the

conclusion on each occasion that, on the basis of this limitlessness of reflection, “consciousness remains inconceivable to us” (SW1, p. 125). Self-consciousness is both immediate knowledge, mediated by reflection, and ever elusive. For Benjamin, this paradox of reflection forms the epistemological basis of Romantic thought.<sup>13</sup>

Fichte sought to circumvent the problem of ‘an endless and empty process’ (SW1, p. 126) of reflection by positing the immediacy of knowledge through the terminus of an ‘absolute I’. By contrast, the Romantics had no wish to eliminate the infinity of reflection, but made it the basis of their understanding.<sup>14</sup> Reflection for them was not to be understood as the activity of an individual subject, or located within an individual consciousness, a cognitive ‘I’ engaged in an endless and futile pursuit of a definitive self-consciousness. Rather, reflection is the critical medium in which art recognizes and (re)constitutes itself. The individual work of art unfolds itself and comes to reveal its innermost tendencies *in*, rather than *through*, reflection; for the medium of reflection is art itself.<sup>15</sup> Just as the ‘I’ was both subject and object of reflection for Fichte, so art is both subject and object of reflection for the Romantics. In reflection, the meaning of the work of art yields its meaning and significance with ever-greater clarity. Whereas for Fichte, reflection brings with it ever increasing self-consciousness in the subject, for the Romantics, the work of art realizes itself ever more fully through reflection in the medium of art. The work of art, like Fichte’s subject, is in an endless state of becoming. Schlegel writes: ‘the romantic type of poetry is still in a state of becoming; indeed, that is its true essence – forever to become, never to be complete’ (cited in McCole, 1993, p. 103). Infinite incompleteness is not a problem to be overcome by arbitrary foreclosure, but is rather the essence of art itself.

Through reflection, the individual work of art neither seeks nor attains completion, but rather fulfils itself in dissolving itself. As the work of art is unfolded through reflection, it comes to point beyond itself, to suggest and disclose its relationship with all other artworks. Reflection in the medium of art ultimately reveals the contiguity and interconnectedness of all works of art, a continuum composed of all individual examples, genres and forms: namely, the Idea of Art. In reflection, the individual work of art reveals itself as nothing other than a fragment of the Idea of Art. The individual artwork is like a knot, which, once it has been carefully untied, appears as part of a continuum. Reflection unravels the borders of a work of art, dissolving it into the ‘Absolute’. The ‘Absolute’ is

nothing other than the processual dissolution of all works of art into the Idea of Art.

### **Immanent criticism**

In Benjamin's view, the early Romantics' understanding of reflection has a number of important consequences for their concept of art criticism. First, it means the centrality of immanent critique: the work of criticism must be in closest accord with the work of art which is its object. Secondly, it envisages the work of art as a monadological fragment of the Idea of Art, as a minute part of a greater whole into which it is ultimately to be dissolved. Thirdly, it requires the objective 'positivity' of criticism, as opposed to the subjectivity of judgement. The task of criticism is the elevation of the genuine work of art, not the determination of, and distinction between, 'good' and 'bad' art. For the Romantics, 'bad art' is simply imperious or insensitive to criticism, and therefore does not take its place in the Idea of Art. 'Bad art' is not art: it is to be subjected to ironic destruction rather than critical dissolution. Lastly, it means an insistence upon the sobriety of prose as the constitutive principle of the Idea of Art.

For Benjamin, the early Romantics' concept of criticism is nothing other than the moment of 'reflection in the medium of art' (SW1, p. 134) in which knowledge of the artwork is extended.<sup>16</sup> Immanent criticism seeks to awaken the tendencies and potentialities which lie dormant within the work of art. It involves an 'intensification of consciousness' (SW1, p. 152), an ever-greater realization of the actual meaning of a work of art. It is not the task of the critic to second-guess the purposes and motives of the author, poet or artist; the latter do not possess privileged insight into the significance of their works, and it would be folly simply to accept their own self-appraisals and estimations. Rather, the critic seeks to bring to light the secret of the artwork, its inherent but hidden possibilities, which elude the author because they manifest themselves only later under different circumstances. Meanings emerge (and disappear again) posthumously, during the 'stage of continued life' (*ILL*, p. 70) of the artwork, its 'afterlife'. Criticism is the immanent illumination and actualization of the artwork in the present moment of reading.

Benjamin's later work on the poet Charles Baudelaire (see chapter 7) provides a useful example of this rejection of authorial

intention. For Benjamin, Baudelaire is the allegorical lyricist *par excellence* of Parisian life in the 'era of high capitalism'. His poetry and prose express a series of contradictions: the intense pleasure and melancholy longing of the modern metropolitan environment, the alluring yet ruinous character of the commodity form, the frisson and fears generated by the urban crowd, and the attempt to give enduring form to the most ephemeral phenomena. Baudelaire's writings give *expression* to these things because he was himself immersed in the phantasmagoria of Paris, the grand illusions and self-deceptions of the Second Empire. This is not necessarily to say that Baudelaire consciously and directly engages with such themes as his principal subject matter (Benjamin admits that the crowd, for instance, rarely figures in Baudelaire's poetry); and it certainly does not mean that Baudelaire offered any particularly insightful socio-historical analysis of his own into such things. In short, Benjamin is not interested in establishing exactly what Baudelaire thought he was doing when he penned his texts, but is concerned instead with the significance of these writings, their 'truth content', when viewed from the perspective of his own time: as documents which give voice to the dreamworld of nineteenth-century capitalist modernity and the transformation of metropolitan culture and experience. Immanent critique thus opens up the possibility of – indeed becomes the imperative for – reading literary texts and other cultural phenomena against, rather than with, the authorial 'grain'. Such texts present themselves for ever-new interrogations, ever-new interpolations. Moreover, this kind of criticism begins to situate both text and reader historically. Such is Benjamin's interpretation of Baudelaire then; but we will have another now, dependent upon our interests, concerns and understandings. Our reading of Baudelaire will be different from Benjamin's if for no other reason than the fact that we must take Benjamin's interpretation into account. Hence, criticism is the continuing, productive and processual revelation and actualization not only of the truths inherent in a work of art, but also of the historical reception of the artwork which filters and colours it for the current reader as well.

For Benjamin, immanent criticism is a 'philological' (SW1, p. 151) or 'historical experiment' (SW1, p. 178) on the work of art, which 'exposes its inner nature' (COR, p. 84) so that 'it is brought to consciousness and to knowledge of itself' (SW1, p. 151). This notion of the 'self-knowledge' and 'self-judgement' (SW1, p. 151) of the artwork is fundamental. A central feature of the Romantic concept of criticism, for Benjamin, was its rejection of the subject-object rela-

tion.<sup>17</sup> The critic does not scrutinize the artwork in order to pass arbitrary judgement upon it. Rather he or she is an observer who shares in the self-knowledge of the work of art released through the critical experiment, like a scientist monitoring and recording a chemical reaction.<sup>18</sup> Benjamin writes:

Experiment consists in the evocation of self-consciousness and self-knowledge in the things observed. To observe a thing means only to arouse it to self-recognition. Whether an experiment succeeds depends on the extent to which the experimenter is capable, through the heightening of his own consciousness, through magical observation . . . of getting nearer to the object and of finally drawing it into himself. (SW1, p. 148)<sup>19</sup>

In the genuine experiment, 'there is in fact no knowledge of an object by a subject' (SW1, p. 146), because in the process of reflection subject and object are, as we have seen, one and the same. Indeed, preservation of the subject-object distinction comes to designate precisely the failure of the critic to participate in the self-knowledge of the work of art, the inability to assimilate this self-knowledge to his or her own.

For immanent criticism to call forth the self-knowledge of the work of art successfully, it must be continuously in accord with it, corresponding and responding to its changing nuances.<sup>20</sup> Criticism must be as fluid as the ever-changing work of art itself.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, as the work of art is unfolded only through the medium of art, criticism itself must partake of the sphere of art, must itself be a work of art. Benjamin writes: 'the Romantics called for poetic criticism, suspending the difference between criticism and poetry and declaring: "Poetry can be criticised only through poetry. An aesthetic judgement that is not itself a work of art . . . has no rights of citizenship in the realm of art".' (SW1, p. 154). Criticism is an infinite process of supplementation so as to "'present the representation anew . . . form what is already formed . . . complement,<sup>22</sup> rejuvenate, newly fashion the work"' (SW1, p. 154). Novalis expresses this succinctly: "'The true reader must be the extended author"' (SW1, p. 153). Criticism as a perpetual reconfiguration, as a mode of ceaseless becoming, constitutes the basis of the afterlife of the work of art.

Such 'extended authorship' leads not so much to the 'completion' of the work of art but, paradoxically, to its dissolution. In its continual self-realization through critical reflection, the artwork comes

to transgress its own limitations as a solitary, isolated entity. The work comes to point beyond itself, to recognize its relationships with, and proximity to, other works, genres and forms. As the artwork increases in self-knowledge, in criticism its boundaries are gently eroded and rendered permeable. It merges into the continuum of the Idea of Art, of which it is but one particular instance. There are two important concepts here: the Idea of Art as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and the individual work of art as monad.

The Romantics see art as a unity or totality of all works of art, as the Absolute, or the Idea of Art. Schlegel hence describes the purpose of Romantic poetics and criticism as:

‘to reunite all the separate genres of poetry . . . It embraces everything so long as it is poetic, from the greatest systems of art that contain in themselves still other systems, to the sigh, the kiss that the musing child breathes out in artless song. . . . The Romantic genus of poetry is the only one that is more than genus and is, so to speak, poetry itself.’ (SW1, p. 166)

Schlegel develops this view further in the mystical thesis that all artworks ‘conjoin’ to compose a single, all-encompassing organic whole, that ‘art itself is one work’ (SW1, p. 167).<sup>23</sup> The Idea of Art here becomes the total work of art, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which is both constituted by and constitutes individual works of art.<sup>24</sup> The individual work of art is simply a particular moment, a concrete manifestation, an indicative fragment of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.<sup>25</sup> Each individual work of art is thus nothing other than a monad in which the Idea of Art is encapsulated and from which it may be distilled. Criticism simultaneously recognizes the Idea of Art as it is refracted in the monadological fragments of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and ‘completes’ them by assimilation in this totality. In ‘completing’/dissolving the individual work of art, criticism adds to, and further ‘completes’, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It is thus in the medium of criticism that both the endless process of ‘completion’ of the individual work of art and the ceaseless becoming of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* occur.

For the Romantics, criticism does not judge the work of art – indeed, it is the very deferral of judgement, its infinite postponement. Whereas judgement seeks to establish and impose external measures and evaluations according to supposedly immutable and eternal aesthetic criteria, the Romantics recognized ‘the impossibility of a positive scale of values’, and insisted upon ‘the principle of

the uncriticizability of inferior work' (SW1, p. 159). Romantic criticism distinguishes itself by its 'complete positivity' (SW1, p. 152). There was to be no criticism of the bad, for the bad is simply that which is uncriticizable, that which cannot be unfolded because it simply does not partake of the Idea of Art. Thus, for the Romantics there are no bad works of art. Either an artefact is a work of art, in which case it lends itself to criticism, or it is not, in which case it does not. For the Romantics, 'the value of a work depends solely on whether it makes its immanent critique possible or not' (SW1, p. 159). The artwork's openness to criticism, its very criticizability, thus 'demonstrates on its own the positive value judgement made concerning it' (SW1, p. 160). By contrast, the bad, the phoney or pseudo work of art does not lend itself to critical unfolding, but can only be destroyed through irony, through the withering howl of scornful laughter.<sup>26</sup>

Whether the elevation of works of art through immanent unfolding, or the 'annihilation of the nugatory' (SW1, p. 178) through corrosive satire, it is ultimately the prose of the critic that is at the core of Romantic thought.<sup>27</sup> It is only in critical prose that the poetic work of art is reflected, brought to self-consciousness and dissolved into the Idea of Art, that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is infinitely reconstituted. Hence, though it may appear paradoxical, the Romantics came to see prose rather than 'poetic' writing itself as the fundamental basis or 'creative ground' (SW1, p. 174) of the 'idea of the poetry' (SW1, p. 174), the Idea of Art. For Benjamin, 'The conception of the idea of poetry as that of prose determines the whole Romantic philosophy of art' (SW1, p. 175) and points unequivocally to the critical sobriety and austerity of the Romantics' thinking.<sup>28</sup> He is critical of the misappropriation of the term 'Romanticism' and its degeneration at the hands of subsequent writers. Romantic thought is not to be equated with the ecstatic raptures of the poetic genius,<sup>29</sup> or with the mythological idolatry of nature, or with 'the depraved and directionless practice of contemporary art criticism' (GS I, p. 708).<sup>30</sup> Romanticism is firmly anchored in the crystal clarity of prose: 'In ordinary usage, the prosaic . . . is, to be sure, a familiar metaphorical designation of the sober. As a thoughtful and collected posture, reflection is the antithesis of ecstasy' (SW1, p. 175).

Benjamin's study is an intervention in the reception of Romanticism, an attempt to disturb its own hitherto treacherous afterlife by unfolding what he sees as its true, radical character. Immanent critique, not irrational bombast, is the early Romantics' 'decisive methodological innovation' (McCole, 1993, p. 89) and their

fundamental critical legacy. His study thus constitutes an exemplary immanent critique of early Romanticism, and of immanent criticism itself. For Benjamin, 'to get to the heart of romanticism' (COR, p. 139) meant to redeem its endangered radical and mystical impulses for the present.

## Benjamin and Romanticism

Benjamin's engagement with the work of the early Romantics was his 'decisive intellectual encounter during the war years' (McCole, 1993, p. 81) and had a profound and enduring impact upon his subsequent writings. In purging Romanticism of its later decadent manifestations and modern misconceptions, Benjamin appropriates and critically reworks some of its key insights and motifs:

*Meaning as a contemporary construct* The Romantics' view that the 'object' of inquiry is not 'discovered' but constituted in the moment of perception or reflection has a particular resonance in Benjamin's later thought. Novalis observes:

'Only now is antiquity starting to arise. . . . It is the same with classical literature as with antiquity. It is not actually given to us – it is not already there; rather, it must first be produced by us. A classical literature arises for us only through diligent and spirited study of the ancients – a classical literature such as the ancients themselves did not possess.' (SW1, p. 182)

'Antiquity' and 'classical literature' are historical constructs, generated by the interpretations and interpolations of the present. The image of the past is formed only in the moment of present recognition,<sup>31</sup> through the interaction of what was and what is. In short, we are never concerned with the past *per se*, but with how the past appears in the present, with its contemporary significance. Indefinite and indeterminate, the past is ever open to (re)construction, (re)appropriation and contestation. Such an understanding becomes the key to the historiographical and epistemological principles pioneered in Convolute N of Benjamin's *Passagenarbeit* and elaborated in the 'Theses on the Concept of History'.

*'Silent' criticism* Immanent critique seeks to unfold the innermost tendencies and truths of the artwork from within, to allow it to

know and speak for itself. The critic abstains from overarching commentary, so as to 'become the medium for the work's unfolding' (McCole, 1993, p. 93). This erasure of the critic's voice becomes an essential principle for Benjamin, and explains his later emphasis upon the use of quotation and his concern to achieve the greatest 'facticity' and 'concreteness'. Most significantly, it accounts in part for Benjamin's subsequent fascination with imagistic forms of representation – in the mosaic, the constellation and montage, meaning is generated in the juxtaposing of individual fragments, rather than in theoretical overlay. The 'silent' critic 'shows' in the skilful act of construction.

*The contingency and transience of truth* Truth is not pursued and grasped by an intentional subject, but unfolded from within under the patient critical gaze. This notion of the observer as a recipient of that which is disclosed becomes an important motif for Benjamin, particularly in his later fascination with the Proustian *mémoire involontaire*. Truth appears only, like a memory, unbidden. Moreover, the moment of such recognition is always transient. Given its endless and perpetual transformation, the past, or the artwork, is perceptible and legible only fleetingly.<sup>32</sup> Truth is encountered *en passant*; critical insight is possible only in the instant in which this motion is momentarily frozen.<sup>33</sup> Criticism thus both facilitates and interrupts the becoming of the work of art, catching it in flight. Truth is only ever an ephemeral apparition – a motif that is of profound significance for Benjamin's later writings (see chapter 7).

This moment of passing recognition is that in which the work of art comes to reveal itself as a fragment of the Idea of Art: namely, at the instant of its final dissolution and absorption. Truth appears at the *last* moment, as the object or work of art is about to disintegrate. The demise of the object is the precondition for the liberation of its inherent truth content. The 'completion' of the work of art paradoxically occurs at the moment of its extinction. Immanent criticism here becomes the ruination, or 'mortification', of the artwork – a fundamental insight which came to underpin both the *Trauerspiel* study and the *Passagenarbeit*.

It is here that an important paradox appears, both in the Romantic notion of immanent criticism and in Benjamin's appropriation and reworking of it. The object of criticism is a construction, the product of a purposive act of critical engagement between, or dialectical interplay of, present interests and past phenomena, critic and artwork. This construction, however, is intended precisely to

permit the supposedly *intentionless* (self-)disclosure of the truth of the object. In other words, the truth of the work of art is both constructed and discovered by the critic. Immanent criticism, then, privileges neither the object (the artwork) nor the subject (the critic); or rather, it privileges both. For the Romantics and for Benjamin, this 'problem' is pre-empted or circumvented by dissolving the subject-object distinction altogether – the critic simply facilitates and partakes of the *self-knowledge* of the artwork. Nevertheless, it is a tension which is unresolved – indeed, one which, articulated in terms of the figure of the 'engineer' (the principle of construction) and the notion of 'afterlife' (the principle of decomposition and disclosure) lies at the heart of Benjamin's work, and indeed of this book.

*The monadological fragment* The fragment, the individual work, is a monad,<sup>34</sup> one which points beyond itself, comes to stand for, or stand in for, the totality of which it is a part. What is present is incomplete, apparently trivial; what is complete is absent, unrepresentable except through the trivial. This paradox frames the ambiguous status of the monadological fragment: it is derided and prized in the same moment. Above all, the fragment serves as a sign for or, more precisely, becomes an allegorical representation of, the infinite. Schlegel writes: "in short, allegory is the tendency towards the absolute in the finite itself. As allegory the individual element exceeds itself in the direction of the infinite" (cited in Frank, 1989, p. 291). Allegory is thus an "intimation of the infinite . . . the outlook upon the same" (cited in Frank, 1989, p. 294). As an allegory, the finite, empirical moment or work is the only possible access to, and representation of, the infinite and hence unrepresentable idea.<sup>35</sup> Hence, for the Romantics, allegory is not to be understood as a crude or mechanical literary device, inferior to the majestic and mystical symbol, but is rather to be prized above all.<sup>36</sup> For Benjamin, it is thus not only their understanding of immanent criticism that distinguishes the early Romantics, but also their appreciation of the allegorical, monadological fragment as the most humble, yet most important intimation of the elusive divine.<sup>37</sup>

### **From *Angelus Novus* to *Elective Affinities***

Benjamin's subsequent attempts to elaborate and exemplify the critical principles developed in his doctoral dissertation experi-

enced mixed fortunes. His hopes of becoming the editor of his own literary journal, the perfect forum in which to publish and encourage such work, were thwarted. His essay on Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*) met a kinder fate, receiving fulsome critical praise, and eventually appearing in what Benjamin described as 'the most exclusive of our journals' (*COR*, p. 237). This boost to his academic reputation was to be short-lived, however. In 1925 he was obliged to withdraw his *Habilitationsschrift* after his examiners at Frankfurt University greeted it with incomprehension and threatened him with the humiliation of rejection.

In a letter to Scholem from Heidelberg of 4 August 1921 Benjamin wrote: 'I have my own journal. Starting the first of January next year I will be publishing it through Weissbach. . . . [I]t will have a very narrow, closed circle of contributors. I want to discuss everything with you in person, and will now tell you only its name, *Angelus Novus*' (*COR*, p. 186).<sup>38</sup> He further noted his hope 'to arrive in Berlin at the beginning of October with the materials on the basis of which I can put most of the journal together for an entire year (four issues, one hundred and twenty pages each)' (*COR*, p. 186). On 4 October 1921 Benjamin informed Scholem that 'The first issue is slowly taking shape' (*COR*, p. 189), and a month later (8 November 1921) was able to specify its principal contents.<sup>39</sup>

Benjamin envisaged *Angelus Novus* as a critical, timely engagement with the prevailing condition of German letters and thought. It was to have both positive and negative moments. On the one hand, it was to be a forum for fostering writings which exemplified and accorded with the literary principles he had developed through his engagement with Romanticism. Benjamin emphasizes the importance of immanent critique for the journal: 'the function of great criticism is not, as is often thought, to instruct by means of historical descriptions or to educate through comparisons, but to cognize by immersing itself in the object. Criticism must account for the truth of works' (*SW1*, p. 293). On the other hand, the journal would provide an opportunity for the destruction of the bad through irony: 'spiritualist occultism, political obscurantism, and Catholic expressionism will be encountered in these pages only as the targets of unsparing criticism' (*SW1*, p. 295). Through presentation of exemplary criticism and denunciation of the spurious, the journal would 'restore criticism to its former strength' and 'proclaim the spirit of its age' (*SW1*, p. 293).<sup>40</sup> Moreover, it would register the true character of the contemporary, by 'distilling what is truly relevant from the sterile pageant of fashionable events, the exploitation

of which can be left to the newspapers' (SW1, p. 293). This concern with identifying the truth amid the transient provided Benjamin with his title:

according to a legend in the Talmud, the angels – who are born anew every instant in countless numbers – are created only 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 its contemporary relevance, which is the only true sort. (SW1, p. 296)

Sadly, *Angelus Novus* was never to make even this brief appearance. On 1 October 1922 Benjamin informed Scholem that Weissbach had decided to 'suspend temporarily the setting up of the *Angelus*' because he had been asked to pay a large advance for it. Benjamin was under no illusion as to the meaning of this. The journal was not to be, and he sadly confesses that 'the editor's throne of honor in my heart is empty' (COR, p. 200).<sup>41</sup>

Benjamin's critical exploration of Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften* was written against the background of this debacle, between the summer of 1921 and February 1922. His study drew together themes from a number of earlier fragments, most notably a five-page sketch dated 1917 of a critical review of Friedrich Gundolf's 1916 book *Goethe*.<sup>42</sup> Gundolf was a member of the Georgekreis,<sup>43</sup> a group whose vision of the cultic elevation and adoration of the poet as inspired genius was an exemplary instance of the artistic self-indulgence and narcissism from which Benjamin sought to redeem the true critical spirit of early Romanticism. Although Gundolf is the target specified in the essay, Benjamin uses him primarily as an exemplary figure for the ideas of Georgekreis and, in particular, Roberts (1982, pp. 104–5) claims, as a substitute for Ludwig Klages (1872–1956), the group's leading thinker, whom Benjamin regarded too highly to attack directly. The 'symbolism' expounded by the Georgekreis envisaged the world of nature as a daemonic realm of mythic symbols and fateful correspondences whose meaning, eluding the rational mind, may be apprehended only in intuition, mystical insight or poetic rapture. The Georgekreis scorned what they saw as the anaemic language and enfeebling consequences of modern civilization and reason,<sup>44</sup> and sought instead the spiritual renewal of German culture through the development of a pure poetic language which would celebrate the vitality and vigour of natural life, the potency of drives and compulsions, and the power of mythic forces. As McCole points out, 'George and his circle stood

for a revival of myth and a frankly pagan poetic ideal' (1993, p. 79), embracing aestheticism and the fervent worship of the heroic poetic genius by a martial brotherhood grandly conceived in the image of the Templars.<sup>45</sup> Such views were anathema to Benjamin, given his understanding of both the sobriety of Romantic criticism and the purity and orderliness of Adamic language. In his view, Gundolf's attempt to appropriate and locate Goethe as poetic genius within the mythic world-view of the Georgekreis resulted in 'a formulation that is distinguished from the mentality of a fortune-cookie motto only by the bloodthirsty mysticism of its wording' (SW1, p. 326). Benjamin's study of *Elective Affinities* had a threefold purpose: to expose the erroneous thinking of the Georgekreis; to demonstrate the power and lucidity of his own critical practice; and to reclaim Goethe's work from, on the one hand, the excesses of the irrationalists, and, on the other, the tedious mediocrity of conservative, bourgeois scholarship. It was thus to be a model of the withering annihilation of the shoddy (Gundolf's criticism) through irony, of the unfolding of the innermost tendencies of the genuine artwork (Goethe's novel) through immanent critique, and of the radical (re)appropriation and actualization of cultural texts.

Benjamin's *Wahlverwandtschaften* study was planned as an 'exemplary piece of criticism' (COR, p. 194) for inclusion in the *Angelus Novus*. Hence the journal's failure left it homeless. Through the intercession of his friend Florens Christian Rang, however, the essay came to the attention of the writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who, while ironically an associate of the Georgekreis and a contributor to its journal, the *Blätter für die Kunst* (published 1892–1919), expressed his 'boundless admiration'<sup>46</sup> and enthusiasm for it in a letter to Rang of 21 November 1923.<sup>47</sup> Much to Benjamin's delight, the study appeared in two instalments (April 1924 and January 1925) in Hofmannsthal's own journal, the *Neue deutsche Beiträge*. In a letter of 5 March 1924, Benjamin expressed his satisfaction with these arrangements and how they might add to the essay's impact:

From an author's point of view, this mode of publication in the most exclusive of our journals by far is absolutely invaluable. . . . [T]his is just the right outlet for my attack on the ideology of George and his disciples. If they should find it difficult to ignore this invective,<sup>48</sup> it may well be due to the uniqueness of this outlet. (COR, p. 237)

The 'New Angel' had vanished, but Benjamin's intellectual ambitions had not disappeared with it. Rather, they had found the firmer footing provided by Hofmannsthal's prestigious journal: an

exemplary publication for Benjamin's own 'exemplary piece of criticism' (COR, p. 194).

### Exemplary criticism

Written in 1808–9, Goethe's novel derives its strange nomenclature from a term then used in chemistry to refer to the readiness (or reluctance) of chemical elements to interact with one another and form compounds. As one of the central characters helpfully explains, "'Those natures which, when they meet, quickly lay hold on and mutually affect one another we call affined'" (Goethe, 1971, p. 52). Whereas some substances appear to avoid contact, others "'most decidedly seek and embrace one another, modify one another, and together form a new substance'" (Goethe, 1971, pp. 52–3). Goethe's story dramatizes this chemical theory of attraction with respect to human relationships. It is concerned with the complications and misfortunes which occur when Charlotte and Eduard, a seemingly happily married couple residing in comfortable idleness on their extensive rural estate, decide to invite, first, Eduard's friend (the Captain) and then Charlotte's niece (Otilie) to stay with them. As human 'elective affinities' take hold, companionships give way to ill-omened romantic entanglements between Charlotte and the Captain, and between Eduard and Otilie. Recognizing the danger of these attachments, Charlotte and the Captain renounce their love, and he promptly leaves the estate. Charlotte, now pregnant by Eduard, insists on a similar act of sacrifice from her reluctant husband; but this results instead in *his* departure from the house, on the understanding that Otilie be allowed to remain in Charlotte's care. Charlotte gives birth to a baby boy, and Eduard finally returns, having distinguished himself in military service. With their love untempered, and a divorce inevitable, all seems set for Eduard and Otilie's union until a boating accident occurs in which the infant drowns while in Otilie's care. This misfortune is taken by Otilie as a sign of the sinfulness of her romance with Eduard. Renouncing her love for him, she withdraws into silent isolation and eventually dies. Her place of burial becomes a shrine for the local villagers, who are astonished by the miraculous healing powers afforded by touching Otilie's body and funeral dress. Eduard dies soon afterwards and is buried, at Charlotte's behest, next to Otilie. The story concludes with the

dead lovers lying side by side awaiting the day of resurrection: 'what a happy moment it will be when one day they awaken again together' (Goethe, 1971, p. 300).

Written in three parts, each subdivided into three sections, Benjamin's critical essay is constructed as an exemplary model of dialectical thought.<sup>49</sup> 'Part One, The Mythic as Thesis,' outlines his critical concepts, and rejects the obvious interpretation of the novel as a critical – and, for its time, scandalous – disquisition on morality and the institution of marriage. Benjamin insists, however, that 'Marriage can in no sense be the center of the novel' (SW1, p. 346). Nor should it be understood within some simplistic biographical or pseudo-psychological perspective as the mere thematization and dramatization of Goethe's own marital problems and romantic complications of the time.

'Part Two, Redemption as Antithesis' considers the reception of Goethe's novel, and focuses upon what Benjamin regards as Gundolf's erroneous interpretation of the story. Far from being, as the *Georgekreis* would have it, a celebration of the violence of mythic forces and the triumph of tragic fate, Benjamin contends that the story extols and exhorts decisive, courageous human action in the face of danger as the *overcoming* of mythic powers. Appropriately, his argument hinges on what initially seems a rather insignificant part of the story: namely a tale (or novella) within the novel recounted by one of the minor characters, 'The Wayward Young Neighbours'.<sup>50</sup> The reckless daring and successful love of the characters in this tale serve as a counterpoint to the inaction and fatalistic resignation which distinguish the figures in the main narrative.

'Part Three, Hope as Synthesis' explores the significance of Ottilie's death. Her passing, Benjamin suggests, represents the death of beauty, the demise of beautiful appearance, which is the precondition for both the recognition of truth and reconciliation in God. The *Wahlverwandtschaften* is only superficially a story about the conflict between love and marital conventions, which, to borrow Benjamin's language, constitutes only a veil through which, in time, one can discern the genuine significance of the story. It is a disquisition upon, and representation of, the relationships between beauty and truth, and death and the hope of salvation. Hence, Benjamin argues, *Elective Affinities* possesses a distinctive reflexive quality: it is an artwork which reflects upon the domain of aesthetics, an Idea of which it is but one monadological fragment.

Benjamin's study exemplified the concept of criticism which he had elaborated in his doctoral dissertation. Criticism is to move

beyond conventional interpretations of the work of art, which deal merely with its subject matter (its 'material content') in order to unfold its hidden meaning (its 'truth content'). According to Benjamin, this distinction between 'material' and 'truth content' corresponds to different levels of analysis: commentary and criticism:

Critique seeks the truth content of a work of art; commentary its material content. The relation between the two is determined by that basic law of literature according to which the more significant the work, the more inconspicuously and intimately its truth content is bound up with material content. (SW1, p. 297)

The material content perceived by the commentator should not obscure the truth content which discloses itself only to the persistent, perceptive critic. The genuine critic of Goethe's novel, for instance, recognizes that 'The subject of *Elective Affinities* is not marriage' (SW1, p. 302). Such an insight into the individual work of art may not be available to its contemporary critics,<sup>51</sup> however, and may certainly elude the actual author him or herself.<sup>52</sup> The thoughts of the author and of contemporary critics are significant only as stations of reflection in the unfolding of the artwork's truth content. It is only in the course of time, and through this ongoing process of critical reflection, that the truth content is coaxed, as it were, from its hiding place into the light of recognition. Truth content is visible only under certain circumstances, and at particular historical moments.<sup>53</sup> Benjamin writes:

The concrete realities rise up before the eyes of the beholder all the more distinctly the more they die out in the world. With this, however, to judge by appearances, the material content and the truth content, united at the beginning of a work's history, set themselves apart from each other in the course of its duration, because the truth content always remains to the same extent hidden as the material content comes to the fore. (SW1, p. 297)

This is an important passage in two respects. First, the distinction between material and truth content is connected with the notion of a palimpsest, the mystical conception of a text or series of texts hidden beneath or within another. Benjamin writes of the critic: 'One may compare him to a paleographer in front of a parchment whose faded text is covered by the lineaments of a more

powerful script which refers to that text. As the paleographer would have to begin by reading the latter script, the critic would have to begin with commentary' (SW1, pp. 297–8). Layers of earlier criticism and interpretation adhere to the work of art itself, partially revealing it, partially obscuring it. The contemporary critic must work backwards from the most recent of these textual layers. Criticism is a contemporary moment of reflection not only of the work of art, but also of the series of critical reflections to which it has already been subject, its entire afterlife.

Secondly, although material content and truth content may initially appear irrevocably coupled, this bond disintegrates through time and through criticism. The historical process of decomposition fractures surface layers to disclose the truth beneath them. Criticism is the 'mortification', as Benjamin later terms it, of the work of art so as to permit the redemption of its truth content. Critical destruction of the artwork is simultaneously and paradoxically the moment of its completion, of its assimilation into the Idea of Art.<sup>54</sup> Appropriately, Benjamin formulates this with respect to the metaphor of a chemical experiment:

If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as a burning funeral pyre, then the commentator stands before it like a chemist, the critic like an alchemist. Whereas, for the former, wood and ash remain the sole objects of his analysis, for the latter only the flame itself preserves an enigma: that of what is alive. Thus, the critic inquires into the truth, whose living flame continues to burn over the heavy logs of what is past and the light ashes of what has been experienced. (SW1, p. 298)

The afterlife of the work of art culminates in a fleeting, incendiary moment of illumination and transcendence.

In revealing the truth content of *Elective Affinities*, Benjamin sought both to save Goethe from the muddled thinking of Gundolf and to demonstrate the power and precision of sober Romantic criticism. His interrogation of Gundolf's text was to be scrupulous and merciless,<sup>55</sup> with the verdict clear from the outset: 'The legally binding condemnation and execution of Friedrich Gundolf will take place in this essay' (COR, p. 196).<sup>56</sup> Gundolf was guilty on two main counts: misreading the book and misappropriating its author.<sup>57</sup> Gundolf envisaged Goethe as a heroic, creative genius, and interpreted the *Elective Affinities* as a celebration of the omnipotence of

mythic forces. Writer and text were thereby transformed by Gundolf into exemplary instances of the 'vitalist' George creed.

First, for Gundolf, in accordance with the precepts of the *Georgekreis*, the work of art is to be regarded as the outpourings of a poetic genius. The poet is one who possesses extraordinary artistic gifts, rare talents and insights which set him or her apart from ordinary mortals. The artist as hero is fated to wrestle with these immense, yet uncontrollable, 'creative' powers throughout his or her tortured life, and to bring forth from deep within him or herself the inspired and sublime artworks of divine genius. For Benjamin, however, the poet is no 'creator' (*Schöpfer*); nor are his or her works 'creations'.<sup>58</sup> As Benjamin makes clear in his earlier 'On Language' fragment, Creation and the creative Word are exclusive to God. Creator and Creation, poet and artwork, correspond to different orders: divine and human. Creation, the divine inception of the cosmos and life *ex nihilo*, is complete, perfect and lasting truth. The work of art, fashioned by the poet from the Babel of fallen human language, is imperfect, ephemeral and subject to (mis)interpretation and (mis)appropriation. The poet does not create, but rather gives 'form' or 'structure' to language, and thereby produces meaning.<sup>59</sup> This work of giving form also distinguishes the poet from the 'hero' of myth. Whereas the latter is resolute in his clear-sighted confrontation with fate, the poet has no such clarity in his struggle to render the work of art.<sup>60</sup> Benjamin's later description of Charles Baudelaire is apt: 'Baudelaire battled the crowd – with the impotent rage of someone fighting the rain or the wind' (*CB*, p. 154).

Envisioning the poet as a heroic creative genius has important ramifications for understanding the task of the contemporary critic; for then the meaning of the artwork is to be found solely in the artistic intention. It can therefore only be explained with respect to the life of the poet, the supreme source of inspiration and only ground of critical understanding. Indeed, Gundolf seeks to collapse the life and works of the poet into each other, such that 'the life itself is seen as a work' (*SW1*, p. 325).<sup>61</sup> For Benjamin, to conflate the meaning of a text with its author's intention is to abandon criticism altogether. Gundolf's preoccupation with the biographical details of Goethe's life exemplifies his failure to recognize and pursue both the specific task of 'authentic biographism, as the archive containing the documents (by themselves undecodable) of this existence' (*SW1*, p. 324), and the essential labour of the genuine critic – unfolding truth content. In confusing life and work, Gundolf provides clear insight into neither.<sup>62</sup> Benjamin concludes:

So triumphs the dogma which, having enchanted the work into life, now through no less a seductive error allows it, as life, to petrify back into work; and which purposes to grasp the much-vaunted 'form' of the poet as a hybrid of hero and creator, in whom nothing further can be distinguished yet about whom, with a show of profundity, anything can be affirmed. (SW1, p. 324)

### **Fate and character: novel and novella**

The key to the 'vitalist' mythical cosmology was an idolatrous<sup>63</sup> vision of human abasement before the blind, omnipotent forces of compulsion, repetition and fate. Nature constituted a realm of portents and omens warning of calamitous future events. As Benjamin recognizes, the *Elective Affinities* is pervaded by uncanny coincidences and inauspicious signs which foretell the disaster which will befall the unwitting characters. The novel is suffused by what he terms a 'death symbolism' (*Todessymbolik*) rooted in the 'daemonic' character of nature.<sup>64</sup> Since all aspects of nature, all events and all circumstances can become possible omens of good or ill fortune, one becomes hopelessly lost in the infinite and impenetrable proliferation of ambiguous signs. The 'daemonic' refers to this illegible, inscrutable world of superstition and fear. The daemonic is the chaotic, anomalous condition of nature, a realm which eludes clear specification and defies human reason and understanding. As Benjamin points out, a troubling intimation of the daemonic accompanied Goethe from his childhood days onwards. He cites Goethe's autobiographical reflections thus:

'He [the young Goethe] believed that he perceived something in nature (whether living or lifeless, animate or inanimate) that manifested itself only in contradictions and therefore could not be expressed in any concept, much less in any word. It was not divine, for it seemed irrational; not human, for it had no intelligence; not diabolical, for it was beneficent; and not angelic because it often betrayed malice. . . . This essence, which appeared to infiltrate all the others . . . I called "daemonic".' (SW1, p. 316)

In the *Walhverwandtschaften*, the principal element of this sinister ambiguity, of death symbolism, is water. Cleansing, purifying, life-giving, water is also mysterious, unfathomable and murderously

engulfing to the unwary. Beneath the inscrutable 'mirroring surface' of the still waters of the lake on which Otilie sets out, lie the silent depths in which the baby will drown. Benjamin comments:

Water as the chaotic element of life does not threaten here in desolate waves that sink a man; rather, it threatens in the enigmatic calm that lets him go to his ruin. To the extent that fate governs, the lovers go to their ruin. Where they spurn the blessing of firm ground, they succumb to the unfathomable. (SW1, p. 303)

This passage points both to Benjamin's rejection of Gundolf's interpretation and to his own argument regarding the *Wahlverwandtschaften*.

The image of the absence of solid ground, of the abyss, comes to define mythological thought for Benjamin. The mythic not only lacks ground, it also avoids grounding. He provides the following striking image of Gundolf's text (and the mythic) as 'a jungle where words swing themselves, like chattering monkeys, from branch to branch, from bombast to bombast, in order not to have to touch the ground which betrays the fact that they cannot stand: that is, the ground of logos, where they ought to stand and give an account of themselves' (SW1, pp. 326–7).

Moreover, the novel is crucially not a paean to the awesome and uncontrollable powers of nature and myth. Still waters, not turbulent waves, are to prove most deadly. Goethe's novel does not celebrate omnipotent natural powers, but rather explores the struggle between human self-determination and mythical compulsion, between resolute action in the face of danger and meek resignation before the forces of fate.<sup>65</sup> Such powers hold sway only when they remain unheeded, uncontested by human beings lulled into apathetic acquiescence or frozen in fearful indecision. The failure to act leads to catastrophe. Far from celebrating blind natural forces, Goethe exhorts humans to struggle against the daemonic.

Benjamin's argument here draws on the contrasting fortunes enjoyed by the characters of *Elective Affinities* and those in the tale of 'The Wayward Young Neighbours' (*wunderlichen Nachbarskindern*), a story told by the companion of a visiting English nobleman to entertain Charlotte and Otilie one evening.<sup>66</sup> The tale concerns a boy and a girl who, despite the hopes of their parents, display nothing but animosity towards each other. When they grow up, the young man leaves for military service, and the young

woman makes plans to marry another suitor. The young man returns and hosts a party for the betrothed on board a riverboat. The young woman, realizing that she has been in love with this young man all along, despairingly throws herself into the river. She is rescued by the prompt action of her beloved, who plunges in after her. The young man seeks help at the house of a newly-wed couple, where he revives the young woman, and the two change into the only spare dry clothes to hand, the wedding apparel of their astonished hosts. When they are finally discovered there by their parents and the other party guests, they fall on their knees and beg the forgiveness and blessing of the assembled congregation.

The *Wahlverwandschaften*, which itself constitutes a hybrid of novel and novella forms,<sup>67</sup> contains within it a second novella, which, for Benjamin, is the key to understanding it. This novella serves as a counterpoint to, or negation of, the novel within which it stands. This involves a number of elements: myth and freedom, inclination and love, appearance and reconciliation, silence and language, fate and character.

The marvellous events recounted in the novella point to the human contestation of, and triumph over, the very mythic powers that hold sway in the novel itself.<sup>68</sup> In the novella, decisive human action and love are rewarded with joyful reconciliation; whereas in the novel, the indecision and apathy of the characters lead only to chaos and death. The 'elective affinities' of the four figures in the novel, apparently freely chosen yet ultimately predetermined, constitute a surrender to the inexplicable forces of attraction. These characters do not so much fall in and out of love as give way to passion, the mere appearance of love.<sup>69</sup> Their fateful and fatal romantic entanglements are too strong to resist, yet at the same time too feeble to allow them to rupture and transgress social proprieties.<sup>70</sup> These characters seek to reconcile and accommodate their troublesome inclinations within prevailing social norms.<sup>71</sup>

Genuine love (*wahre Liebe*), love which spurns convention, appears only in the novella. It is this real love of the 'Wayward Young Neighbours',<sup>72</sup> discovered with astonished joy at the end of the story, which prompts and guides their bold actions and makes their final plea for forgiveness irresistible. Whereas illusory love, timid and compromised, can win only the illusion of reconciliation, appeasement, genuine love risks all and wins over everyone.<sup>73</sup> The 'Wayward Young Neighbours' readily confront death, and in so doing place all their trust in the mercy of God. Their unhesitating

dive into the turbulent waters of the river constitutes a literal leap of faith. Benjamin writes:

True reconciliation with God is achieved by no one who does not thereby destroy everything – or as much as he possesses – in order only then, before God’s reconciled countenance, to find it resurrected. It follows that a death-defying leap marks that moment when – each one wholly alone for himself before God – they make every effort for the sake of reconciliation. (SW1, pp. 342–3)

Genuine love brings genuine reconciliation: reconciliation, that is, not with social norms but with God.<sup>74</sup> Thus, for Benjamin, the novella ultimately constitutes an allegory of the triumph and redeeming power of courageous human action and selfless love.

The figures in the novel itself are not only bereft of such love, they are also marked by the absence of language. Language is surrendered by the characters in the novel as events reduce them to silence. The figure of Otilie is of special significance here. Like the still waters of the lake, Otilie herself becomes inexpressive, blankly returning the gaze cast upon her, mirror-like. Her death remains obscure, not only to the other characters, but even to herself.<sup>75</sup> Her speechless demise is not the consequence of any definite moral resolve,<sup>76</sup> but stems rather from an urge to retreat into the tranquillity of nothingness, ‘the longing for rest’ (SW1, p. 336). It is a sorrowful, not a tragic, end. Hence Gundolf’s view that “‘the pathos of this work”’ is “‘no less tragically sublime and shattering than that from which Sophocles’ *Oedipus* arises”’ constitutes for Benjamin ‘the falsest of judgements’ (SW1, p. 337). The tragic hero challenges fate and the gods, an act of hubris which reconfigures the moral order of the community. Otilie merely retreats from the world. Her silence is not to be confused with the speechlessness of the tragic hero who is struck dumb at the instant when he ‘becomes aware that he is better than his god’ (OWS, p. 127). Otilie is not a tragic figure, because, in her fatalistic resignation, she lacks ‘character’. Benjamin’s verdict on Otilie’s passive, ‘plant-like’ (SW1, p. 336) withering is clear: ‘Nothing more untragic can be conceived than this mournful end’ (SW1, p. 337).

In Benjamin’s view, Gundolf’s errors were both manifold and crass: Goethe’s tale is in no sense a eulogy to vital mythic powers; the figures in the novel are in no sense heroic characters; Otilie’s sorrowful death must not be confused with the tragic demise of the mythic hero; consequently, the *Wahlverwandtschaften* must on no

account be understood as a tragedy. Nor should notions of myth and heroism be transposed on to the life of the poet, thereby casting him in the spurious role of creator. Such a misunderstanding amounts to an injustice to the true skill and value of the artist as a form-giver. Gundolf's work constituted nothing less than 'a veritable falsification of knowledge' (GS I, p. 828).

### Reconciliation, hope and the death of beauty

Unfolding the antithetical moments of the novel and the novella reveals the truth content of Goethe's tale: *Elective Affinities* is a representation of the sorrowful consequences of human fallibility and submission to mythic forces, and a forceful reminder that one must confront fate 'with cunning and with high spirits' (ILL, p. 102). Furthermore, through the structural device of the novella, a 'fairy tale for dialecticians', the *Wahlverwandtschaften* explores the interplay between love and the hope of reconciliation. It is in the third and final, synthetic phase of Benjamin's study, however, that the full significance of the novel is elaborated: it is a disquisition on the death of beauty and the revelation of truth, a treatise on the relationship between art and philosophy.

Benjamin's argument becomes complex and convoluted here. Although beauty is intimately related to appearance, it should not be simply equated with it. Beauty is not mere appearance: superficial, deceptive, a mask or 'veil' (*Hülle*) which disguises something else. Rather, beauty is precisely this 'something else': truth, not concealed behind, but discerned within, its 'veil'.<sup>77</sup> The work of art, the beautiful, is truth (truth content) within its veil (material content). The task of the genuine critic is not to lift or tear away this veil, for truth always eludes those grasping hands which all too eagerly seek to strip it bare. Rather, the critic must appreciate both the veil and the beauty of truth within it.<sup>78</sup> Criticism aspires to the clearest possible perception of the true (the philosophical truth) within the beautiful (the work of art), the enduring within the ephemeral, the immortal within the mortal.

Benjamin's theological motifs return once more in this context. Just as the work of the poet is not to be confused with the act of Creation, so the labour of the critic does not bring Revelation. Both Creation and Revelation are divine acts, limited to God. Even to the most scrupulous critic, truth always remains a secret.<sup>79</sup> Beauty is

part of the divine order of Creation, in which truth, awaiting divine Revelation, can be apprehended by the critic only more or less obscurely, as an intimation.<sup>80</sup> The truth discerned by the critic can only ever be partial, provisional, contestable. Revelation, the eventual and actual stripping away of the veil can occur only in that final reconciliation with God, prefigured in genuine love<sup>81</sup> and found in death. All that is mortal will one day have its truth unveiled.<sup>82</sup> Truth is ultimately manifest on the Day of Judgement, the moment of redemption.

The figure of Otilie is crucial here. She is the very incarnation of beauty and, as such, is an allegory of the beautiful work of art. And just as Otilie dies, so the artwork is also apt to 'die out in the world' (SW1, p. 297). In the artwork's perishing, its truth content and material content become more readily distinguishable. Truth is unfolded as the artwork withers. Here Otilie's silent, 'intentionless' demise serves as an allegory of the mortification of the beautiful work of art for the sake of its truth content. Moreover, just as the individual work of art comes to point beyond itself to the Idea of Art, of which it is an exemplary instance and within which it is finally dissolved, so Otilie's death anticipates that moment of reconciliation with the absolute, with God, denied her in life. Her death indicates the hope of redemption. Benjamin writes: 'the certainty of blessing that, in the novella, the lovers take home with them corresponds to the hope of redemption that we nourish for all the dead' (SW1, p. 355). The hope of redemption is for those who can themselves hope no longer, the dead.<sup>83</sup> Hence Benjamin's essay concludes with this 'mystery' (SW1, p. 355), this paradox of hope: 'Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope' (SW1, p. 356).

Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, his tale of doomed, illicit love, is a philosophical enquiry into the very character of art and the relationship between beauty, truth and redemption. Indeed, it is precisely this philosophical-theological truth content that distinguishes it as a genuine work of art. For Benjamin, the novel is an allegorical presentation of the mortification of beauty – that is, of the work of art itself – for the sake of truth and for the hope of reconciliation in God. In this way, as Roberts (1982, p. 132) astutely points out, the novel contains within it, as its truth content to be unfolded, as its secret, the very key to the disclosure of this secret, which is at the same time the secret of the work of art *per se*. It is the discernment of this 'secret as a secret' (Roberts, 1982, p. 132), that constitutes the ultimate achievement of Benjamin's critical unfolding, his exemplary criticism of Goethe's exemplary work of art.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to show how Benjamin's concern to 'recreate criticism as a genre' led him to engage with the writings of the early Romantics, the first *modern* critics. Drawing on their works, Benjamin develops a complex, intricate notion of immanent criticism. Conceived as an intervention in, and reconfiguration of, the afterlife of the artwork, immanent critique involves the processual disclosure of the truth content of the work of art as it is subject to gradual disintegration and ruination. Truth is made manifest only at the moment of extinction. Such a vision of critical practice has a number of important consequences for Benjamin:

- 1 The decentring of the author. Criticism does not involve the empathetic recovery of some original artistic intention.
- 2 The artwork as monad. The work of art is but a fragment composing and expressing in abbreviated form a greater totality (be it the Idea of Art or the sociocultural matrix in which it appears) which otherwise eludes analysis.
- 3 The imperative of construction. Unfolding the artwork as a monadological fragment requires forms of textual construction and representation which abstain from theoretical intrusion.
- 4 The historical situatedness of artwork and critic. Works may be legible only in certain ways, if at all, at certain historical junctures and moments of construction.
- 5 The actuality of meaning. The significance of an artwork is contingent upon, and enters into, a particular constellation with current circumstances and interests.
- 6 The contestability of interpretation. The cultural and political significance of a work of art is not specified in advance, but is subject to (mis)appropriation according to political and other struggles in the present.
- 7 The absence of judgement. Opinions as to the supposed aesthetic merit of an artwork (as in the critical reception of the *Trauerspiel*) say more about the prejudices of the critic than the artwork itself, and have no place in genuine criticism.
- 8 The disenchantment of art. The task of the sober critic is to dispel the mystifications and illusions which surround the artwork and artist, not to perpetuate or proliferate them.

These consequences had a profound and enduring impact not only on Benjamin's subsequent literary criticism, but also on his wider

cultural criticism and historiographical writings. Immanent criticism provides a method for the critical analysis not only of Goethe, the *Trauerspiel*, Surrealism, Proust and Baudelaire, but also of a plethora of cultural phenomena – the commodities and fashions of the recent past, the crumbling metropolitan architecture of the ‘prehistory of modernity’. In Benjamin’s later writings, these are all subject to mortification, presenting their afterlife for critical scrutiny. Moreover, in his appropriation of immanent critique, Benjamin begins to discern and articulate the character and role of the modern intellectual as critic and writer, and thereby to locate and orient himself within the sociocultural milieu of which he was a part – the writer as sober producer, as compiler and composer of fragments, as partisan in the political conflicts of the present, as redeemer of the forgotten dead.