

On the Delineation of Choice and Decision in Benjamin's "Goethe's Elective Affinities"

This paper will attempt to approach, through a reading of Benjamin's essay "Goethe's elective affinities," the question of the relation between the possibility of the *instant of decision* or the *madness* of decision¹ and its relation to what might be called a law of calculation or tragic fate.² The concept of the irreducibility of decision, as Derrida has argued, opens immediately on a major problematic or aporia: if the absolute singularity of decision, a singularity which cuts itself off from all rational calculation, is what determines any decision worthy of the name, then how does one *know* that there has been a decision, that a certain calculation has been broken or interrupted? How does one know, in other words, that a decision is *truly* a decision and not a mere repetition of an already decided fate, of a decision that has already decided? Heidegger, in the third volume of the *Nietzsche* lectures, poses this problem of wresting or delimiting the genuine decision from out of its relation to its counterfeit thus:

- 1 Derrida, in the *Gift of Death*, uses the phrase (taken from Kierkegaard) "the instant of decision is madness" to highlight the problematic of decision itself: for there to be (ethical) responsibility a decision must take place, but without a program that would determine that decision in advance. See chapter 3 "Whom to Give To," pages 53-81 in particular.
- 2 This term is introduced in Benjamin notably in the short piece "Fate and Character" which discusses Goethe (among others) and is written in the same period as the longer essay "Goethe's Elective Affinities" (1919-1922).

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The abused and almost exhausted word "decision" is especially preferred today, now that everything has long since been decided or at least thought to be decided. Yet even the well-nigh incredible misuse of the word decision cannot prevent us from granting to the word that meaning by which it is related to the most intimate scission and the most extreme distinction. (N 5)

What is at stake here is the possibility of opening what might be called a space of judgment *on decision*. In Heidegger, particularly in his lecture courses on Hölderlin, this space of decision is the question of historicity or of becoming-historical itself.³ One can already see, however, even beyond Heidegger's determination of this space as the space of the "happening" (Ereignis) of History, that the problematic of decision — historical or otherwise — enters into a sort of hermeneutic circle. The question becomes how does *one judge* decision, how does one separate or cordon off a space in which a pure decision can be thought, or is possible? How does one decide about decision? How does one think this possibility, or calculate this incalculable, for as Derrida insists, the incalculable instant of decision demands calculation, it requires it? This paper will attempt to pose this question by unfolding and commenting on Benjamin's effort to delimit the concept of decision in his 1921 essay "Goethe's Elective Affinities," its connection to one of the novel's characters, Otilie, and her secret decision to die by starving herself. It will unpack Benjamin's critique of this *counterfeit decision* and his attempt to delimit the proper sphere and possibility of a "true" decision. It will then go on to argue that Benjamin's critique of Otilie's decision *as secret*, which he argues is therefore a non-decision, is also that which opens up within the novel a law of calculation of the incalculable, a secret beyond the secret, and thus a space of decision irreducible to any particular speech acts in the novel itself. The paper will then go on to suggest that Benjamin's critique rejoins, at a certain point, the notion of the incalculability of decision at the very point where it attempts to delimit its calculability insofar as it repeats the very decision that it unfolds in Goethe. The paper then ends with a gesture toward a consideration of this very "crisis of decision" which opens up in Benjamin's *own* text.

Benjamin's analysis of the novel opens with a distinction that conditions his entire approach to the novel: the distinction between material and truth

- 3 See in particular Part 3, section 22 (on the "historical becoming homely" of Hölderlin's river poetry) in Heidegger's 1942 lecture course on *Hölderlin's Hymn the Ister*.

contents of the work. This distinction allows him to differentiate the path of commentary on the novel and the path of Critique that will be his own. Benjamin writes "Critique seeks the truth content of a work of art; commentary its material content"⁴(GE 298/63). The translation of "Sachegehalt" for "material content" is perhaps a little misleading since it suggests something straightforwardly material. However, the "Sache" of "Sachegehalt" must be read according to its meaning in, for example, the English idiomatic phrase "What's the matter"? or "Is that the case?". The "Sachegehalt" is the matter of the novel, what the novel is "about" in a more general sense. To risk a somewhat premature formulation, the material content of the novel might be said to be that which maintains itself on the level of the visibility of phenomena in the novel, as well as what conditions that visibility; it is, in other words, the legible "content" of the novel. In this sense, the novel could be said to be "about" marriage or "about" the landed gentry, even though the novel nowhere expressly "says" this. The truth content of the novel, on the other hand, is that which is *set apart*, remains hidden *in* the material content. It seems that something like the distinction Kant makes in the third Critique between Metaphysical and Critical principles is operative here. Kant's distinction likewise consists in separating a principle that rests on a phenomenal predetermination from one that is "purely" transcendental, purely critical. He writes:

A transcendental principle is one by means of which is represented, a priori, the universal condition under which alone things can be in general objects of cognition. On the other hand, a principle is called metaphysical if it represents the a priori condition under which alone objects, whose concept must be empirically given, can be further determined a priori. Thus the principle of the cognition of bodies as substances and as changeable substances is transcendental if thereby it is asserted that their changes must have a cause; it is metaphysical if it asserts that their changes must have an *external* cause. (CJ 17)

Put simply, transcendental principles deal with the rules or conditions for the possibility of the existence of "something," bodies for example, *at all*, whereas

4 Benjamin's text will henceforth be cited in text as (GE), with English pagination on the left, followed by the German. For the English translation see Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings*. Vol 1. Eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996. For the German see Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminationen*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977.

metaphysical principles *presuppose* their existence and pose the question of their further condition "precritically." In other words, they assume a phenomenal moment which itself must be subjected to critique.⁵ What this means is that transcendental principles take metaphysical ones as their object. In order to make a further claim about the action of bodies, for example, the conditions of the possibility of their existence must first be established.

While I am not suggesting that Benjamin appropriates this Kantian distinction *tout coup*, one should note that at least structurally and even methodologically the distinction between material and truth contents seems to operate along similar lines, and that the hopes for what Benjamin calls a "Critique" of the novel are pinned on the possibility of taking the novel's material content as its object. This, in effect, would be to pose the question of the material content's ground or condition of possibility. One could say that what Benjamin attempts to uncover is a secret, an *unsaid* of the novel (which would be its truth content) that commentators, obsessed as they are with an elucidation of what the novel says, with its purely phenomenal aspects, cannot confront. The goal would be to move toward these other conditions or rules by taking the material content of the novel as its object. Benjamin insists in this regard that the role of the critic (as compared to the commentator) is like one who stands in front of a text like a paleographer attempting to discern over the markings of a faded parchment the "lineaments of the more powerful script which refers to that text" (GE 298/63). The truth content of the work, then, is the unsaid of the work, it is a secret which even the work itself does not have access to and which conditions its material content.

The distinction between material and truth contents colors nearly everything Benjamin has to say about the novel and certainly conditions what he takes to be its misreading by previous critics. This distinction provides a criterion for deciding a number of things, including the separation, as we will see, between mere choice and genuine decision. As Benjamin writes:

And with one stroke an invaluable criterion of judgment springs out for him; only now can he raise the basic critical question of whether the semblance/luster (Schein) of the truth content is due to the material content, or the life of

5 This distinction organizes de Man's reading of the Kantian sublime in "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant" (*Aesthetic Ideology*). There "phenomenality" is linked to metaphysical principles, whereas the notion of 'materiality' that de Man finds at work in Kant's *Third Critique* bears a closer relation to "Critical" principles Kant here attempts to define

the material content to the truth content. (Und mit einem Schlag entspringt ihm daraus ein unschatzbares Kriterium seines Urteils: nun erst kann er die kritische Grundfrage stellen, ob der Schein des Wahrheitsgehaltes dem Sachgehalt oder das Leben des Sachgehaltes dem Wahrheitsgehalt zu verdanken sei.) (GE 298/ 63)

There is, of course, much to say about this criterion of decision, the "Schlag," the stroke, or blow of decision that separates the truth content from the material content, and we will return to this shortly. What must first be delineated, however, is how this distinction conditions Benjamin's critique of decision in general and Otilie's decision in particular. This distinction leads to a critique not only of decision but also of particular readings of the novel that are incapable of extricating themselves adequately from its material content. What takes place, according to Benjamin in most commentaries on the *Elective Affinities* is that the preoccupation with the material content of the novel leads to a reification of what Benjamin calls the "mythic layer" of the work. It is read according to the hermeneutic horizon of its material content which, understood by the commentators as the quasi-hidden "truth" of the work, thereby leaves intact its mythic layer. The mythic layer of the novel is a feature of its material content and is strongly linked in Benjamin with the particular concept of *fate* that seems to bind the characters of the novel together. In terms of the material/truth content distinction, the mythic layer appears to be that which remains *uniform* in the novel, a kind of primeval source which conditions its representations. As Benjamin characterizes it in Goethe, it is the "seeds of eternal growth," a kind of "formed content" of the novel. Benjamin opposes this to the ethical and the historical:

For at the exact moment when Kant's work was completed and a map through the bare woods of reality (Wald des Wirklichen) was sketched, the Goethean quest for the seeds of eternal growth began. There came that direction of classicism which sought to grasp not so much the ethical and historical as the mythic and philological. Its thought did not bear on the evolving ideas but on the formed contents, preserved in life and language. (GE 298/64)

After a long discourse on Kant's theory of marriage (and its link to the ethical), Benjamin turns to a critique of the notion that "marriage" in this sense (as an ethical relation) can even rightly be said to form part of the material content of the novel at all. Rather, what the novel witnesses, according to Benjamin, is the *dissolution* of the ethical and its convergence with

the mythic. Which is to say that the novel maintains the purely *juridical* aspect of marriage and its connection to law by showing its dissolution in and through a more powerful, mythic law. Benjamin writes:

After all he [Goethe- K.K.] did not want, like Mittler, to establish a foundation for marriage but wished, rather, to show the forces that arise from its decay. Yet these are surely the mythic powers of the law (die mythischen Gewalten des Rechts), and in them marriage is only the execution of a decline that it does not decree. (GE 301/68)

In the dissolution of marriage that the novel witnesses is found neither an ethical nor a social problem; as Benjamin writes: "everything human turns into appearance, and the mythic alone remains as essence (Wesen)" (GE 302/69). The mythic is thus linked with the dark powers of natural necessity and destiny, a superhuman power that organizes the very relation of the characters to each other. The characters of the novel are conditioned entirely by this hidden law of destiny, by a "mythic nature" which pervades the entire landscape of the novel, right down to the depiction of the estate and its latent symbolism.

This mythic layer of the novel is what attaches it, according to Benjamin, to Goethe's scientific work of the period, namely his work on the "Theory of Color" which links it with the scientific (chemical) metaphor of the tide, the natural law of the "elective affinities." Benjamin characterizes this as a "magnetic power of the interior of the Earth" (GE 303/70), a power which conditions the characters and which sets the backdrop for a "tragic scene" (GE 303/70). Though an extended analysis of the relation between the novel and Goethe's scientific work in the "Theory of Colors" will not be possible here, a passage which deals with this theory in Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* (which Benjamin appears to have in mind in places) is helpful to begin to characterize what Benjamin understands by the mythic layer of the novel and its relation to the material content (or phenomenal appearance). Hegel articulates Goethe's theory of the phenomenal appearance of color as a dialectic between light and darkness in the context of a critique of the Newtonian theory of light which, according to Hegel, does not think radically enough the principle of the *individuation* of color, assuming as it does that (white) light is a mere accumulation of the spectrum:

The circumstances connected with the manifestation of color are lumped together in this chaotic fashion, and experiments tied to the most specialized

conditions are usually opposed to the simple, general conditions, the archetypal phenomena (Urphanomenen), in which the nature of color reveals itself to an unprejudiced intelligence. (He PN 196)

What the Newtonian theory of color does not take into account, according to Hegel, is the obscuring role that the prism plays, the role of darkness as *mediator* in the division of light into individual colors. It does not take into account the mediating role of the dialectic between light and darkness, the archetypal phenomena (or urphanomenen) which condition and are prior to the individual appearances of color. It is this application from science of the unfolding of these "ur-phenomena" which, according to Benjamin produce the mythic layer of the work:

The nature of the ur-phenomena was the standard (Die Natur der Urphanomene war der Masstab); the relation of every work to it was something one could read off it. But on the basis of the double meaning in the concept of nature, the ur-phenomena as archetype (Urbild) too often turned into nature as model (Vorbild). (GE 315/84)

Benjamin continues:

If in this contamination of the pure domain and the empirical domain, sensuous nature already appears to claim the highest place, its mythic face triumphs in the comprehensive totality of its appearances (so triumphiert ihr mythisches Gesicht in der Gesamterscheinung ihres Seins). (GE 315/84)

The positing of the "ur-phenomena" in the sphere of the novel produces its mythic layer, a kind of pre-phenomenal ground which conditions the individual characters right down to the novel's symbolism itself. It is a secret law, a boundless "daemonic" power that conditions everything in the novel and forms its most pronounced material content. It remains of the order of the phenomenal while at the same time conditioning the "ob-phenomena," the phenomena of the novel which explicitly appear "above ground," so to speak, such as the characters, their relations to each other, etc. In this sense, the mythic layer is the primary or organizing material content which, as such, is in need of an elucidation of the prior appearance of the "ur-phenomena" and the law or *truth content* which conditions their possibility.

Though Benjamin nowhere specifies this, it is clear that what he has in mind through his numerous articulations of the mythic layer of the novel is

the founding and grounding metaphor of the novel that gives it its tide. The concept of elective affinities is originally a chemical one, grounded in the notion of regulated exchange between partners. In this concept, partners or elements of a given chemical substance, when combined with another dually constituted substance, will switch partners in a regulated exchange. The concept is originally introduced in Chapter 4 of Part 1 of the novel, prior to the arrival of Otilie, by Eduard who reads aloud from a scientific text. Charlotte's reaction to the term "affinity" which she understands as referring to *human* relations provokes this statement from Eduard:

It is a metaphor which has misled and confused you... Here to be sure it is only a question of soil and minerals; but man is true Narcissus: he makes the whole world his mirror. (EA 50)

What Eduard reveals about the truth of Charlotte's "mistake" is that the concept of "elective affinities" does not derive, strictly speaking, from chemistry. The term is not merely a scientific term which will be applied to the human realm, rather it is already an anthropomorphizing of nature⁶; the metaphor is already a metaphor for human relations which is made to serve the function of articulating the results of a chemical reaction or exchange, and not the other way around. However, the application of the metaphor which is used to describe relations in nature comes to be "mythified" at the point where it is taken as a naturalized law, the application of "ur-phenomena" or archetypes from nature which are applied *back* again to human relations and thus reified. The metaphor is *already* a metaphor, it is already "carried over" from the realm of human relations and applied to soil and minerals, and it is its uncanny promiscuity (it is capable of being "applied" to natural and human relations alike) that renders it mythic.

The actual explanation of the metaphor proceeds through a series of steps which the Captain articulates, starting with an entity's necessary relation to itself, which then proceeds to the entity's relation to others. Throughout the purely chemical explanation of the concept of affinities, Charlotte repeatedly interjects with an application of its rules to the human realm: affined entities appear to her to possess not only "an affinity of blood" but an "affinity of mind" (EA 53). It is only at the moment when the Captain's explanation

6 J. Hillis Miller makes this point in his reading of the "Elective Affinities" in chapter 3 of *Ariadne's Thread*.

reaches the discussion of "elective" affinities, the abandonment of one affinity for a more compelling one, that the characters explicitly apply the metaphor to themselves. Eduard interjects:

Unless I am much mistaken ... your remarks carry a double meaning, (...es steckt eine kleine Tiicke hinter deinen Reden). Confess it now! When all is said, I am in your eyes the lime which the Captain, as a sulphuric acid, has seized on, withdrawn from your charming company, and transformed into a stubborn gypsum. (EA 54-55)

Charlotte replies:

If your conscience prompts you to such reflections.... I have no need to worry. These metaphors [my translation-K.K] (Gleichnisrede) are artful and amusing, and who does not like to play with analogies? But man is so very much elevated above these elements and if he has in this instance been somewhat liberal with the words "choice" (Wahl) and "elective affinity" (Wahlverwandschaft), it is well for him to turn and look within himself, and then consider truly what validity such expressions possess. (EA 55)

Charlotte's apparent refusal to apply the metaphor to the current situation stems from the problem of its *ungrounded nutate*; the affinity between her and Eduard is currently threatened by the "chance" introduction of a third term (the Captain). In order to ground the law, in order that Charlotte not be left to "drift around again in the void" as she puts it, a fourth term will prove necessary (namely Ottilie) in order to guarantee a regulated exchange. It is the introduction of Ottilie which grounds the "choice" by introducing a partner for the other "entity" whose previous affinity has been disturbed, guaranteeing a regulated exchange. As the Captain insists:

... these cases are in fact the most significant and noteworthy of all; in them one can actually demonstrate attraction and relatedness, this as it were crosswise parting and uniting: where four entities, previously joined together in pairs, are brought into contact, abandon their previous union, and join together afresh. In this relinquishment (Fahrenlassen) and seizing (Ergreifen), in this fleeing and seeking, one really can believe one is witnessing a higher determination (Bestimmung); one credits such entities with a species of will and choice and regards the technical term (das Kunstwort) "elective affinities" as entirely justified. (EA 55)

In order to reveal the "higher determination" of the "choice" of partners, a fourth term through which a previously affined partner can become affined anew is necessary (and this fourth term is Ottilie). Charlotte's subsequent request for the description of a case of this equalized exchange of partners goes unanswered by the Captain who articulates the law of exchange in the abstract language of signs — an indication, perhaps, of the infinite applicability of the (mythic) law. The Captain summarizes this law by saying:

... I think I can briefly sum up in the language of signs. Imagine an A intimately united with a B, so that no force is able to sunder them; imagine a C likewise related to a D; now bring the two couples into contact: A will throw itself at D, C at B without our being able to say which first deserted its partner, which first embraced the other's partner. (EA 56)

It is this law of exchange which grounds and inflects nearly everything that happens in the novel. This law of exchange is the mythic law of the novel. It is the ratio of exchange that calculates in advance the course of the novel and its subsequent developments: Eduard's affinity to Ottilie, Charlotte's to the Captain.⁷ The law's "application" to the destiny of the characters themselves is made by Eduard at the end of chapter 4, but is done so through his *mis-projection* of the law on the future course of events. He says to Charlotte:

... let us look on this formula as a metaphor from which we may extract a lesson we can apply immediately to ourselves. You, Charlotte, represent the A, and I represent your B; for in fact I do depend altogether on you and follow you as A follows B. The C is quite obviously the Captain, who for the moment is to some extent drawing me away from you. Now, it is only fair that, if you are not to vanish into limitless air, you must be provided with a D, and this D is unquestionably the charming little lady Ottilie, whose approaching presence you may no longer resist. (EA 56)

What Eduard is capable of doing is reading the mythic law of the novel and understanding it as its founding metaphor of exchange and necessary

7 The principle of exchange is also the crux of Miller's reading of the character Ottilie as an example of catachresis, as opposed to a regulated (Aristotelian) metaphor. For an analysis of this distinction see Derrida's "White Mythology," particularly the section "Ellipsis of the Sun" in *Margins of Philosophy*.

attraction. What he fails to do, however, is apply the law correctly: the exchanges and substitutions take place, but not in the manner Eduard thinks they will. What will happen, of course, is not an exchange between he and the Captain, Charlotte and Otilie, but rather an exchange between he and Otilie, the Captain and Charlotte that threatens their own previous affinity. Eduard, here, is like the tragic king Oedipus who knows the law, who knows the prophecy, but is unable to apply it to himself correctly. It is this law which will "seal the lovers fates" and which Benjamin argues articulates the mythic layer of the novel, a reification of nature as the "magnetic power of the interior of the earth."

Everything in the novel appears destined by this law: the shared names of Eduard and the Captain (both were originally named Otto), the symbol on the glass which unites the letters E and O and which quasi-miraculously soars into the air and is caught unharmed at the ceremony to celebrate the construction of the new house on the estate, the death of the priest at the baptism of the child Otto (who looks like a combination of the Captain and Otilie even though he was conceived by Eduard and Charlotte) — everything takes place or is represented in reference to this singular law which merely unfolds itself in the course of the novel. Everything appears fated in the novel because everything falls under the criterion of this motivating and metaphorizing law. In Benjamin's words: "It belongs ... most intimately to the essence of an order whose members live out their lives under a nameless law, a fatality that fills their world with the pallid light of a solar eclipse"(GE 305/72). It is ultimately this understanding of the mythic layer of the novel that conditions Benjamin's reading of the *secret* and the non-decision of the novel. His critique of "choice" (Wahl) depends on the mythic articulation of the law of the "Wahlverwandschaften" or elective affinities. Every mere "choice" judged from the standpoint of the destiny of the mythic layer is totally blind, totally dependent and calculated on a previous "decision," a mythic or tragic law which Otilie grounds. Choice (Wahl) here is merely the conscious affirmation of an already decided application of the law. The novel is full of these kinds of "choices," ratifications of a pre-determined, pre-chosen destiny: Eduard's leaving of the decision "to chance" to invite the Captain to the estate at the very opening of the novel, his ratification of a pre-decision when Mittler confronts him and in conversation provokes this almost metaleptic admonition of Eduard's decision to be with Otilie: "But it was only as we were talking that I came to know my own mind, that I felt quite definitely what I ought to do, what I had in fact already decided to do"(EA

148). Charlotte too, late in the novel directly after the death of the child Otto, confronted with the decision of whether to divorce Eduard or not is met with a similar pre-determination of the decision. She says:

I feel clearly enough that the destiny of more than one person now lies in my hands, and what I have to do admits of no doubt and is soon told. I agree to the divorce. I ought to have agreed to it earlier; through my hesitation and opposition I have killed the child. There are certain things which fate is obstinately determined upon. Reason and virtue, duty and all that is sacred, oppose it in vain; something is to happen that seems right to fate, even if it does not seem right to us; and so, do what we will, fate at last prevails. (EA 266)

All of these "decisions" Benjamin insists, are not decisions, they merely wallow in choice: they are only ratifications of a previous, blind, ungrounded law that conditions them.

Yet what Benjamin observes in Otilie (who is the ground of this mythic law) is a somewhat different fate or different relation to fate. Part of this has to do with the *secrecy* of her decision to die. Otilie's passing away in the novel, her slow secret starving of herself, is linked with the mythic law of the novel. Benjamin writes:

... what the darkness conceals does emerge clearly from everything else: the possibility, indeed the necessity, of the sacrifice according to the deepest intentions of the novel. Thus, not only is it as a "victim of destiny"(Opfer des Geschicks) that Otilie 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. That is why, despite her suicide, Otilie dies as a martyr, leaving behind her miraculous remains. (GE 309/77-78)

The secrecy of Otilie's decision connects it with the secrecy of the mythic layer of the novel which determines it, and which sacrifices her. Which is to say that Otilie's decision connects this decision with the mythic law of the novel as a transcendent fate that, in the case of Otilie, makes her an archetype of sacrifice; it dooms her to death. Her death is atonement in the sense of fate; it is not, strictly speaking, a voluntary death. This is why Benjamin insists that Otilie's decision seems to take shape in a manner almost incomprehensible to herself; her choice to kill herself is more akin to a drive than a decision. It is an almost *unconscious* death sentence, a speechless, secret drive which starves

her. According to Benjamin, she is "... in her seeming and her becoming, subjected until her death to a fateful power, she vegetates without decision. (... im Scheinen und im Werden schicksalhafter Gewalt bis zum Tode unterworfen, entscheidungslos ihr Leben dahinlebt)" (GE 337/112). The "dark interior of the Earth" which conditions her death is what makes her "vegetate without decision." The attempt to read Otilie as a tragic figure along the lines of classical tragedy is also refused by Benjamin on the grounds that there is an element in tragedy in the speech of the tragic hero which transcends or, rather, ascends above the guilt and innocence of the mythic layer "as an abyss." While Benjamin does not elaborate on this, what he infers is that there is something in tragedy that is distinguishable from the purely mythical sphere that *appears* to determine it; the tragic hero at a point becomes divorced from the mythic law which makes him an archetype. Otilie, on the other hand, dies as the archetype of the innocent sacrificed by the mythic law. She is a purely mythic figure and *so* is a "mere semblance." As Benjamin insists:

For this silencing of the moral voice is not to be grasped, like the muted language of affects, as a feature of individuality. It is not a determination of the boundaries of human being (der Grenzen menschlichen Wesens.) With this silence, the semblance (Schein) has installed itself consumingly in the heart of the noblest being... All speechless clarity of action is semblance-like (ist scheinhaft), and in truth the inner life of those who in this way preserve themselves is no less obscure to them than to others.(GE 337/112)

Otilie's semblance-like quality, her appearance as beauty, binds her to the mythic. It makes her less than an individual and more than a mere figure. Otilie's decision is a *transcendent secret*, one hidden from view, but still of the order of the phenomenal (or the ur-phenomenal); it is a secret kept hidden in the darkness of the interior of the earth only to reveal itself as that which predestines her and makes of her a mere semblance.

Yet there is, in Otilie, something that pushes her to the limit of the mythic enclosure in the novel. Indeed, the novel itself suggests that Otilie's secret, or rather, Otilie *as* a secret, begins to fall away from the narrative itself; she is represented merely second hand by the narrator in the form of fragments of her diary in part 2 of the novel. Part one ends with these words:

She [Otilie] had nothing more to say. She could not hope and she could not desire. But a glimpse of her soul is provided by a journal which she kept, from which we propose to offer a number of extracts. (EA 151)

Otilie as a character here calls into question the omniscient narrator:: she "falls out," of the narrative. Co-extensive with her decision to starve herself is her gradual disappearance from the novel. Otilie is the ground of the mythic law, the fourth element that makes possible the law of regulated exchange. Yet there is, lodged within her fated existence as a "Schein" or appearance grounded in the mythic law something which interrupts this semblance that the mythic law appears to dictate in the novel. There is, simply put, something like a secret of the secret in the novel that moves Otilie to the *limits* of the mythic layer.

To unfold this dimension of the novel, Benjamin turns to the novella ("Die wunderlichen Nachbarskinder") which is buried inside it and which he calls the "day of decision shining into the dusk-filled Hades of the novel." Benjamin's argument, in brief, insists that the novella's characters are kept at a distance because they are closer than the characters of the novel to the secret law that conditions them. Benjamin writes: "For if the novel, like a maelstrom, draws the reader irresistibly into its interior, the novella strives towards distance (Abstand), pushing every living creature out of its magic circle" (GE 330/ 104). It is ironically the novel's putative realism that gives it over to the mythic. Lodged in its center, the novella acts like a shadow version of the novel (which had originally begun as a novella itself) that appears to have a similar structure and is differentiated from the novel mainly by its *result*. "destiny" turns out happily for the characters of the novella. What differs, for Benjamin, is the relation to the mystery or secret that is at its center. He writes:

In the clearest way, the thus-conceived lawful character of its form (namely, the untouchability of the center— that is to say, the mystery of an essential characteristic) stands out in bold relief. For in it, the mystery is the catastrophe (Denn Geheimnis ist in ihr die Katastrophe), which, as the animating principle of the story, is conducted into its center, while in the novel the significance of the catastrophe, the concluding event, remains phenomenal. (GE 331/105)

To say that there is a "catastrophe" of the novella seems odd, since it appears even less like a tragedy than the novel, except that Benjamin's use of this concept with its background in tragedy seems to suggest that the novella's

mystery or secret detaches itself from the mystery or secret of the novel. Whereas the catastrophe of the novel remains phenomenal (or ur-phenomenal) the catastrophe of the novella is conducted into its center. Benjamin continues:

Because these human beings do not risk everything for the sake of a falsely conceived freedom, no sacrifice falls among them; rather the decision befalls within them. (... fällt unter ihnen kein Opfer; sondern in ihnen die Entscheidung). In fact freedom is as clearly removed from the youth's saving decision as is fate... The lovers of the novella stand beyond both freedom and fate, and their courageous decision suffices to tear to bits a fate that would gather to a head over them and to see through a freedom that would pull them down into the nothingness of choice (das Nichts der Wahl). (GE 332/106)

That the decision falls *within them* means neither that they are free and that the characters of the novel are not, nor that they are fated to decide. As Benjamin asserts, the characters of the novel do not "die in beauty" or in semblance, they do not obtain freedom through sacrifice, though the fact that no sacrifice "falls in them" equally means that the "decision falls in them." Simply put, the novella itself *is* the fall of decision into the novel, a secret of the novel more secret than the mythic law of the novel.

The relation of the novella to the novel, according to Benjamin, is one of thesis to antithesis, or somewhat more precisely, the novella is the antithesis to the thesis of the mythic layer of the novel. It is buried in the novel like a secret that the mythic cannot dispel, and it opens up the possibility of true decision, an opposition to mere choice (Wahl) which the novella articulates in its very interior. It is like an interior more interior than the "dark interior of the Earth." As Benjamin suggests, it is:

... comparable to an image in the darkness of a cathedral — an image which portrays the cathedral itself and so in the midst of the interior communicates a view of the place not otherwise available (und so im Innern eine Anschauung vom Orte mitteilt...). In this way it brings inside at the same time a reflection of the bright indeed sober day. (GE 352/131)

This figural description of the relation between the mythic novel and the critical novella which appears to represent the internal law of the novel from its inside seems to have been pulled from Ch3. of part 2 of the novel itself as Otilie sits in the cathedral designed by the architect. Here, in Goethe's words she:

felt her existence and did not feel it, she felt that all of this before her might vanish away and that she too might vanish away, and only when the sun ceased to illumine the window did Otilie come to herself and hurry back to the mansion. (EA 169)

It is almost as though Otilie were here becoming aware of the semblance-like nature that determines her, according to Benjamin. The "light" which the novella sheds on the novel from its interior seems to touch on Otilie's own secrecy, and here we now mean not only the secrecy which links her to the mythic law of the novel, but also the secrecy which *she is* the novel. Perhaps to underscore this point, this scene at the cathedral is immediately followed by the second narrated entry from Otilie's journal where she meditates on the destiny of the architect:

The architect above all has in this the strangest of destinies. How often he employs his whole mind and his whole love in the production of rooms from which he himself must be excluded... In temples, he fixes a boundary between himself and the holy of holies, he may no longer mount the steps he himself has erected... (EA 170)

Otilie's own "falling out" of the novel, her becoming secret, seems to be hinted at here. The novel, like the architect, appears to condition her (through the law of which she is the ground) while simultaneously erecting a boundary between itself and her. Otilie, like the novella, is the limit that marks the novel's relation to the mythic and thereby opens up the *beyond* of the mythic. In and through marking or delimiting it, she is on both sides, both the delimiting of the mythic and its beyond which she opens into the novel. A fundamental question remains, however: in what way does this link her to what Benjamin credits the novella with, that is, the "dawning of the day of decision into the dusk-filled Hades of the novel"?

This question is linked, in Benjamin, with Otilie's semblance of beauty, her appearance (Schein) and its relation to the chief material content of the novel. Benjamin writes:

In *Elective Affinities*... the daemonic principles of conjuration irrupt into the very center of the poetic composition. For what is conjured is always only a semblance (Schein) — in Otilie a semblance of living beauty — which strongly, mysteriously, and impurely imposes itself in the most powerful sense as "material" ("Stoff"). (GE 339/115)

The engendering of Otilie's semblance, what Benjamin calls her "conjunction" (Beschwörung) is precisely that which opens up another fate or law within the novel's very interior, within Otilie herself as its secret witness. What erupts into the novel, according to Benjamin, is the expressionless (das Ausdrucklose):

That which has being is mere beauty, mere harmony, which floods through the chaos... What arrests this semblance, spellbinds the movement, and interrupts the harmony is the expressionless (das Ausdrucklose). This life grounds the mystery, this petrification grounds the content in the work. (E 340/G 126)

The "expressionless" completes the work; it grounds the work as Otilie grounds the law of exchange in the novel. But it completes it by *disarticulating* it, arresting the semblance of the novel and shattering its false totality. Benjamin gives a definition of the "expressionless" through what he sees as its articulation in Hölderlin's *Notes to Oedipus* which attempt to clarify the tragic law of the play. Benjamin writes:

... the expressionless can be no more rigorously defined than through a passage in Hölderlin's *Anmerkungen ?um Oedipus..* The passage reads: "For the tragic transport is actually empty (eigentlich leer), and the least restrained. — Thereby in the rhythmic sequence of the representations wherein the transport presents itself (sich darstellt), there becomes necessary what in poetic meter is called Caesura, the pure word, the counter-rhythmic rupture ... in such a manner that not the change or representation but the representation itself very soon appears. (Sondern die Vostellung selber erscheint)." (GE340/117)

This massively difficult passage will need more commentary than I can give here,⁸ but what one must recognize in Benjamin's articulation of the "expressionless" according to Hölderlin's definition of the tragic caesura is here nothing less than an articulation of the law of calculation of the tragic, the law of tragedy. The empty tragic transport, the contentless, cryptic secret buried in the heart of the order of semblance which the novel articulates could well be said of Otilie; her semblance turns upon itself, represents itself as semblance, and to use Benjamin's Nietzschean turn of phrase, "goes under." Benjamin seems to repeat this understanding of the Hölderlinian caesura when

he turns finally to her beauty (and secrecy) and its relation to the "expressionless" (or secret of the secret). He writes:

Emotion ... will be a transition from the intuition "on the path of a truly moral ... development" only to the uniquely objective correlative of shock, to the sublime (zum Erhabenen). It is precisely this transition, this going over, that is accomplished in the going under of semblance (Eben dieser Übergang ist es, der im Untergang des Schemes sich vollzieht). That semblance which presents itself in Otilie's beauty is the one that goes under. It is not to be understood, however, as if external need and force bring about Otilie's destruction; rather, her type of semblance itself is the basis for the imperative that the semblance be extinguished and extinguished soon. (GE 349/128)

Her semblance opens within itself a view to her own status *as* beautiful semblance; semblance as such "makes itself known" in Otilie. Like the novella, which represents from the interior of the novel its own law to itself and so "communicates a view of the place not otherwise available," Otilie does the same for "semblance." As the "purest" semblance, she is also that which marks its limit. This limit is the "expressionless" and Benjamin connects it precisely with Otilie's beauty:

The semblance (Schein), however, does not comprise the essence of beauty. Rather, the latter points down more deeply to what in the work of art in contrast to the semblance may be characterized as the expressionless; but outside this contrast (Gegensatzes), it neither appears in art nor can be unambiguously named. Although the expressionless contrasts with the semblance, it stands in such a fashion of necessary relationship to the semblance that precisely the beautiful, even if it is not semblance, ceases to be essentially beautiful when the semblance disappears from it. (Zum Schein nämlich steht das Ausdrucklose, wiewohl im Gegensatz, doch in derart notwenedigem Verhältnis, daB eben das Schöne, ob auch selber nicht Schein, aufhört ein wesentlich Schönes zu sein, wenn der Schein von ihm schwindet) (GE 350/129)

The "expressionless" is not separate from the beautiful semblance; it does not arrest the semblance from the outside, as it were. Rather, the expressionless manifests itself as the *secret law of semblance*, a secret internal to semblance which disarticulates it from its interior, so to speak, and opens a secret "within" the secret.

To clarify this notion somewhat we must follow Benjamin's articulation of the unfolding of this other secret within the mythic layer of the novel and

⁸ For extensive commentary on this passage from Hölderlin see Lacoue-Labarthe's "Caesura of the Speculative" and "Hölderlin and the Greeks" in *Typography*.

its relation to the disappearance of Otilie. I have already alluded to the fact that Otilie as semblance "disappears" from the narrative of the novel through the use of her diary entries. But the "disappearance" of Otilie for Benjamin also ties her to the "going under" of semblance and the movement of the "expressionless" which erupts into the novel. To delimit this relation, Benjamin articulates the relation between the semblance and the beautiful, for they are not reducible to each other. He writes:

For semblance belongs to the essentially beautiful as the veil (die Hülle) and as the essential law of beauty, shows itself thus, that beauty appears as such only in what is veiled. Beauty, therefore, is not itself semblance... (GE 350/129)

Beauty, simply put, is not a veil covering something else, nor is it something which can be unveiled, (as an *ur-phenomena* of phenomena, for instance). It is irreducible to semblance in this sense of a "mere appearance" or to a secret which the semblance covers over. As Benjamin formulates it, the beautiful, rather, *is* this appearance, the giving of the secret:

For the beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil. Unveiled, however, it would prove to be infinitely inconspicuous. (Denn weder die Hülle noch der verhüllte Gegenstand ist das Schöne, sondern dies ist ' der Gegenstand in seiner Hülle. Enthüllt, aber wurde er unendlich unscheinbar sich erweisen.) (GE 351/G 130)

The beautiful is neither the secret itself, nor the obfuscation of the secret, it is the giving of the secret in its veil, the making visible of its withdrawal. Without this withdrawal, which is both the figuring of the withdrawal and the withdrawal "itself," the "unveiling" of the beautiful would merely make it "inconspicuous" (unscheinbar), non-descript, non-delineated. Which is to say that the beautiful cannot be unveiled, that its veiling, its disappearance "as such" is its essential trait. It does not contain a secret *to be revealed*, which would link it again to the mythic that harbors a secret only in order to just as easily dispel it. Rather, beauty is a *constitutive* secret, neither the veil nor its beyond but the pure mark of their separation. Benjamin's use of Kantian terminology here seems loose but not altogether unfitting. The beautiful in Kant, put very generally, functions quite similarly to Benjamin's formulation since it involves a phenomenal content (or veil) that is further determined in reflective judgment (or a sort of "beyond" of the phenomenal). The Kantian beautiful begins with a phenomenal moment that hints at a "beyond" (or a

"purposiveness without purpose"). The secret movement or withdrawal of the beautiful is referenced in Benjamin through another infamous Kantian term (the sublime), however, and this makes the unfolding of this *other* secret even more difficult and enigmatic. Benjamin writes:

For the sake of that unity which veil and veiled compose in it, beauty can essentially be valid only where the duality of nakedness and veiling does not yet obtain: in art and in the appearances (Erscheinungen) of nature. On the other hand, the more distinctly this duality expresses itself in order finally to confirm itself at the highest in man, the more this becomes clear: in veiless nakedness (in der hiillenlosen Nacktheit) the essentially beautiful has withdrawn, and in the naked body of the human being (in dem nackten Körper des Menschen) are attained a being beyond all beauty (ein Sein iiber aller Schonheit erreicht) — the sublime — (das Erhabene) and a work beyond all creations (und ein Werk iiber Gebilden) — that of the creator (das des Schöpfers). (EG 351/130-31)

It will not be possible to analyze the quasi-messianic tone of this use of Kantian terminology. Nor will it be possible to stage a full rehearsal of the respective stakes or problematics of the analytic of the beautiful and the analytic of the sublime in Kant's third Critique. However, a general reminder seems appropriate here in order to clarify Benjamin's use of these terms. The analytic of the beautiful, one should recall, is the articulation of the imagination (as the sphere of the third Critique) with the understanding and thus with the bounds or rules of the *phenomenal* world of the first Critique. The analytic of the *sublimes* the articulation of the imagination with reason and the noumenal world of the second Critique, and is thus linked with the attempt to ground Critical principles *Critically* (and thus the very Critical Philosophy itself) without reference to a phenomenal moment that would precede it.⁹ Beauty, then, is linked with metaphysical principles, the sublime with purely transcendental ones.

Thus, when Benjamin ties the distinction between beauty and its withdrawal (or beyond) in the sublime to the distinction between the novel and the novella, what unfolds in the disappearance of semblance appears to be a repetition of the distinction which opens his critique of the novel: the distinction between material and truth contents. From out of the semblance of Otilie's beauty in the novel comes Otilie as its *other secret*, a truth content which interrupts the mythic layer of its material content and empties it out.

⁹ These tasks are explicitly articulated in Kant's Introduction to the *Third Critique*

She is the empty "tragic transport," of Hölderlin's caesura, a failed metaphor, or rather the mythic layer's secret delimitation.

Benjamin's critique of Otilie's secret "choice" thus opens ultimately onto a radical decision which she *is* (and which she no more "chooses" than she chooses to die). If the analogical formulations of this interruption of the mythic (and of mythic "choice") have been too inconspicuous until now (i.e. Otilie is *like* the novella which is *like* the cathedral which is *like* the sublime withdrawal of semblance in the beautiful etc.), their clarification rests entirely on the distinction Benjamin articulates at the very beginning between truth content and material content. If Benjamin nowhere provides a clear definition of these terms it is because *they cannot be totally distinguished*. The distinction does not effectuate a division, a pure thought of pure decision at its source, but an unfolding of decision in its withdrawal; the emptying out, as it were, of "mere choice" in its "becoming other." That this is possible only through a repetition of the limit in the text that marks the difference between material and truth contents, novel and novella, pure decision and its counterfeit, is what one might call the secret law of calculation of the incalculable: it is both the delimitation of the calculable and its beyond, the "there is" of the incalculable. That is, it is both the irreducibility and *the promise* of decision.

There is, strictly speaking, no "pure decision" in Benjamin's reading of Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, but only because the decision "falls within it," like the blow or stroke of the "invaluable criterion" which allows the critic to raise the question of the uniting and separating of material from truth contents. What Benjamin uncovers in his reading and critique of Otilie's secret decision is perhaps nothing but the break or interruption of an original insertion of measure which places Otilie at the limit of the mythic layer of the novel, and which Benjamin repeats in the very gesture of his Critique: the tracing of the limit, the separation of phenomenal appearance of choice from its beyond. In this sense, Otilie constitutes the tracing of the limit between the mythic/ material content and the truth content of the novel, and so is the dawning of a "decision," a cutting, interruption or caesura which "precedes" (for lack of a better word) the mythic law of the novel. She disarticulates this law's application, which is what opens her to another fate: the fate of an original decision which *she is* as the ground of the mythic law. She is the original putting into place of a measure or law of calculation which cannot be accounted for, and which no straightforward voluntarism will ever be adequate to. Benjamin's critique of Otilie's choice, thus, does not open up a space of judgment entirely independent of the (mythic) realm in which that choice is

determined. Rather, the space of judgment on decision, the space where decision can be thought in its "pure" concept, is always already a space of division and decision, a cutting or scission which is "prior" to choice, without determining it. What a thought of decision must do, then, is repeat the drawing of the line, the pre-decision which is not yet, and always already, its counterfeit. This original drawing of the line, an original insertion of measure which cannot be accounted for, a tragic caesura which interrupts the movement of choice and calculation and opens up another fate (or tragic law) must be repeated, and through its repetition it becomes decisive. In this manner it is both a decision "prior" to choice which disarticulates it, and the very future of decision, of a decision to come. It is at once the possibility of the interruption of calculation and the introduction of a decision on decision. Benjamin's repetition of this decision, of this separation, is what opens his text onto the future anterior of decision, towards this "other decision": a decision beyond choice which he repeats and by repeating pays tribute to by uncovering its hidden law of calculation. Outside of the quasi-messianic tone of the articulation of this law (particularly in relation to the passages on the beautiful and the sublime), Benjamin's text *enacts* a "thought" of this decision. It opens and repeats the crisis of decision through a repetition which both betrays it and conditions its possibility. In Benjamin is repeated, in the stroke or blow of his decisive critique, what is offered by the caesura of the novel in which the fate of the lovers is sealed and in which at the same time everything is suspended. Like a fall or break, as if decided by fate, Benjamin names the caesura of the work and gives it the form of a single line from Goethe which reads: "Hope shot across the sky above their heads like a falling star."

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