

Goethe and the Sublime

by

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Abstract

The dissertation situates the Goethean sublime in an obscured countermovement of resistance to the aestheticization the concept underwent in the 18th century. Before the encounter with the English aesthetic concept of the sublime, the German notion of *das Erhabene* (the sublime) named not a category of aesthetic experience, but a social affect. In contrast to the Sublime of Edmund Burke's theory, which explicitly excludes melancholy from the sources of the Sublime, *das Erhabene* is an affect related to the self-overcoming of melancholic subjectivity.

As the aestheticized notion of the sublime displaced *das Erhabene*, Goethe became one of the most radical innovators of the aesthetics of the sublime. But as is demonstrated in chapters on *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Elective Affinities*, *Faust* and *Wilhelm Meister*, he did so with the aim of recovering the displaced meaning of *das Erhabene* as social affect. Goethe's sublime aims to show at every turn that the so-called "aesthetic experience" of the sublime is really displaced social affect. His treatment of the sublime therefore constitutes a radical critique of the establishment of aesthetics as an independent sphere of inquiry. There is for Goethe no way to understand aesthetic experience independently of its social context. By reconnecting the sublime it to the original social meaning of *das Erhabene*, Goethe recovers the aesthetics of the sublime

as a means of mediating and facilitating the movement of subjectivity from frustrated stasis to divine creativity; i.e., from exclusion to participation in the material creation of reality.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
Introduction: "A rose by any other name..."	viii
Chapter 1: From <i>das Erhabene</i> to the Sublime	1
1.1 Melancholy Renaissance	1
1.2 Enlightenment: Lost in Translation	5
1.3 Johann Jakob Bodmer	7
1.4 Edmund Burke	11
1.5 Moses Mendelssohn	16
1.6 Johann Wolfgang Goethe	19
1.7 Herder's Sublime Melancholy	21
1.8 Subjectivity and the Sublime	38
Chapter 2: The Duality of Nature in <i>Die Leiden des jungen Werther</i>	41
2.1 Early Aesthetic Agon	41
2.2 Werther and the Janus of Nature	49
2.3 Wertherian Synesthesia	53
2.4 The Birth of Mephisto from the Spirit of Young Werther	69
2.5 Scavenger Sublime: <i>Harzreise im Winter</i>	71

Chapter 3: Dialectics of Strategy. Qual der Wahlverwandtschaften	81
3.1 Strategy	81
3.2 Biopolitical Strategy in Athens	82
3.3 Shakespeare and the Critique of Theatre	92
3.4 What does Goethe Want?	106
3.5 Strategy and Truth	112
Chapter 4: Faust als Puppenspiel. The Weight of the Word	117
4.1 Pupal Beginnings	117
4.2 Mixed Metaphors	119
4.3 Sublime of Bildung: Auerbachs Keller in Leipzig	122
4.4 "Nach Golde drängt, / Am Golde hängt / Doch alles."	127
4.5 "So herrsche denn Eros der alles begonnen!"	130
4.6 Beauty. "Was hilft der Augen schärfster Blitz!"	138
Chapter 5: Wilhelm Meister's Sublime Journey	149
5.1 Eros and Entsagung: "Wer ist der Verräter?"	149
5.2 After the World: "Im Schatten eines mächtigen Felsen..."	157
5.3 Narrative Mechanics and Human Meaning	159
5.4 The Beautiful and the Sublime	162
5.5 The Aesthetic Mediation of Life	168
5.6 Sublime Enjoyment	175

5.7 Happiness	178
5.8 Conclusion	184
Abbreviations	186
Works Cited	187

Introduction

"A rose by any other name..."

The literature on Goethe is vast. This quantitative problem is not specific to Goethe: every scholar is faced with the problem of selecting what is relevant from existing secondary literature. Since reading everything is not an option, scholars look for ways of narrowing down the field of what counts as relevant to their particular line of inquiry. Of course, there are many ways to do this: the simplest way in the age of Google being to follow key words. But it immediately becomes clear how limiting this is. How can I be sure, in the age of Google, that what I call Nature or the Sublime is the same thing somebody else calls by the same name?

But this isn't just a postmodern, Google-age question; it is a modern one which Goethe is keenly aware of. The answer is that there is no way to be sure—and for Goethe, arriving at this uncertainty means we have reached the *Urphänomen*, or the point at which it makes more sense to stop trying to be sure. This is precisely the same discursive problem we find at the heart of the sublime. Since the experience of the sublime in itself is never present within discourse, how can anyone be sure that they are talking about the same thing, the same experience? Of course they cannot, and this is a theoretical problem that runs all the way through the discourse of the sublime from Longinus to Žižek.

But recognition of this problem—merely theoretical acknowledgement of it—has not stopped or held back the productivity of the sublime. Despite this epistemological limit, the aesthetic sublime is as productive as ever. What makes it productive is the dream that the epistemological problem can be solved—that is, the dream that the aesthetic struggle can come to an end in a final reconciliation. Paradoxically, this wish to settle the question of the sublime drives production

ever further in the direction of phenomenological descriptions that attempt to represent what is, by definition, unrepresentable. This is the historical problem which my research into the scholarly literature on both Goethe and on the sublime presented to me.

Given this situation, I began to wonder whether the sublime might be explainable in a Freudian way, as a symptom of literary production under modern and, increasingly, under industrial conditions. If I could see the sublime as a symptom, I could then see how far a Freudian methodology would take me. So I set about trying to untangle and follow the symptom formation—that is, the discourse on the sublime—back to the scene of an original displacement. What I found was that, strangely enough, the sublime and *das Erhabene* were originally such different notions that mere conceptual comparison or contrast could not quite get at what had happened. I found that concomitantly with the establishment of aesthetics as an independent sphere of inquiry, the German notion of *das Erhabene* as social affect was displaced by the English aesthetic concept of the sublime. This English concept had, at least in its leading theoretical elaborations, very different contours than *das Erhabene*. Not only was it thoroughly rhetorical and instrumental, and supported by a reified materialism, it explicitly excluded from the Sublime the experience of melancholy, a crucial association of *das Erhabene* which the Enlightenment had inherited from Florentine humanism.

My argument is that *das Erhabene*, or at least its most fundamental content (that it is a social affect), was repressed when it was displaced by the aestheticized concept of the sublime. Further, I maintain that Goethe was hyper-aware of this displacement, and its problematicity is one of the reasons he shows so much aversion to theoretical discourses on aesthetics. From Goethe's perspective, theoretical discourses on aesthetics only lead further away from the only possible sources of understanding aesthetic experience, which for him have to be embodied and

experiential. This means that from Goethe's perspective, the formation of aesthetics as an independent sphere of inquiry begins itself to look like a symptom of social repression. And the sublime is simply the longest feather in the jester's cap of aesthetic experience.

I argue that this is what Goethe wanted to show through his own aesthetic practice. By Goethe's aesthetics of the sublime I mean, in the most general sense, the way Goethe uses the dialectic in order to construct an authorial position that seems to be beyond or above language. Like Freudian transference, the aesthetics of the sublime relies on provoking and drawing out a reader's excess imagination. The techniques of the aesthetic sublime, from parataxis to repetition, elision and interruption, even the "self-enigmatizations" supposedly employed by some writers of the Frankfurt School, and, last but not least, Goethe's Symbol in its sometimes frustrating, sometimes emancipatory indeterminacy, have all been counted and accounted for, described by various commentators, from Longinus to Mendelssohn to Thomas Weiskel. These techniques in themselves, and Goethe's virtuosic mastery of them—which are the reason why we can now see him as an originator of psychoanalysis—are not the topic of the dissertation. The question pursued by the dissertation is rather: *but why did Goethe engage in such techniques if he was simultaneously so critical of the discourse on the sublime? Why did he burden the reader with something he himself sees as so problematic?*

At this point I was able to restate the problem in a new way. The aim of the dissertation was to explain Goethe's aesthetic practice: why did he write the way he did? In a Freudian way, I wanted to discover the latent thought of which Goethe's literature is a distorted concretization. The dissertation is both historical and theoretical in the sense that it attempts to provide an explanation for this phenomenon.

The conclusion I reached is that Goethe wanted to show that the experience of the sublime is a mechanism. Not a mechanism in the sense that it is something that is produced by rhetoric... this is one of the great mistakes that drives production. But that it is a mechanism we can only understand when we look at the bigger social and historical context in which literary production takes place. To put it succinctly, Goethe's aesthetics of the sublime aims to show that no book or any other kind of written text can put burdens on readers¹. A book, a written text, is an inanimate object. It simply does not have that kind of power.

Does this mean that the sublime is purely subjective, like Kant thought? For Goethe the answer is: absolutely not. Goethe's answer is that if we want to understand the phenomenon of the sublime, we have to look at the bigger context in which readers and texts are brought together. When I started looking at the problem of the sublime in the way I believed Goethe's literature was pointing, what I found was that, although inanimate texts are, left to their own devices, powerless over readers, institutions on the other hand do put burdens on readers (and fashion is just one such institution)². They do it through canonization and capitalization, through enshrining texts and authors and imbuing them with social capital. This is how texts are transformed into sublime objects. What makes a text aesthetically "sublime" from a Goethean perspective? Its rhetorical techniques, its moral integrity, or its position, meaning and function within a social field? The point is that, when it comes to sublime objects, the undecidability of this question marks the limit of inquiry. This is what Goethe called an *Urphänomen*. It means we have reached the limit of what thought can accomplish in the present moment. The Goethean conclusion is that a sublime object is one which confounds our ability to distinguish the empirical features from reflected and refracted social relations. What especially his mature or postclassical works make

¹Here I am indebted to Jane K. Brown, without whose criticism I could not have arrived at this formulation.

²On Goethe's responses to fashion, see Boyle's reading of *Werther* as well as Daniel Purdy's *Tyranny of Elegance*.

clear is that this distinction *must* be confounded if sublime objects are to fulfill their ideological function. Aesthetic discourse is, left to its own devices, only able to come to terms with this contradiction in so far as it represses the social.

The repression of the social field leads to the problem of unintelligibility (so, again, back to the problem of scholarly production and sociality). If two positions are unintelligible to each other, it is because neither can see how their divergent position and its attendant social and aesthetic values are driven by material processes which far outstrip what an individual human consciousness can account for in any given moment. This is, on my reading, the phenomenon which Goethe's mature literature aims to represent. In doing so, Goethe diagnoses the aesthetic as a symptom of the occlusion and repression of the social. The aesthetic can only be constructed as an independent sphere when confounding and upsetting experience of the social is expelled from consideration. To compensate for the failure of this repression, aesthetics symptomatically constructs itself as the universal. But the dream-like harmony of the aesthetic arises, Goethe shows, as a compensation for the repression of an originally much more diffuse and indeterminate social affect—still speaking with Freud, we could call it infant sexuality; Nietzsche's word for it was *Fernstenliebe*.³

What Goethe shows is that if we want to understand the aesthetic—that is, if we want to understand historically how we come to imprison ourselves in aesthetic fortresses—we have to trace the formation of the aesthetic back to the scene of an original displacement. That is the work undertaken in the chapters that follow.

To conclude I will sum up and clarify once more the implications of this Goethean view of the sublime: if the religious sublime is a self-crushing experience of awe, and the Kantian sublime

³*Fernstenliebe* (the love of the furthest) is Nietzsche's counter-concept to the notion of *Nächstenliebe* (the love of the nearest, or of one's neighbour).

culminates in realizing one's ability to transcend nature, Goethe is saying that both of these go further than is necessary (this will be explained in 3.3 on the basis of Goethe's notion of tragedy as elaborated in *Shakespeare und kein Ende!*). Once you arrive at the limit of your ability to distinguish empirical and social attributes, and have recognized that what you are dealing with is a sublime object, Goethe says you have already arrived at the *Urphänomen*. Goethe suggests that when you reach this point, the project of knowledge is, at least for the moment, exhausted.

Chapter 1

From *das Erhabene* to the Sublime

1.1 Melancholy Renaissance

Zart Gedicht, wie Regenbogen,

Wird nur auf dunklen Grund gezogen.⁴

The first part of this story has been told: in the Renaissance, the allegorical figure of Melancholy was reinterpreted and revalued in ways that can now be seen as emblematic of the emergence of modern creative subjectivity. In his classic interpretation of Albrecht Dürer's 'Melencolia I,' Erwin Panofsky showed the striking ways in which Dürer's Melancholia broke free of her ancestry. Melancholia's origins are in the humoral theories that were already fully developed in late antiquity. According to humoral physiology, a person's temperament was an effect of the balance among their four vital fluids of choler, phlegm, blood and melancholy. Because since the fall from grace, no person could achieve the ideal or perfectly healthy balance among the four humors, in every individual one humor always prevails as the determinant of his personality or character type. "As long as the predominance of any one humor keeps within reasonable bounds the mind and body of the individual is merely qualified in this peculiar way. But if his humor gets out of control [...] he ceases to be a normal or "natural" phlegmatic, melancholic, etc. He falls sick and may ultimately die..."⁵

⁴WA I/2, 237.

⁵Panofsky 158.

Of the four temperaments, the sanguine constitution, associated with youth and spring, was the most desirable, while the melancholic "was hated and feared as the worst."⁶ Black gall, which was imagined to cause melancholia, made the melancholic both unfortunate and disagreeable, and in extreme cases could cause madness. Among the adjectives attributed to the constitutional melancholic, Panofsky further lists "awkward, miserly, spiteful, greedy, malicious, cowardly, faithless, irreverent and drowsy;" "surly, sad forgetful, lazy and sluggish." The only redeeming quality of the victim of black gall was "a certain inclination for solitary study," although this feature was frequently omitted from representations.

Prior to Dürer, there were two main genres which deployed representations of Melancholy: medical treatises, which treated of it as a disease, and offered different methods of treatment, and popular broad-sheets, Calendars and "Complexbüchlein," on the other hand, which treated the Melancholic as a type of human nature. "He appeared within a series of four figures or scenes intended to bring out the more or less desirable but, each in its way, perfectly "normal" features of the Four Temperaments."⁷ The scenic mode of illustrating the four temperaments drew upon the medieval tradition of representing the Vices. "During the high Middle Ages the types of human behavior had been studied and depicted not for their own sake but with reference to the system of moral theology. They were not illustrated in secular monographs but, under the guise of Vices [...] Toward the end of the Middle Ages these moralistic patterns were gradually converted into characterological specimens, the accent on good and evil being lessened and ultimately abolished."⁸ As the distinguishing characteristic of the medieval Melancholic had been "glumness and drowsiness," his figure was based on the vice Sloth (*Acedia*). Sloth was

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid. 159.

⁸Ibid. 159.

represented by various figures of "sinful sleep," such as a man asleep at his plow or a woman asleep at her spinning. It was this "gloomy inertia" in the face of unfinished work that provided Dürer with the general idea for his own representation of Melancholy.⁹ But the crucial difference introduced by Dürer was that his Melancholia had become inactive for "entirely opposite reasons" than the women in the older illustrations. Whereas these earlier sinners had fallen asleep out of sheer laziness, Dürer's Melancholia is "super-awake; her fixed stare is one of intent though fruitless searching. She is inactive not because she is too lazy to work but because work has become meaningless to her; her energy is paralyzed not by sleep but by thought."¹⁰ This difference amounts to a paradigmatic shift in the conception of Melancholia; no longer a sluggish left-behind, she is now "a superior being—superior, not only by virtue of her wings but also by virtue of her intelligence and imagination—surrounded by the tools and symbols of creative endeavor and scientific research." Dürer's Melancholia is "a being endowed with the intellectual power and technical accomplishments of an 'Art,' yet despairing under the cloud of a 'black humor' [...] –in short a 'Melancholia artificialis' or Artist's Melancholy [...] She does not hold on to an object which does not exist, but to a problem which cannot be solved."¹¹ She thus typifies "Theoretical Insight which thinks but cannot act."¹²

This metamorphosis of Melancholia was not a product of Dürer's solitary creative genius; rather, it reflected a transformation that had already been underway for some time in humanist thought. The Florentine humanist Marsilio Ficino's Neo-Platonic *Libri de Vita Triplici* (Three Books on Life, 1489) had reworked the concept of melancholy on the basis of a long neglected Aristotelian

⁹Ibid. 160.

¹⁰Ibid. 160.

¹¹Ibid. 162-3.

¹²Ibid. 164.

analysis of "the psycho-physiology of human greatness," according to which the truly melancholic character is at constant risk of madness: "they walk, as it were, on a narrow bridge between two abysses. But they walk, just for this reason, way above the level of ordinary mortals."¹³ If melancholics can learn to manage their precarious equilibrium, their very "anomaly" manifests as beauty. "They may still be subject to depression and overexcitement, but they outrank all other men." Among the Florentine Neo-Platonists, Aristotle's theory was seen to provide a scientific basis for Plato's notion of divine frenzy, and "the expression *furor melancholicus* came to be synonymous with *furor divinus*," such that "the hitherto disparaged melancholy became surrounded with the halo of the sublime."¹⁴ No longer a lost case of sinful stagnation, Melancholia was reborn among the Florentine humanists as an associate of divinity. Dürer knew about the theosis of this once listless daemon from the first version of Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim's *De Occulta Philosophia* (Of Occult Philosophy, 1509/10), which took over entire sentences from Ficino's *Libri de Vita* almost verbatim.¹⁵

As published in 1531, this famous book appears to be an item from the study of Dr. Faustus, fairly confused in plan and full of cabalistic charms, astrological and geomantic tables and other magical devices. The original version of 1509/10, however, which had been dedicated to a friend of Pirckheimer's, the Abbot Trithemius of Würzburg, and was circulated among the German humanists in manuscript form, was a much shorter and more "reasonable" book. It is only about one-third as long as the printed version, and the already noticeable emphasis on magic does not yet obscure a clear and, in its way, consistent system of natural philosophy. The author, largely basing himself on Marsilio Ficino, sets forth the Neo-Platonic doctrine of cosmic forces whose flux and reflux unifies and enlivens the universe, and he tries to show how the operation of these forces enables man not only to practice legitimate magic—as opposed to necromancy and commerce with the Devil—but also to achieve his greatest spiritual and intellectual triumphs.¹⁶

¹³Ibid. 165.

¹⁴Ibid. 165.

¹⁵Ibid. 169. The later, more famous version of this book was not published until 1531, a few years after Dürer's death.

¹⁶Ibid. 168-9.

The Renaissance bequeathed to the Enlightenment an image of Melancholia that was intimately tied to sublimity in the making. As we will see, the semantic countenance of *das Erhabene* is uniquely coloured by its association with melancholy. The new daemonic potentiality that Melancholia acquired through her transvaluation in the hands of the humanists is crucial for understanding the semantic range and implications of *das Erhabene* in the German eighteenth century, in the moment that it came into conflict with the concept of the *sublime* as elaborated by French and English critics, most notably Edmund Burke.

1.2 Enlightenment: Lost in Translation

It is a commonplace of intellectual history that the modern category of the sublime represents the eighteenth century's attempt to secularize a religious conception of divinity by transposing it into the register of aesthetics. But this narrative not only obscures important differences between the English and French contexts and the German context, it also occludes an important counter-tendency within the history of the concept of the sublime. It was through disagreements with critics like Boileau, Dennis, Addison and Burke that German writers were drawn into the discourse on the sublime, for which the treatise attributed to Longinus served as ancient authority and reference point. Immanuel Jacob Pyra, who, according to Carsten Zelle, may well have been the first the first writer in German to dedicate a monograph to clearing up the problem of the sublime, did not translate Longinus' sublime as "das Erhabene," but as "das Hohe" (the elevated, the great)¹⁷. It is significant that for Pyra, the sublime was *not* "das Erhabene." But the tendency in the eighteenth century would quickly become, as it still is today, to translate both the English "sublime," as well as the Greek term used in Longinus' treatise *Peri hýpsous*, into German as *das Erhabene*.

¹⁷Pyra 11. Zelle does not discuss Pyra's choice of "das Hohe" and titles the untitled manuscript "Über das Erhabene."

But something curious happened when some German writers began translating *the sublime* as *das Erhabene* beginning in the middle of the eighteenth century. In English, the use of the word sublime in literary criticism had from about 1700 onward been significantly influenced by Boileau and his French translation of Longinus. The later English as well as German emphasis on the "surprising" aspect of the sublime may be traceable to the account of Longinus given by Boileau in the preface to his translation.¹⁸ Of even greater importance, however, is that even in its pre-Longinian usage, the English term sublime referred to a rhetorical device.¹⁹

By the time of Burke's *Enquiry*, however [the sublime] had undergone important changes [...] Whereas in the early stages the sublime is essentially a style of writing, with Burke it becomes a mode of aesthetic experience found in literature and far beyond it. On the other hand, the sublime acquires a more rigid definition as a quality in objects which excites such an experience. Another change alters the approach to the whole subject of sublimity. In the time of Boileau "sublime" is a term primarily for literary critics; later sublimity is a subject for psychological study by philosophers interested in the relation between human emotions and sublime objects.²⁰

Yet despite Burke's turn towards the psychological and anthropological aspects of the sublime, its traditional identity as a rhetorical figure persists in his theory. For a number of German thinkers in the latter half of the eighteenth century, however, the term *erhaben* still lacked the notion of elevated style or manner which in English goes back at least to the sixteenth century. The concept which the German critics received under the name of *sublime* shipped with rhetorical and aesthetic associations that did not correspond comfortably to the semantic range of *erhaben*. In the theosis and daemonization of Melancholia, we have already encountered one of these associations. It remains to examine the second, related association of *erhaben* which distinguishes it from *sublime*: this is a group of closely related notions that turn around the

¹⁸Boulton xlvi.

¹⁹This is attested by Angel Day's *The English Secretorie* (1586) in which "sublime" is defined as "the highest and stateliest manner, and loftiest deliverance of anything that may be." Quoted in *ibid.* xlv.

²⁰*Ibid.* xlvii.

central ideas of respect and admiration, *Ehrfurcht* and *Bewunderung*. In the following sections, I show how Bodmer and Mendelssohn first tried to distinguish *das Erhabene* from the Sublime and how they argued against its reduction to rhetorical instruments and effects. Bridging the discussions of Bodmer and Mendelssohn, my treatment of Burke's *Enquiry* aims to provide the reader with a sense of what they were up against in the reified visions of English materialism.

1.3 Johann Jakob Bodmer

In his *Critische Briefe*²¹ of 1746, the Zurich critic and philologist Johann Jakob Bodmer uses *das Erhabene* in a technical sense to debate about aesthetics. But contrary to "einige Kunstlehrer" (who go unnamed), the main contention of Bodmer's argument is that *das Erhabene* is not really an aesthetic category at all. In contrast to the subjectivist theory which Kant would eventually develop in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Bodmer maintains that *das Erhabene* inheres objectively in those objects to which *Erhabenheit* is correctly attributed. This requires him to make a distinction between strong, refined minds, who "sich weder durch den Schein der Dinge, noch durch Wahn betrügen lassen," and the gullible, superstitious *Pöbel* who are susceptible to the superficial enthrallments of fashion and other deceptions.²² Those things experienced as *erhaben* by a mind capable of discernment are, for Bodmer, intrinsically *erhaben*.

But what sorts of things can be *erhaben*? To Bodmer, *erhaben* are those things that bring about *Verwunderung* in refined and strong minds capable of measured contemplation and penetration to the truth of things. *Verwunderung* is an experience of *Bewunderung*, of admiration, but with the

²¹Bodmer's earlier text *Vom Wunderbaren in der Poesie* (1740), dedicated to an apology of Milton's poetics, is sometimes considered to be his definitive statement on the sublime. While he does in that text use the notion of *erhaben* in an epithetic way to talk about Milton, he does not in that essay give any explicit definition of his concept of *das Erhabene*. In the *Critische Briefe* he does precisely this. That is why I base my argument on the lesser known text.

²²Bodmer 96.

added dynamic capacity "in Erstaunen, in tiefes Nachsinnen, in Furcht und Schrecken zu setzen."²³ This condition that *erhaben* objects be surprising and unsettling, if not terrifying, is a central feature of Bodmer's account, and it is upon this condition that he bases his position that neither nature nor works of art can be *erhaben*. In the case of nature, we experience awe while contemplating the works of the infinite and all-powerful creator, but they are not *erhaben* because they fail to meet the dynamic condition: the awe of nature is, as he puts it, "keine solche Bewunderung welche das Gemüthe plötzlich in Erstaunen setze." This, Bodmer explains, is because "Der Schöpfer hat nicht wollen, daß der Mensch dadurch aus sich selbst gesetzt, in einer fortwährenden Verzückung lebete. Er hat [die Werke der Natur] ihn [*sic*] nur darum vor das Gesicht gestellt, daß sie ergetzeten, und unterrichteten."²⁴ And since works of art are, according to Bodmer, merely derivative and imitative of nature, and valuable only to the extent that they succeed in imitation, they are likewise incapable of "einen starken Geist in Bewegung oder Unruhe zu setzen," and "dienen allein zum Ergetzen."²⁵

If, according to Bodmer, neither nature or works of art are truly *erhaben*, what is? His answer is that *das Erhabene* is a quality of human or anthropomorphic beings which breaks the mold of quotidian humanness through deeds, words, attitudes and decisions which seem to transcend merely human capabilities. Bodmer includes fictional persons in representation (such as figures from literature and myth) as well as the "Einwohner der unsichtbaren Welt," such as angels, both those of light as well as those of darkness. Bodmer's definition can benefit from examples of beings that do not actually exist, because he has defined *das Erhabene* as an objective quality of person or character that exists regardless of the form in which it is represented. This is why, in

²³Ibid. 101.

²⁴Ibid. 97

²⁵Ibid., 97-8.

the fourth *Critischer Brief*, Bodmer goes on to explicitly deny the existence of such a thing as *erhaben* rhetoric or a formula for producing *das Erhabene*. In an attitude reminiscent of Socrates' position in the *Phaedrus*, Bodmer explicitly attacks Longinus' rhetorical approach in *Peri hýpsous*: "Aber sage ich auch zu viel, daß seine Ausdrücke zum Lob der Ausdrücke nach dem oratorischen Firnisse schmecken?"²⁶ Bodmer allows, however, for the existence of an *erhaben* style, but it is one that reflects or is produced by a truly *erhaben* character.

There is thus, for Bodmer, no way to bring about *erhaben* effects without truly *erhaben* content. This gives him cause to assert that the best way to present *das Erhabene* is through a simple and clear style that is appropriate to its object. The awe which is the fruit of *das Erhabene* is not produced through the medium of language; *das Erhabene* is merely displayed or revealed through it. The best thing style can do is keep itself out of the way.

Bodmer's account differs radically from both Longinus' and Burke's sublime (see below) in its insistence that *das Erhabene* is itself non-aesthetic and cannot be produced by a rule-based poetics or by an instrumental rhetoric. Bodmer's position on the relationship between *das Erhabene* and rhetoric is in this regard analogous to Socrates' positions on the relationship between truth and rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*. In the penultimate paragraph of his third letter, Bodmer expresses the essence of his concept of *das Erhabene* in the following way: "Das Erhabene ist die höchste Kraft des Herzens... sein Gegenstand ist das Grosse, das Vortreffliche in den freyen Handlungen... Es zeigt ein grosses Herz oder eine hohe Natur... Ein grosses Herz verursacht eine gewisse Bewunderung, mit Bestürzung oder Erstaunen vermischet."²⁷

²⁶Ibid. 104.

²⁷Ibid. 102.

In light of this conclusion, there is something incongruous in Bodmer's acceptance of the experience of terror into the definition of *das Erhabene*, as well as his use of the condition of surprise to disqualify works of nature and art from *das Erhabene*. Bodmer adopts a key feature of the French and English discourses on the sublime while excluding one of the central experiences around which the discourse took shape: the quintessential natural sublime as experienced in the crossing of the Alps. Of course, as a native of Zurich, Bodmer never experienced the sudden, crushing awe of seeing them for the first time with adult eyes: for him, the Alps may have been no more terrifying than an English pastoral landscape. Yet this does not explain why Bodmer considered surprise or terror to be an indispensable feature of *das Erhabene* if he would only use it to argue that nature is not in fact *erhaben*.

Whatever Bodmer's reason for accepting this feature into his definition, in his argument its role is to support his position that neither works of nature nor of art are *erhaben*. Bodmer never explains or develops the idea or import of the terrible. He is, in fact, never sure what to call or even how to delimit the condition of surprise in *Verwunderung*, which ranges from *Bewegung* to *Unruhe* to *plötzliches Erstaunen* all the way to *Furcht und Schrecken*. The priority of Bodmer's argument is to demonstrate that *das Erhabene* is a feature of persons that lies beyond the reaches of rhetoric. The condition of surprise or terror supports this priority as well as Bodmer's fundamental rejection of *das Erhabene* as an aesthetic category. Nevertheless, Bodmer's intervention in the discourse on the sublime was a significant contribution to the process whereby *das Erhabene* was drawn into the orbit of literary-critical debate as if it were a conceptual equivalent of the Sublime.

1.4 Edmund Burke

The most important English theoretician of the Sublime would be Edmund Burke, who was still a college student when he began to work on the treatise that eventually gained him notoriety as a critic. But the significance of Burke for the present discussion lies also in the exemplary way he represents the challenge posed to the German metaphysical tradition by the paradigm of English and French materialism. Burke's *Enquiry* is still one of the major touchstones in the debate on the beautiful and the sublime and it was also the text which provoked Moses Mendelssohn to take up the discourse on the sublime.

When Burke thinks about aesthetics, what he is concerned with are pre-reflective psychosomatic responses to objects of sense. He sees aesthetic effects as ultimately rooted in self-preservation and sexual reproduction, which are for him the fundamental instincts of human beings. Providence has, according to Burke, outfitted us in such a way as to guarantee the persistence of human life to some great end of which we are necessarily ignorant. Pain and terror are there to warn us away from life-threatening dangers, while the "great incentive" of sexual pleasure ensures the reproduction of the species²⁸.

Pain and pleasure are qualitatively different, according to Burke. Pain does not consist in the absence or cessation of pleasure, nor is the mere absence of pain the same thing as positive pleasure. Disappointment and grief, for example, he calls *modifications* of pleasure. They arise upon the loss of the object which had been the cause of pleasure. Delight and joy are likewise *modifications* of pain, resulting from its cessation. In physiological terms, both pain and pleasure are related to changes in the tension and stress of muscle fibers. Terror is a premonition of pain, which is itself an emissary of death. When frightened, the body grows tense, just as in actual

²⁸Burke 88 ff.

pain, but to a lesser degree. When this tension is released, we may experience what Burke calls delight, or return directly to a ground-zero of indifference, depending on the intensity of the pain or terror. Pleasure, for its part, does not consist merely in a reduction of tension. Rather, the fibers are coaxed into a positive state of relaxation: they are lulled and massaged into a languor beyond the state of indifference. When pleasure stops, the fibers likewise return to ground-zero.

If, on the way there, we dwell in memory upon the lost object, it is not pain we experience, but melancholy, which he claims is a modification of pleasure.

Of pain and pleasure, the two principal movers of the human animal, Burke states that pain is unequivocally the more powerful. It is from terror that our strongest passions and emotions arise. Fear of pain and death, Burke reasons, must therefore also be the source of the most powerful aesthetic experiences to which we are subject. The Sublime, he concludes, arises from ideas and impressions related to terror and to terrifying objects, and thus has its roots in the experience of pain. The Beautiful, on the other hand, arises from impressions which evoke calm, contemplative pleasure.

Because the sublime arises on Burke's account from terror and pain, his association of melancholy with pleasure effectively undoes the Renaissance association of melancholy and the sublime. As will be shown below with reference to the melancholically inflected Miltonian sublime, this disassociation of melancholy and the sublime in Burke's analysis ultimately leads to a failure to penetrate beyond the most superficial conception of the role played by the sublime in poetry.

The delight we take in the Sublime is for Burke thus not a positive pleasure, such as that which is connected to the Beautiful. It is a modification of pain made possible by our distance from

personal danger. Immunity from bodily harm is not in itself sufficient to produce the Sublime, but it is its necessary condition. Terrifying and spectacular stagings of state violence, such as public tortures and executions, serve Burke as the most striking examples of safety-enabled *Schadenfreude*. Mere representations of suffering and death, he further argues, such as abound in poetry, painting, and tragic theater, can never approach the aesthetic power of the real mutilation of living bodies. To make this point, Burke invites his reader to

Chuse a day on which to represent the most sublime and affecting tragedy we have; appoint the most favourite actors; spare no cost upon the scenes and decorations; unite the greatest efforts of poetry, painting and music; and when you have collected your audience, just at the moment when their minds are erect with expectation, let it be reported that a state criminal of high rank is on the point of being executed in the adjoining square; in a moment the emptiness of the theatre would demonstrate the comparative weakness of the imitative arts, and proclaim the triumph of the real sympathy.²⁹

Sympathy, along with imitation and ambition, are key terms in Burke's understanding of how God hardwired our aesthetic apparatus to create passions that are "agreeable to that variety of ends they are to serve in the the great chain of society."³⁰ This society is imagined by Burke as divided between what he calls society in general, and the society of the sexes. Society in general includes the relationships men have to one another, to the inanimate world, and to non-human animals. Relationships between men and women belong to another realm. The society of the sexes is governed, as we have already seen, by a system of object relations driven by pleasure and its attendant aesthetic effect, the Beautiful. The beauty of particular women is for Burke a social quality which accounts for how men, who are drawn to the opposite sex in general, are able to make socially relevant distinctions among them.

²⁹Ibid. 93.

³⁰Ibid. 90.

General society, on the other hand, is built at bottom on fear and on antagonism between males. Were it not for the providential passions of sympathy, imitation and ambition, society in general would devolve into the sort of mutual slaughter and anarchy postulated by Hobbes. Mass society at an anonymous level offers no positive pleasure. Absolute solitude of extended duration, on the other hand, does produce a positive pain. We are thus pushed by the pain of solitude towards social organization, despite the fact that relationships between males are essentially frightening. "Look at a man, or any other animal of prodigious strength, and what is your idea before reflection? Is it that this strength will be subservient to you, to your ease, to your pleasure, to your interest in any sense? No; the emotion you feel is, lest this enormous strength should be employed to the purposes of rapine and destruction."³¹

Burke's interest in aesthetics is driven by his interest in social order. For Burke, the aesthetic experience of the sublime is at bottom about terror and self-preservation. That is to say that Burke is ultimately interested in how the sublime as a rhetorical strategy can be harnessed to the end of social control. This bent to Burke's interest makes itself felt at nearly every point of his discussion, but it is perhaps nowhere more limiting than in his understanding of poetry as a technology of power with dominion over the passions. This leads him to adopt the position that poetry is at its best when it is most obscure and confused; indeed that clarity works against the ends of poetry, since clarity is an "enemy to all enthusiasms whatsoever."³² Strangest of all, however, is Burke's contention that it is "our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration."³³ These ideas occur in the fourth and fifth sections of the second part of Burke's

³¹Ibid. 108.

³²Ibid. 60.

³³Ibid. 61.

treatise and culminate in a brief discussion of the sublime Satan of *Paradise Lost*, whom Milton rendered in the lines:

He above the rest
 In shape and gesture proudly eminent
 Stood like a tower; his form had not yet lost
 All her original brightness, nor appeared
 Less than archangel ruin'd, and th' excess
 Of glory obscured: as when the sun new ris'n
 Looks through the horizontal misty air
 Shorn of his beams; or from behind the moon
 In dim eclipse disastrous twilight sheds
 On half the nations; and with fear of change
 Perplexes monarchs.

According to Burke's analysis of this passage, "The mind is hurried out of itself, by a croud of great and confused images; which affect because they are crouded and confused [...] The images raised by poetry are always of this obscure kind; though in general the effects of poetry, are by no means to be attributed to the images it raises [...]"³⁴ It is not clear whether Burke intends to discuss poetry or his inability to do so: in fact, he performatively contradicts his own position that the effects of poetry are not linked to the images it raises. In perceiving only a confused profusion of images that excite the passions, Burke identifies his own authorial position with that of Milton's perplexed, stability-obsessed monarchs, who cannot read "th' excess / Of glory obscured."

³⁴Ibid. 62.

Burke's discourse on the sublime, driven as it is by an obsession with social control, can neither accommodate the experience of the melancholic nor explain the meaning of the sublime for poetry. He doesn't seem to have understood that poetry is the very process which distills diabolically jumbled negativity—"th' excess / Of glory obscured"—into clarity.

1.5 Moses Mendelssohn

The aesthetic malpractice noted above played a significant role in motivating Mendelssohn's critique of the *Enquiry*: while he admits that "Der Verfasser ist ein sehr guter Beobachter der Natur,"³⁵ (by which he identifies Burke's interest in the sublime as primarily anthropological, a tendency that is also predominant in Kant's 1764 treatise on the Beautiful and the Sublime³⁶) he has little praise for Burke's insights on the beautiful. He has more positive to say about Burke's treatment of the sublime in Part IV of the treatise. But in order for Mendelssohn to engage Burke in a discussion of the sublime, he has first to make an important distinction between what he calls "das primarie" or "ursprünglich Erhabene" and "das secundarie Erhabene." Mendelssohn's initial reaction to Burke was to question whether what Burke was calling the sublime was indeed *das Erhabene*. Mendelssohn's first reflections on Burke are contained in a lengthy letter which he sent to Lessing in 1758, in which he responded to Burke's *Enquiry*, which had just been published anonymously. It is clear from the way Mendelssohn ends the letter that he hoped to

³⁵Mendelssohn 111.

³⁶Goethe mentioned Kant's pre-critical book on taste to Schiller in a letter of 1795, asking him "Kennen Sie die Kantischen Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen von 1771 [Goethe is referring to the third, only slightly modified edition of the book originally published in 1764.]? Es wäre eine recht artige Schrift, wenn die Worte *schön* und *erhaben* auf dem Titel gar nicht stünden und im Büchelchen selbst seltner vorkämen. Es ist voll allerliebster Bemerkungen über die Menschen, und man sieht seine Grundsätze schon keimen." (18.2.1795, WA IV/10, 235). Schiller responded with the observation that "Die Ausführung ist bloß anthropologisch, und über die letzten Gründe des Schönen lernt man darin nichts. Aber als Physik und Naturgeschichte des Erhabenen und Schönen enthält es manchen fruchtbaren Stoff. Für die ernsthafte Materie schien mir der Stil etwas zu spielend und blumenreich; ein sonderbarer Fehler an einem Kant, der aber wieder sehr begreiflich ist." (19.2.1795, BSG I, 59). What Goethe and Schiller agreed on was that Kant's anthropological interest had taken his treatment in a direction that diverged significantly from the questions about the beautiful and the sublime that they were discussing in their letters of the 1790s.

engage his friend Lessing in a dialogue on the subject, calling his own thoughts "bloße Embryonen von Gedanken, die ein Lessing erst entwickeln und beseelen muß" and expressing the wish that Lessing might also be up to the task of "einigen von meinen Mißgeburten eine regelmäßige Gestalt geben und ein Leben einhauchen."³⁷

Compared to the relatively restrained review of the book which he published later that year, this first response was at points much more sharply critical of Burke's account.³⁸ The starting point of his critique, and it is far from trivial, is a rejection of the pleasure-pain principle, which is a foundational anthropological principle for Burke. With this move Mendelssohn effectively rejects the anthropological linchpin of Hobbes, Hume, Locke, Shaftesbury, and the rest of the mainstream of English and French versions of materialism. Mendelssohn's contention is that the concepts of pleasure and pain are not, as Burke puts it, "simple ideas, incapable of definition," but "dunkle Begriffe," obscure, ill-defined concepts.³⁹ This is a negative correlate of a central idea of Mendelssohn's Spinozistic theory of mixed sentiments, which he here expresses in the question of "ob man nicht behaupten kann, es gebe durchaus keine Empfindung, die ganz rein angenehm oder unangenehm sei."⁴⁰ Another, connected point of contention is Burke's assertion that that the drive for self-preservation can be a source of the sublime. For Mendelssohn, the

³⁷Mendelssohn 114. In the enclosure of this letter sent to Lessing can also be found Mendelssohn's articulation of the central idea of Lessing's *Laökoon*, the definition of the difference between poetry and visual art. "Man begehrt gemeinlich den Fehler, daß man die Wirkungen zweier Kräfte vergleicht, ohne dasjenige in Betrachtung zu ziehen, was eine jede Kunst in ihrer Art bestimmt. Soll die Malerei mit der Poesie verglichen werden, so muß man den Unterschied beständig vor Augen haben, daß jene in der Folge neben einander, diese hingegen in der Folge auf einander wirkt." This formulation is a restatement of what he had already stated in the previous section: "Daß uns die Gemälde und Bilder überhaupt durch Worte nicht so klar geschildert werden können, als in der Malerei, kommt vielleicht daher, daß uns die Worte eigentlich dasjenige in der Folge auf einander vorstellen, was in dem Gegenstände neben einander existiert." Ibid. 113. These reflections were written in response to Burke's brief discussion of Milton mentioned above.

³⁸Cf. Pollok, XVI.

³⁹Mendelssohn 108.

⁴⁰Ibid. 111.

"heftigen Gemüthsbewegungen, aus welchen die Erhabenheit entstehen soll" cannot have self-preservation as their sole impetus. On the contrary, he sees the powerful emotions which arise "aus gesellschaftlichen Neigungen" to be a far more fruitful "Quelle des Erhabenen."⁴¹

With this, the foundation of Mendelssohn's divergence from Burke is laid. For Mendelssohn, *das Erhabene* is ultimately an interpersonal phenomenon. For Mendelssohn, the movement from a feeling that has a social origin to a cathexis of inanimate objects, such as that which Burke tries to draw between sympathy and imitation, requires a leap that is logically inconsistent: "Welch ein Sprung! wir sind aus Sympathie geneigt nachzumachen, was andere Menschen tun; daher vergnügen wir uns an der Nachahmung eines Misthaufens oder eines Küchengerätes."⁴² Mendelssohn is perplexed as to how Burke can miss the obvious conclusion that the source of *das Erhabene* is to be found in admiration: "Die Betrachtung, daß das Erhabene ein Erstaunen zuwege bringen kann, hätte leichtlich den Verfasser auf die Folge leiten können, daß die Bewunderung die Quelle des Erhabenen sei; denn das Erstaunen ist bloß ein höherer Grad von Bewunderung." And this is indeed Mendelssohn's position.

Mendelssohn thus argues that what Burke calls the sublime is really just a secondary phenomenon, which he calls "secundarie Erhabene," by which he means the properly aesthetic sublime ("die Beförderungsmittel des Erhabenen")⁴³, that aspect of the sublime to which rhetoric and artistic craftsmanship can contribute. He makes this distinction in order to preserve what he calls "das primarie" or originary *Erhabene*, whose source is to be found in the social affect of *Bewunderung*. At this point for Mendelssohn, *Bewunderung* is sufficient to act as a first cause that requires no further psychological or physiological explanation. Mendelssohn finds Burke

⁴¹Ibid. 109.

⁴²Ibid. 112.

⁴³Ibid.

much more useful when it comes to this secondary *Erhabene*, those rhetorical and artistic techniques conducive to the presentation of the "ursprünglich Erhabene." These rhetorical notions rest on physiological and psychological descriptions which Mendelssohn finds interesting and in which he, subsequently, likewise engages.

Mendelssohn's initial response to Burke thus involves saying that Burke is wrong about what the sublime is. From Mendelssohn's perspective, Burke is talking about something else at the anthropological crossroads of aesthetics, physiology and psychology. To him this wasn't *das Erhabene*, but he was still genuinely interested in what Burke was getting at and he wanted to engage in a discussion of it, though on the condition of specifying it as secondary. We can thus see that while Mendelssohn resists the aestheticization of the "primary" sublime, he also goes some way towards furthering the development of an aesthetic discourse on *das Erhabene*, as if he were indeed referring to the same thing Burke was referring to by the name sublime.

1.6 Johann Wolfgang Goethe

A decade after Bodmer published his *Critische Briefe*, at the outset of 1757, a precocious young poet by the name of Johann Wolfgang Goethe was still using the word *erhaben* in an even more naive or primitive sense than that expounded by Bodmer. This earliest of his surviving poems, written for his grandparents on the occasion of the New Year of 1757, had the purpose, as he put it, of demonstrating to his "hochgeehrtesten und herzlichgeliebten Großeltern die Gesinnungen kindlicher Hochachtung und Liebe":

Erhabener Großpapa! Ein Neues Jahr erscheint,
 Drum muß ich meine Pflicht und Schuldigkeit entrichten,
 Die Ehrfurcht heißt mich hier aus reinem Herz zu dichten,
 So schlecht es aber ist, so gut ist es gemeint.

Gott, der die Zeit erneuert, erneure auch Ihr Glück,
 Und kröne Sie dies Jahr mit stetem Wohlergehen;
 Ihr Wohlsein müsse lang so fest wie Zedern stehen,
 Ihr Tun begleite stets ein günstiges Geschick;
 Ihr Haus sei wie bisher des Segens Sammelplatz,
 Und lasse Sie noch spät Möninens Ruder führen,
 Gesundheit müsse Sie bis an Ihr Ende zieren,
 Dann diese ist gewiß der allergrößte Schatz.

Erhabene Großmama! Des Jahres erster Tag
 Erweckt in meiner Brust ein zärtliches Empfinden
 Und heißt mich ebenfalls Sie jetzo anzubinden
 Mit Versen, die vielleicht kein Kenner lesen mag;
 Indessen hören Sie die schlechten Zeilen an,
 Indem sie wie ein Wunsch aus wahrer Liebe fließen.
 Der Segen müsse sich heut über Sie ergießen,
 Der Höchste schütze Sie, wie er bisher getan.
 Er wolle Ihnen stets, was Sie sich wünschen, geben
 Und lasse Sie noch oft ein Neues Jahr erleben.
 Dies sind die Erstlinge, die Sie anheut empfangen,
 Die Feder wird hinfort mehr Fertigkeit erlangen.⁴⁴

In his biography of Goethe, Nicholas Boyle translates this poem's opening word as "Sublime."⁴⁵

The aim of this introductory chapter is, in a nutshell, to make plausible the possibility that

⁴⁴WA I/37, 1-2.

⁴⁵Boyle I, 55.

Boyle's is a mistranslation. Goethe clearly has something quite different in mind than what contemporary English speakers or the English-speaking eighteenth century would have associated with the Sublime. The affect at which Goethe's usage aims is closer in meaning to *Bewunderung*, admiration or veneration, than it is even to Bodmer's *Verwunderung* (we have seen that for Mendelssohn, the difference between *Bewunderung* and *Erstaunen* is merely one of degree). Indeed, "Sublime Grandfather" is a very strange thing to say in English, although *erhaben* works naturally in Goethe's fledgling lyric. And yet the conceptual equivalence of the sublime and *das Erhabene* is such a commonplace that we are apt not to register Boyle's "Sublime Grandpapa" as a mistranslation. Of course, the eight year old Goethe would not have been aware of the new semantic contours that were accruing to *erhaben* in criticism and aesthetic theory. We saw how when Bodmer and Mendelssohn interrogated the meaning of *das Erhabene*, they both talked about *Bewunderung* or *Verwunderung*, that is, they talked about it increasingly as a surprising and unexpected experience of *Ehrfurcht*. This corroborates the eight-year old Goethe's usage, although with a crucial difference: namely, the usage of the older men has the added element of delay or belatedness. For the eight-year old Goethe, there was not yet anything at all surprising about the experience of *Ehrfurcht*. Another feature of Goethe's usage, however, points towards the future of the sublime: *das Erhabene* was already tied up for Goethe with the struggle to refine an imperfect aesthetic practice, and his first poem captures beautifully many of the anxieties that the vocation of writing entails.

1.7 Herder's Sublime Melancholy

I have thus far argued that the German Enlightenment inherited a notion of *das Erhabene* that was distinct from the Burkean sublime for two reasons: 1) *das Erhabene* was associated with melancholia, on the one hand, and with notions of awe and respect, on the other; 2) *das Erhabene* was not primarily a rhetorical strategy but an interpersonal phenomenon, a social

affect. By focussing on moments in the reception of the concept of the sublime in which we can see German critics wrestling with and resisting those elements of the English discourse which were contrary to these particular resonances, I have attempted to show how over the course of the eighteenth century, the German concept of *das Erhabene* was displaced by a concept of the Sublime that shipped with predominantly aesthetic and anthropological aspects that played no part in earlier German usage.

It remains to be shown that, although Goethe would eventually become one of the foremost innovators of the aesthetics of the sublime, his usage strived always to maintain an open valence to the older meanings which the new, aestheticized concept of the sublime threatened to consign to history. I will now show how the features of *das Erhabene* thus far identified: that it involves melancholy and respect, and that it is an interpersonal phenomenon, are all in evidence in Goethe's mature treatment of the sublime. This constellation of meanings attached to *das Erhabene* occupied a highly significant and personal place in Goethe's intellectual development. This is because they were associated in his mind with his memory of his friend and early mentor, Herder.

In the following, I do not give an interpretation of Herder's theory of the sublime.⁴⁶ I argue that in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Goethe has left a coded interpretation of Herder's *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*. It is not merely an interpretation of the *Abhandlung's* apodictic content, however. It simultaneously shows how Goethe imagined Herder's life and thought to reciprocally condition one another. The point that emerges from this is one of the guiding arguments of the dissertation: *the question of the Sublime is interesting to Goethe to the extent that it serves to interrogate the reciprocal conditioning of life and thought.*

⁴⁶The lack of a discussion of Herder's theory of the sublime is a major weakness of my account. It is among the major additions I will make as I revise the argument for publication as a book.

In Book 10 of his poetic autobiography *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Goethe calls his first meeting with Herder in Strasbourg in 1770 and the ensuing acquaintance with him "das bedeutendste Ereigniß, was die wichtigsten Folgen für mich haben sollte."⁴⁷ Herder was Goethe's elder by five years—a significant gap in one's twenties, as Goethe remarks—and had already made a name for himself with critical interventions such as *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur. Fragmente* and *Kritische Wälder*. Goethe, who had not yet made his mark on the cultural scene, was understandably in awe of the accomplishment and broad learning of his new acquaintance.

But Goethe's recollections of the beginning of his acquaintance with Herder are also marked by a profound ambivalence. Goethe relates that his respect and Herder's seniority meant that Herder "mußte [...] eine große Superiorität über mich gewinnen. Aber behaglich war der Zustand nicht:" he continues, "denn ältere Personen, mit denen ich bisher umgegangen, hatten mich mit Schonung zu bilden gesucht, vielleicht auch durch Nachgiebigkeit verzogen."⁴⁸ Herder, however, productively challenged Goethe in ways he had never before been pushed, subjecting him to what comes close to sounding, in Goethe's recollection, like an intellectual hazing.⁴⁹ When Goethe told Herder of his collection of official state seals of feudal lords and petty princes, for instance, the latter "verwarf nicht allein dieses ganze Interesse, sondern wußte es mir auch lächerlich zu machen, ja beinahe zu verleiden."⁵⁰ The pain of the (unsuccessful) eye operation which Herder underwent in Strasbourg—during the recovery from which Goethe would visit him mornings and evenings, sometimes even spending entire days with him—he would take out on

⁴⁷WA I/27, 302.

⁴⁸WA I/27, 307.

⁴⁹Goethe places the encounter with Herder almost directly in the middle of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. The centrality of pedagogical violence or "hazing" as I have called it here is also dramatically underscored by the Greek epigraph which Goethe takes from the Athenian New Comedy poet Menander and sets at the beginning of *DuW*, which is translated in the commentary of the Frankfurter Ausgabe as "Der nicht geschundene Mensch wird nicht erzogen" (FA I/14, 1074).

⁵⁰WA I/27, 305.

Goethe with his mocking wit. "Er konnte nicht ein Billet schreiben, um etwas zu verlangen, das nicht mit irgend einer Verhöhnung gewürzt gewesen wäre. So schrieb er mir zum Beispiel einmal:

Wenn des Brutus Briefe dir sind in Cicero's Briefen,
 Dir, den die Tröster der Schulen von wohlgehobelten Brettern,
 Prachtgerüstete, trösten, doch mehr von außen als innen,
 Der von Göttern du stammst, von Goten oder vom Kote,
 Goethe, sende mir sie.⁵¹

While Goethe admits that there is a kernel of truth in Herder's upbraiding of a superficial strain in his book *fetishism*, he is bothered by the liberties Herder permits himself with his name, which, after all, he didn't choose and couldn't change. "Indem nun also auf der einen Seite meine große Neigung und Verehrung für ihn, und auf der andern das Mißbehagen, das er in mir erweckte, beständig mit einander im Streit lagen; so entstand ein Zwiespalt in mir, der erste in seiner Art, den ich in meinem Leben empfunden hatte⁵². Thus began a process of critical reflection which Goethe describes as "gerechten Tadel von ungerechten Invektiven zu unterscheiden. Und so war denn auch kein Tag, der nicht auf das fruchtbarste lehrreich für mich gewesen wäre."⁵³ Most importantly, Goethe describes how, through Herder, he gained a radically new, demotic understanding of literature, based in the idea that poetry was "eine Welt- und Völkergabe [...], nicht ein Privat-Erbtheil einiger feinen, gebildeten Männer."⁵⁴

⁵¹WA I/27, 311.

⁵²WA I/27, 307-8.

⁵³WA I/27, 313.

⁵⁴WA I/27, 313.

It was during this time in Strasbourg that Herder was completing his prize essay *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772), which he gave to Goethe to read in manuscript as each part was completed. Herder translated the question posed by the Berlin *Akademie der Wissenschaften* for himself into German as "Haben die Menschen, ihren Naturfähigkeiten überlassen, sich selbst Sprache erfinden können?"⁵⁵

Goethe writes in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* that the question posed for the contest didn't quite make sense to him. Goethe was "zu sehr in der Mitte der Dinge befangen, als daß ich hätte an Anfang und Ende denken sollen [...] War der Mensch göttlichen Ursprungs, so war es ja auch die Sprache selbst, und war der Mensch in dem Umkreis der Natur betrachtet, ein natürliches Wesen, so war die Sprache gleichfalls natürlich. Diese beiden Dinge konnte ich wie Seel' und Leib niemals auseinander bringen."⁵⁶ These lines are sometimes taken as evidence of Goethe's dismissal of the prize essay question's conceptual foundations and hence its importance.⁵⁷ This is a difficult position to maintain, however, since, as Goethe goes on to say "Ich las die Abhandlung mit großem Vergnügen und zu meiner besondern Kräftigung; allein ich stand nicht hoch genug, weder im Wissen noch im Denken, um ein Urteil darüber zu begründen."⁵⁸

By stating that at the time, he did not have the capacity to form a judgment on the *Abhandlung*, Goethe sets himself up for the question "and now?" It is precisely this judgement, I argue, that Goethe provides in a highly coded way in Book 10 of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. Here, Goethe returns to Herder's *Abhandlung* and reads it as emblematic of his mentor's fundamental

⁵⁵SW V, 1.

⁵⁶WA I/27, 309.

⁵⁷Goethe is implying that what he did not yet understand that the question's importance, as framed, could only be made sense of in the context of the contemporary discourse (of which he was largely ignorant) and its social and political implications. Cf. Clark, Jr. (1955) 132; 136.

⁵⁸WA I/27, 310.

intellectual gesture. The judgement which the twenty-year-old could not yet form finally comes together four decades later in the narrative reflections of the mature autobiographer.⁵⁹ To understand this reassessment, we will first have to address the argument of the prize essay, and pay a visit to Goethe's groundbreaking epistolary novel, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*.

In stark contrast to Goethe's puzzlement over the rationalistic presuppositions of the prize question, Herder called the question "eine vortrefliche, grosse, u. wahrhaftig Philosophische."⁶⁰ This was in no small measure because the question seemed perfectly tailored to Herder's literary-historical and philological background and interests. Despite the often-leveled charge that the empirical evidence Herder relies on is sparse,⁶¹ the characteristic move he makes is to first shift the paradigm of argumentation away from the rationalist assumptions apparent in the question's phrasing, and onto the ground of the material record of human languages contained in literary history and in the emerging anthropological discourse. Herder thus aims to offer not a hypothesis, as the prize question had demanded, but what he claims is historical fact perfectly legible in nature and in the written record of humanity.

Like his predecessors Condillac and Rousseau, Herder starts with the idea that there is a cry of nature or *Natursprache* in which all animals vocalize passion, woe, pain and pleasure. The bond which this sound and resonance creates among similarly outfitted creatures results in what he calls a "Mechanik fühlender Körper."⁶² For Herder, however, this does nothing to explain the

⁵⁹ According to FA, The second part (containing books 6-10) of *Dichtung und Wahrheit* was dictated between September 1811 and October 1812 (FA I/14, 1002). According to entries in Goethe's diary, the episode concerning Herder in Strasbourg was written from April 2-6, 1811 (WA III/4, 195-6). On August 4 1812 he (re-)read Herder's *Kalligone* and *Lebensbeschreibung* (WA III/4, 225). And Sept. 9 1812 he went through the "das Herdersche Verhältniß" described in the tenth book before reviewing the manuscript of the 9th and 10th books on the following day (WA III/4, 320).

⁶⁰ SW IV, 405.

⁶¹ Cf. Clark, Jr. 132-3.

⁶² SW V, 3.

particular difference of human language. "Condillac und Rousseau mußten über den Sprachursprung irren, weil sie sich über diesen Unterschied so bekannt und verschieden irrten: da jener [...] die Tiere zu Menschen und dieser [...] die Menschen zu Tiere machte."⁶³ Herder wants to explain human language in a way that accounts for humanity's emergence from nature without making us into mechanistic effects of an "empfindsame Maschine." Similarly to what we saw in Mendelssohn's confrontation with Burke, Herder's concern is to construct a discourse that can maintain its indeterminacy in the face of the ossifying visions of a deterministic materialism. But Herder's strategy is not to bracket anthropology, but to construct an anthropological discourse with the human invention of language at its core. To do this he theorizes the difference between animals and humans in environmental terms. Animal life, he explains, is restricted to relatively small and circumscribed spheres of activity in which animals can achieve instinctual perfection because of a focus of their sensory organization upon their bounded natural environment. This limited environment is the proper sphere of *Natursprache*; it connects individual organisms with each other at the level of feeling and creates an intra-species exchange about sensuous experience.

Humans, however, are not restricted to an environment that is so small, enclosed, and self-evident. Animals of a species know what each other are sounding about because they are sensuously immersed in the same element and bound up with one another at the level of aesthetic organization focused on a common goal—a beehive is one such example.⁶⁴ What is fundamentally different about humans is that their environment and sphere of activity is the entire world and their social or species horizon encompasses all of humanity. This means that humans lack a

⁶³SW V, 21.

⁶⁴"Die Biene in ihrem Korbe bauet mit der Weisheit, die Egeria ihrem Numa nicht lehren konnte; aber außer dieser Zellen und außer ihrem Bestimmungsgeschäft in diesen Zellen ist sie auch nichts. Die Spinne webet mit der Kunst der Minerva; aber alle ihre Kunst ist auch in diesen engen Spinnraum verwebet; das ist ihre Welt! Wie wundersam ist das Insekt und wie eng der Kreis seiner Wirkung!" SW V, 23.

natural environmental frame of reference, a small sphere which can be governed by the instinctual sounding of feeling. For Herder, this is crucially not a mere difference of degree. The global trajectory of the human means that, by virtue of its uprootedness, instinct falls away and the human becomes an artificial being. For to be human involves creatively taking part in determining one's purpose with regard to nature. This is the sense in which, as Goethe writes in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, "Herders Abhandlung ging darauf hinaus, zu zeigen, wie der Mensch wohl aus eigenen Kräften zu einer Sprache gelangen könne und müsse."⁶⁵

This diasporic condition of humanity dictates that human language become abstract, conceptual and historical. The lack of a commonly sensed environment among humans means that human language must be able to describe things in their absence [*schildern*]; it must be able to mediate between different environments and be comprehensible to people who have never shared quite the same frame of sense references. It has to do this so it can create the possibility for communication across generational, social, national and geographic difference. An important aspect of the particularly human quality of language is thus to be found in its capacity to transcend aesthetic particularism and prejudice.

But the difference between human and animal in Herder is not as simple as an opposition between, on one side, blind instinct and mechanistic feeling, and on the other side, abstract, conceptual language applied in the service of self-positing aims. This has to do with Herder's understanding of temporality and transformation as well as his conviction that history, properly understood, is the only possible foundation of philosophy. As Hans Dietrich Irscher has put it, "der Begriff 'Ursprung' [wird] von Herder überwiegend in der Bedeutung von 'Wesen' verwendet,

⁶⁵WA I/27, 310.

doch bleibt sein zeitliches Verständnis stets gegenwärtig."⁶⁶ When humans invent their artificial conceptual language, the *Natursprache*, the sounding and resounding of feeling nature, is not cancelled; only in the human, it becomes caught up in reflective processes which give it a fundamentally new character and trajectory: "*In allen Sprachen des Ursprungs tönen noch Reste dieser Naturtöne*; nur freilich sind sie nicht die Hauptfäden der menschlichen Sprache. Sie sind nicht die eigentlichen Wurzeln," says Herder, "aber die Säfte, die die Wurzeln der Sprache beleben."⁶⁷

Human language is both inherited and taught as well as creatively appropriated anew by each individual and successive generation. The historicity of human language means that for language to be truly human, it is necessary that its origin and history be recalled and reflected. The humanity of language thus consists in its becoming conceptual and universal without falling out of communication with its origin. Or, to recall what Hans Dietrich Irscher says about how Herder uses the concept *Ursprung*, we could say that humanity means using language without forgetting what language essentially is. To be dominated and controlled by the surging of feeling in language, is to fall short of language in the human sense; but to close oneself off or become deaf to it is nothing less than barbarous:

Da unsre Töne der Natur zum Ausdruck der Leidenschaft bestimmt sind, so ist natürlich, daß sie auch die Elemente aller Rührung werden! Wer ist, dem bei einem zuckenden, wimmernden Gequälten, bei einem ächzenden Sterbenden, auch selbst bei einem stöhnenden Vieh, wenn seine ganze Maschine leidet, dies Ach nicht zu Herzen dringe? Wer ist der fühllose Barbar? Je harmonischer das empfindsame Saitenspiel selbst bei Tieren mit anderen Tieren gewebt ist, desto mehr fühlen selbst diese miteinander: ihre Nerven kommen in eine gleichmäßige Spannung, ihre Seele in einen gleichmäßigen Ton, sie leiden wirklich mechanisch mit. Und welche Stählung seiner Fibern! Welche Macht, alle Öffnungen seiner

⁶⁶Irscher 58. Cf. also Clark, Jr. 136: "The real question, from beginning to end, was that of the *nature* and *use* of language."

⁶⁷SW V, 9.

Empfindsamkeit zu verstopfen, gehört dazu, daß ein Mensch hingegen taub und hart werde!⁶⁸

But over time, the strategy of controlling animal natures and passions through the displacements and repressions of increasingly abstract, conceptual language—even when supported by complementary cultural forms which have the same aim—is destined to fail. One way or another, Herder maintained, nature will sound:

Unsre künstliche Sprache mag die Sprache der Natur so verdränget, unsre bürgerliche Lebensart und gesellschaftliche Artigkeit mag die Flut und das Meer der Leidenschaften so gedämmt, ausgetrocknet und abgeleitet haben, als man will; der heftigste Augenblick der Empfindung, wo und wie selten er sich finde, nimmt noch immer sein Recht wieder und tönt in seiner mütterlichen Sprache [...].⁶⁹

The problem of human language, then, is neither how to overcome nor how to release the storm and stress of woe and passion; it is rather a question of how feeling will participate in consciousness. For Herder, the notion that animal instincts represent a form of "blinde Determinationen"⁷⁰ is a noxious one that is opposed to the very spirit of philosophical inquiry. He counters that the hive of a bee, or the web of a spider, are not the result of genetic scripts but products of these creatures' *Vorstellungskräfte*. Their ability to produce such beautiful, finely wrought objects has to do with their being intensely focused upon a single point within a circumscribed sphere. The rest of the world might as well not exist. This is what instinct is for Herder, an intense focus of *Vorstellungskräfte* upon a single task within a limited sphere.

Humans don't have instincts because the worlds they inhabit have broken up and broken apart, *the world has become their world*. Humans don't have a single task, such as constructing a web, but many diverse ones which distract and divide their attention. For this reason humans don't

⁶⁸SW V, 15.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰SW V, 23.

have what Herder calls a *Tiersprache*, "Ein dunkles sinnliches Einverständnis einer Thiergattung untereinander über ihre Bestimmung im Kreise ihrer Würkung."⁷¹ But far from being a mere lack, this condition is also a clue that the unfolding of specifically human potential will have to take a different direction involving the invention of a unique language.

The global trajectory of humanity means that humans are constantly subject to a distraction and disordering of their senses. Displacement from clearly circumscribed environments makes the problem of how to focus a central task in the self-constitution of the human, and one which is central to the ongoing process of language appropriation and invention. Since humans lack animal drives and senses focused on a single, common goal, human focus must be willed by a consciously self-reflective individual. It is in this act of reflective focusing that the individual constitutes itself. This is possible owing to the naturally holistic disposition of the human, a condition for which Herder invents the concept *Besonnenheit*. This is how he imagines it to take place:

Der Mensch beweiset Reflexion, wenn die Kraft seiner Seele so frei würket, daß sie in dem ganzen Ozean von Empfindungen, der sie durch alle Sinnen durchrauschet, *eine* Welle, wenn ich so sagen darf, absondern, sie anhalten, die Aufmerksamkeit auf sie richten und sich bewußt sein kann, daß sie aufmerke. Er beweiset Reflexion, wenn er aus dem ganzen schwebenden Traum der Bilder, die seine Sinne vorbeistreichen, sich in ein Moment des Wachens sammeln, auf *einem* Bilde freiwillig verweilen, es in helle ruhigere Obacht nehmen und sich Merkmale absondern kann, daß dies der Gegenstand und kein anderer sei.⁷²

This act of bringing the rush of sense impressions to a reflective standstill is even more difficult than it may sound when considered in light of the natural underlying unity of all the senses in

⁷¹SW V, 24.

⁷²SW V, 35. It is interesting to note how, despite his consistent rejection of Wolffian faculty psychology in favor of a holistic notion of reason as the undivided *Kräfte* of the individual, Herder keeps his register within the legible range of orthodox Leibnizianism in addressing himself to the Berlin Academy. In a Latin essay titled, "Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas," Leibniz had stated that "Knowledge [*cognitio*] is clear...when it makes it possible for me to recognize the thing represented," but that it is "confused when I cannot enumerate one by one the marks which are sufficient to distinguish the thing from others, even though the thing may in truth have such marks and constituents into which its concept can be resolved." Leibniz 291.

what Herder calls *Gefühl*. About the same time Herder first began writing down the ideas about language that eventually made their way into the *Abhandlung*⁷³, Kant published his pre-critical book on aesthetics, *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen* (1764), in which he likewise spoke of a "Bewußtsein eines Gefühls" as a level at which all the variety of diverse sense impressions come together and are felt as one. In Kant's pre-critical book, this unifying nature of *Gefühl* aids the construction of a plane onto which all kinds of experience are flattened and collapsed, permitting them to be compared and contrasted on equal terms while also providing a provisional ground for critically delimiting aesthetic subjectivity.

Gefühl serves a very different function in Herder's *Abhandlung* than it does in Kant's *Beobachtungen*. Herder describes the raw or natural state of sense experience as synesthetic:⁷⁴ "Wir sind ein denkendes sensorium commune," he says, in which thoughts and sense impressions become entangled according to "fremde Analogien der verschiedenen Sinne."⁷⁵ Yet all the senses are mere representations of what he considers to be a single positive force of the soul:

Wir unterscheiden sie aber wieder nur durch Sinne; also Vorstellungsarten durch Vorstellungsarten. Wir lernen mit vieler Mühe, sie im Gebrauche trennen - in einem gewissen Grunde aber würken sie noch immer zusammen [...] Der Philosoph muß einen Faden der Empfindung liegenlassen, indem er den andern verfolgt - in der Natur aber sind all Fäden *ein* Gewebe! - Je dunkler nun die Sinne sind, desto mehr fließen sie ineinander, und je ungeübter, je weniger man noch gelernt hat, einen ohne den andern zu brauchen, mit Adresse und Deutlichkeit zu brauchen, desto dunkler!⁷⁶

For Herder there is an indivisible level of feeling and another level of imaginative analysis at which the task becomes one of reflectively ordering the confused sensorium of the self and untying the analogical knots into which touch, hearing and vision inevitably work themselves.

⁷³Irmscher 56.

⁷⁴Cf. Irmscher 69.

⁷⁵SW V, 61.

⁷⁶SW V, 62.

This involves identifying particular feelings and impressions and reestablishing their connections to their original sensory causes. It is in doing this and in naming these causes that the subject achieves consciousness and indeed constitutes itself. As Herder would eventually express it succinctly in *Über Bild, Dichtung und Fabel* (1787), "wir sehen nicht, sondern wir erschaffen uns Bilder."⁷⁷

When Herder's *Abhandlung* is read with an eye to the centrality of the question of developing humanity, or becoming human, it becomes possible to see how Goethe's *Werther* stages a negative example of this process, as an example of someone who fails to meet Herder's challenge. As Werther puts it:

Mein Freund, wenn's denn um meine Augen dämmert, und die Welt um mich her und Himmel ganz in meiner Seele ruht, wie die Gestalt einer Geliebten; dann sehn ich mich oft und denke: ach könntest du das wieder ausdrücken, könntest du dem Papier das einhauchen, was so voll, so warm in dir lebt, daß es würde der Spiegel deiner Seele, wie deine Seele ist der Spiegel des unendlichen Gottes. Mein Freund – Aber ich gehe darüber zu Grunde, ich erliege unter der Gewalt der Herrlichkeit dieser Erscheinungen.⁷⁸

What are Herder and Goethe saying about subjectivity? We first need to clear away a commonly accepted notion about the functioning of subjectivity in *Werther*. In just one of many recent examples, Angus Nicholls repeats this view in the context of tracing the sources of Goethe's ideas about the daemonic. This position basically says that Werther's problem is one of an overreaching subjectivity which distorts objective reality. According to Nicholls, "Werther is the monadic soul gone wrong—the individual who cannot adapt his internal emotions, longings and desires to external reality: the world of objects and other subjects."⁷⁹ "*Werther* served as proof for

⁷⁷SW XV, 526.

⁷⁸WA I/19, 8. At this point I think the correspondence between Herder's *Abhandlung* and the problematic of *Werther* is difficult to exaggerate. As Herder had put it, the sense of sight or vision (*das Gesicht*) "ist so helle und überglanzend, es liefert eine solche Menge von Merkmalen, daß die Seele unter der Mannigfaltigkeit erliegt und etwa eine eins nur so schwach absondern kann, daß die Wiedererkennung daran schwer wird." SW V, 65.

⁷⁹Nicholls 186.

Goethe that the subject's capacity to distort nature, to perceive the external world in purely subjective terms, was theoretically limitless."⁸⁰ The problem with this view is that there is no evidence to support that in the early 1770s, Goethe was thinking the problem of subjectivity in terms of distortion or indeed in terms of a negative, critical procedure that would curb subjective excess and bring perception back in line with reality. Because Nicholls' assertion that *Werther* diagnoses "the pathology of an aesthetic idea" relies on reading Goethe's later affinity and rapprochement with Kant's critical philosophy back into the *Sturm und Drang*, it distorts the paradigm though which Goethe was thinking subjectivity at this time. I will maintain in the next chapter that the evidence of *Werther* suggests that the problem was not one of excessive subjectivity or subjective distortion but of the subject's self-constitution, the question of whether and how a human subject could even come into being as such. We have seen how Herder relates this question to the problem of synesthesia, that for him the subject is faced with the necessity of creatively detangling this analogically compounded confusion of sense impressions as an act through which it constitutes itself. That *Werther*'s problem is experienced as just such a synesthesia is taken up in the next chapter and will be developed there more thoroughly. Let it suffice to say for the moment that in *Werther*, Goethe is thinking through Herder's idea about the self-constitution of the human subject as a creative disentanglement or re-ordering of the relationship among the different senses and between sense impressions and their causes. *Werther*'s problem is not excessive subjectivity, but undone, unconsummated subjectivity; not distortion of reality, but reality's synesthetic disorder and entanglement; not overreaching subjectivity, but a failure to render self and reality as parallel outcomes of a creative process.⁸¹

⁸⁰Nicholls 193.

⁸¹According to Andrew Piper, *Werther* "subtly critiqued the excesses of individuality at [the core of the spirit of a generation] and the world's incapacity to accommodate this greater yearning for sympathy and sentiment" (Piper 26). In speaking of individuality rather than subjectivity, Piper's argument avoids the criticism I am leveling at a line of thinking here represented by Nicholls.

As the problem of the self-constitution of the human, the question of subjectivity has a direct bearing on what Goethe says about Herder's theory of the origin of language in Book 10 of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. The Strasbourg-Herder episode unfolds under the sign of Herder's painful and unsuccessful eye operation, an ailment to which Goethe judiciously ascribes Herder's bad moods, mockery and spewing of vituperative bile. "Dieser Fall kommt im Leben öfters vor," Goethe writes, "und man beachtet nicht genug die moralische Wirkung krankhafter Zustände, und beurteilt daher manche Charaktere ungerecht, weil man alle Menschen für gesund nimmt und von ihnen verlangt, daß sie sich auch in solcher Maße betragen sollen."⁸² Goethe will take this a step even further, though, and make Herder's failed operation and its scar into a symbol for his mentor's character and life. This becomes possible through the image repertoire opened up by the anatomical language in which Goethe describes Herder's ailment.

Dieses Übel ist eins der beschwerlichsten und unangenehmsten, und um desto lästiger, als es nur durch eine schmerzliche, höchstverdrießliche und unsichere Operation geheilt werden kann. Das Tränensäckchen nämlich ist nach unten zu verschlossen, so daß die darin enthaltene Feuchtigkeit nicht nach der Nase hin und um so weniger abfließen kann als auch dem benachbarten Knochen die Öffnung fehlt, wodurch diese Sekretion naturgemäß erfolgen sollte. Der Boden des Säckchens muß daher aufgeschnitten und der Knochen durchbohrt werden; da denn ein Pferdehaar durch den Tränenpunkt, ferner durch das eröffnete Säckchen und durch den damit in Verbindung gesetzten neuen Kanal gezogen und täglich hin und wider bewegt wird, um die Kommunikation zwischen beiden Teilen herzustellen, welches alles nicht getan noch erreicht werden kann, wenn nicht erst in jener Gegend äußerlich ein Einschnitt gemacht worden.⁸³

The aim of Herder's operation was to reestablish communication between the upper and lower parts of the tear drainage system. In describing Herder's malady in this way, Goethe simultaneously distills the *Abhandlung's* most important and fundamental idea. Herder saw abstract language as a tool that was invented by humans to serve its own pressing needs, and in particular those needs which arose from the particularities of the human condition, which, as we

⁸²WA I/27, 307.

⁸³WA I/27, 305.

saw, he understood in largely environmental terms. This involved the idea that the natural environment of humanity was, compared to the confined environments and activities of many animals, vast, splintered and multi-faceted. But despite humanity's global trajectory, Herder maintained that language must be individually meaningful and useful and socially meaningful and useful at the same time. His discourse thus makes use of the distinction between *obere und untere Seelenkräfte* that lay at the heart of the Wolffian-Leibnizian system, but it does so in order to show how the task of inventing language must be to overcome the separation of feeling and thinking, a theoretical commitment that marked Herder's early philosophical investigations: "[...] wie fein ist die *Ehe*, die Gott zwischen *Empfinden* und *Denken* in unsrer Natur gemacht hat! Ein feines Gewebe, nur durch Wortformeln von einander zu trennen. [...] Alles sogenannte *reine Denken* in die Gottheit hinein, ist Trug und Spiel, die ärgste Schwärmerei, die sich nur selbst nicht dafür erkennt. Alle unser Denken ist aus und durch Empfindung entstanden, trägt auch, Trotz aller Destillation, davon noch reiche Spuren."⁸⁴ Herder had written just a few years before in his *Journal meiner Reise*:

Das ist der Fehler der Zeit in der wir leben: man hat lange vor uns eine Sprache erfunden, tausend Generationen vor uns haben sie mit feinen Begriffen bereichert: wir lernen ihre Sprache, gehen mit Worten in 2. Minuten durch, was sie in Jahrhunderten erfunden und verstehen gelernt. Lernen damit nichts: veralten uns an Grammatiken, Wortbüchern und Diskursen, die wir nicht verstehen, und legen uns auf Zeitlebens in eine üble Falte.⁸⁵

Herder thought that for language to be truly human, it had to avoid entanglement in this "üble Falte" of lifeless abstraction, and the way to do it was to maintain communication between "upper" and "lower" potencies of the soul. In Herder's treatise on language, the reader is challenged to think this on two levels at once, both at the level of the individual and at the level of an all-inclusive humanity. In inventing abstract language, the individual must keep feeling and

⁸⁴SW VIII, 233-4.

⁸⁵SW IV, 452.

thought, body and mind, together, allowing each to inform the other. On the level of society, however, the invention of abstract language meant building canals—channels of feeling, distilled into the clarity of thought—that reached from the least highly developed and least powerful loci of humanity to the most complexly organized, most highly mediated and most powerful levels of human society. This was Herder's response both to the geographic diaspora of humanity as well as its social stratification and irregular development. Abstract language ought to form an artificial canal to serve the expressive needs of a unified, though stratified and dispersed, human social organism.

Goethe's critique of Herder's radical humanism involves questioning to what extent it is possible for an individual human being to commit to maintaining both the individual economy of *Natursprache* and its global social economy at the same time. In crisis or sickness, doesn't the individual have to turn away from the one in order to deal effectively with the other? Goethe eventually goes so far as to suggest that Herder's all-inclusive humanism, his sensible opening on an imagined human totality, became a site of infection that hindered his ability to maintain the connection between feeling and thought at the individual level. For Goethe, this restricted Herder's ability to maintain his sensibility in other directions; in his attempt to keep himself open "nach unten hin," he became increasingly incapable of maintaining a respectful and open channel of distilled thought-feeling towards those around him in Weimar society, and those above him, *nach oben hin*, his social superiors and benefactors like Duke Carl August. In concluding his narrative about the period of Herder's operation and recovery, Goethe weaves together a dense succession of images to form a complex symbol of the way Herder's thought impacted his life:

Genug, nach so viel Qual und Leiden wollte die künstliche Tränenrinne sich nicht bilden und die beabsichtigte Kommunikation nicht zu Stande kommen. Man sah sich genötigt, damit das Übel nicht ärger würde, die Wunde zugehn zu lassen. Wenn man nun bei der Operation Herders Standhaftigkeit unter solchen

Schmerzen bewundern mußte, so hatte seine melancholische, ja grimmige Resignation in den Gedanken, zeitlebens einen solchen Makel tragen zu müssen, etwas wahrhaft Erhabenes, wodurch er sich die Verehrung derer, die ihn schauten und liebten, für immer zu eigen machte.⁸⁶

Goethe's narrative about the first period of his friendship with Herder is interwoven with a reading of the *Abhandlung*, in which he suggests that the prize essay had in fact set out to show that the purpose of abstract language should be to forge an artificial tear duct of universal humanity. It is an homage in a uniquely Goethean mode, which tempers its personal intimacy with an even more intimate moment of critical self-distancing. Goethe thought that Herder's humanism went further than was good for him, further than was possible. In just a few lines, he sketches an image of his mentor's life and thought which reconciles the contradictions in a symbolic wound. Herder's sublime "Makel," the undone, ever unfinished and gushing quality of his prose, is redeemed in the respect and love that his endlessly melancholic bearing inspired in others. Like a death shroud woven over the dark background of Herder's melancholy, Goethe stretches a gossamer rainbow.

1.8 Subjectivity and the Sublime

This chapter has served to introduce the two main ideas that will be developed in the rest of the dissertation. One has to do with the displacement of *das Erhabene* by the sublime. I have attempted to show specific instances of ambivalence towards and resistance to the conceptual transformation of *das Erhabene*. The notion that *das Erhabene* is a social affect, rather than a rhetorical mechanism or an inherent quality of inanimate objects, was buried by its aestheticization. The aestheticization of *das Erhabene*—its transformation into a concept for talking about aesthetic experience—entailed the suppression of its most important semantic valence. This conceptual transformation is a highly significant moment in German intellectual

⁸⁶WA I/27, 315.

history because the displacement of *das Erhabene* was necessary, I argue, to justify the invention of the aesthetic as a sphere of human experience existing independently of social reality. I aim to show in the rest of the dissertation how Goethe uses the aesthetics of the sublime to recover this suppressed valence: *das Erhabene* is a social affect. In this way, Goethe's aesthetics of the sublime attempt to mediate between *das Erhabene* and the sublime.

The second idea I have begun to advance, and which will be developed further in the following chapters, is that Goethe's sublime simultaneously attempts to mediate between two counterposed experiences of modernity. The image Goethe offers of the modern subject is stretched out between two extremes. At one pole, the subject is a participant in creation. All creation is for Goethe simultaneously a natural and a social act. Human creation expresses a particular instance of the inextricable bond between nature and society. To be alive for Goethe is to participate in this, to become a co-author of material and spiritual reality.

At the other end of the spectrum we find the melancholic individual who has fallen out of the bond of entanglement between society and nature. Under the weight of thought, in the certainty of knowing better, the melancholic abstains from a consummation that can only appear to her as a submission to the lifeless conventions of a repressive and alienating social reality. The melancholic must herself bring forth the world to which she submits.⁸⁷

But, Goethe wants to show at every turn, even the most radical negativity is only consummated upon its return to a locus of entanglement between society and nature. The very movement of subjectivity is for Goethe caught between the joy of creating in connection with a bigger whole, and the individual's exclusion from such participation. The aim of Goethe's sublime is to mediate between these two poles of subjective experience: to serve objectively as a mediator among

⁸⁷I refer to the melancholic with a feminine pronoun because Melancholia is symbolically and iconographically construed as feminine. Sexuation is ontological for Goethe, but it is not essentially tied to, nor exhausted by, its biological expression at the level of human sexuation nor at the level of social convention in gender.

subjectivities that tend to be pulled, increasingly in modernity, towards one or the other pole (the poles are by turns suspicious and envious of one another!). Goethe's sublime thus aims to bring these subjective extremes closer to each other, to grind a lens that will show to subjectivity at one pole the objective truth in the subjectivity at the other.

Chapter 2

The Duality of Nature in *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*

2.1 Early Aesthetic Agonism

Unsere Einbildungskraft, durch ihre Natur gedrungen sich zu erheben, durch die phantastischen Bilder der Dichtkunst genährt, bildet sich eine Reihe Wesen hinauf, wo wir das unterste sind, und alles außer uns herrlicher erscheint, jeder anedre vollkommner ist. Und das geht ganz natürlich zu.
-*Werther*, 20. Oct. 1771⁸⁸

In the Introduction, I suggested that *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (1774) can be read as a response to Herder's prize essay, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772). In this chapter I will propose understanding Werther's syndrome as unresolved "synesthesia," a failure to find a framework in which he can grasp the activity of imagination in terms of its origin in sense experience. Werther fails to live up to the Herderian challenge of appropriating language for his own needs, and this failure corresponds to a failure to master the aesthetics of the sublime. I will show that the sublime cannot emerge in Werther's language because he cannot stabilize a distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. This primal wound of literary modernity emerges in Goethe's *Werther*, but only at the novel's periphery, not within the imaginary lifeworld of its protagonist.

Goethe represents Werther as torn between the beautiful and the sublime by showing the role played in his psyche by totalizing images of Nature. But as will be shown on the basis of his aesthetic writings from the early 1770's, Goethe's attitude towards Nature was distinct from Werther's. In his *Storm and Stress* aesthetic writings, Goethe puts totalizing images of Nature in the service of an aggressive critical empiricism. Goethe's images of Nature arise consistently alongside critical questions about the status of such images. What exactly is this *Ganze*, what is

⁸⁸WA I/19, 90.

its *Sinn* and what is its relation to *Erkenntnis*? These are questions that Goethe persistently asks, because from early on, he recognized that there was something objectively amiss in the figure of the whole. On 26 April 1774 he wrote to Pfenninger:

Und so ist das Wort der Menschen mir Wort Gottes es mögens Pfaffen oder Huren gesammelt und zum Canon gerollt oder als Fragmente hingestreut haben. Und mit inniger Seele fall ich dem Bruder um den Hals Moses! Prophet! Evangelist! Apostel, Spinoza oder Machiavell. Darf aber auch zu iedem sagen, lieber Freund geht dirs doch wie mir! Im einzelnen sentirst du kräftig und herrlich, das Ganze ging in euern Kopf so wenig als in meinen.⁸⁹

The attitude towards totality which Goethe expresses here presages, in germ-like form, the natural-scientific concept of the *Urphänomen* which he would only begin to develop over two decades later. The young Goethe's commitment to empiricism meant that the role of the *Ganze* in cognition was incredibly problematic. What mattered was experience, and especially personal, embodied experience. This is a problem that we will see is constantly on the horizon of Werther's attempts to understand cognition as an irreducibly individual and creative activity. Crucially, Goethe's notion of experience includes experience *of* the incommensurability of individual subjectivity *with* the totalizing images of a deterministic nature. This incommensurability evokes a crisis on the axis of knowledge and value. For Werther, it is as if the creative force of imagination were in danger of being squeezed off the map of a mechanistic universe:

[...] und wie ich da so bald Grenzen meiner Vorstellungskraft fand; und doch mußte das weiter gehn, immer weiter, bis ich mich ganz in dem Anschauen einer unsichtbaren Ferne verlor.--- Siehe, mein Lieber, so beschränkt und so glücklich waren die herrlichen Altväter! so kindlich ihr Gefühl, ihre Dichtung! Wenn Ulyß von dem ungemess'nen Meer und von der unendlichen Erde spricht, das ist so wahr, menschlich, innig, eng und geheimnißvoll. Was hilft mich's, daß ich jetzt mit jedem Schulknaben nachsagen kann, daß sie rund sei?⁹⁰

⁸⁹WA IV/2, 157.

⁹⁰WA I/19, 110.

In the years running up to the composition of *Werther*, Goethe's commitment to the role of sense experience in cognition meant that untested knowledge of the arts was utterly empty. The most strident example of what grasping after totality should not look like was delivered by the Encyclopedists, who delivered at best a sense *of* knowing, a pseudo-knowledge of the sort that Goethe has Werther call "hübsche Kenntnisse."

Vor wenig Tagen traf ich einen jungen V--- an, einen offenen Jungen, mit einer gar glücklichen Gesichtsbildung. Er kommt erst von Akademien, dünkt sich eben nicht weise, aber glaubt doch, er wisse mehr als andere. Auch war er fleißig, wie ich an allerlei spüre, kurz, er hat hübsche Kenntnisse. Da er hörte, daß ich viel zeichnete und Griechisch könnte (zwei Meteore hier zu Lande), wandte er sich an mich und kramte viel Wissens aus, von Batteaux bis zu Wood, von de Piles zu Winckelmann, und versicherte mich, er habe Sulzers Theorie, den ersten Theil, ganz durchgelesen und besitze ein Manuscript von Heynen über das Studium der Antike. Ich ließ das gut sein.⁹¹

Sulzer's *Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste* (1771-74, 1778 ff., 1786 ff.) is an encyclopedia of arts jargon— "Sulzers Theorie, den ersten Theil, ganz durchgelesen" suggests that—this is the joke—the young academician had read all the articles from A-J in alphabetical order. In Merck's scathing review of the *Theorie* in the *Frankfurter gelehrte Anzeigen* of 1772, he had referred to its author as "one of our foremost philosophical farmers" (eines unserer ersten Landwirthe der Philosophie) and bemoaned the great mass of "psychologischen Erklärungen abstracter Ideen" based on "*Obervationen*, aber nicht Experimente."⁹² Sulzer is derided as a foreigner who merely travelled to the land of art, but wasn't born and raised there, "hat nie darin gelebt, nie gelitten und genossen." Worst of all, Sulzer is a subordinate writer, a pedant of the given, rather than a thinker and originator in his own right: "Es ist Polybius der Taktiker, und nicht Thucydides und Xenophon der General, Hume der Scribent, und nicht Burnet der Staatsmann, der schreibt." Compared to the critical aesthetics of Lessing and Herder, his *Theorie* is a primer for school

⁹¹WA I/19, 13.

⁹²WA I/37, 193ff.

boys. Goethe's own review of Sulzer's *Die schönen Künste in ihrem Ursprung, ihrer wahren Natur und besten Anwendung betrachtet* (1772), also from the *Anzeigen* of 1772, picks up where many of Merck's complaints leave off, and is at least as aggressive. Sulzer's encyclopedism epitomized the empty oppressiveness of neoclassicism and its Frenchifying domestic imitators, and with Herder's encouragement and authorization, it could serve the author-publishers of the *Anzeigen* as a foil for programmatic statements of their emerging post-Shakespearean aesthetics.

Da sind sie denn, versteht sich, wieder alle beisammen, verwandt oder nicht. Was steht im Lexikon nicht alles beisammen? Was läßt sich durch solche Philosophie nicht verbinden? Malerei und Tanzkunst, Beredsamkeit und Baukunst, Dichtkunst und Bildhauerei, alle aus einem Loch, durch das magische Licht eines philosophischen Lämpchens auf die weiße Wand gezaubert, tanzen sie im Wunderschein buntfarbig auf und nieder, und die verzückten Zuschauer frohlocken sich fast außer Athem.⁹³

Merck's and Goethe's critiques of Sulzer are sophisticated works of late Enlightenment empiricist criticism. At the center of both is a notion of experience that has little to do with the "values" of immediacy and authenticity. This is an often overlooked point that is key to any understanding of the political and epistemological relevance of the concept of experience. Although effects of immediacy and authenticity are often understood as independent aesthetic values of *Empfindsamkeit* and *Sturm und Drang* (the epistolary novel and the lyric being the genres par excellence of immediacy), in the critiques of Sulzer the concept of experience forms a wedge between the aesthetic and the political, by which political concerns are brought to bear on aesthetic discourse and through which aesthetics first appears as a political force in its own right. *Theorie* in the sense attributed to Sulzer is precisely opposed to experience, it is a noxious superstructure that replaces sense experience with conjured Nothingness:

Daß eine Theorie der Künste für Deutschland noch nicht gar an der Zeit sein möchte, haben wir schon ehemals unsre Gedanken gesagt. Wir bescheiden uns wohl, daß ein solche Meinung die Ausgabe eines solchen Buchs nicht hindern

⁹³WA I/37, 207-8.

kann; nur warnen können und müssen wir unsre guten jungen Freunde vor dergleichen Werken. Wer von den Künsten nicht sinnliche Erfahrung hat, der lasse sie lieber. Warum sollte er sich damit beschäftigen? Weil es so Mode ist? Er bedenke, daß er sich durch alle Theorie den Weg zum wahren Genusse versperrt, denn ein schädlicheres *Nichts*, als sie, ist nicht erfunden worden.⁹⁴

Theoretical knowledge of aesthetics has at best a simulacral relationship to its object. Through its intervention, we are cut off from the rich diversity of our own senses. In the place of the pleasure of experience, we perceive only aesthetic *categories*, "alle aus einem Loch, durch das magische Licht eines philosophischen Lämpchens auf die weiße Wand gezaubert." From Goethe's perspective, his peers and the up-and-coming youth run the risk of losing, through theoretical *Verbildung*, access to enjoyment of their own senses and with it, to artistic truth. Even more sinister is the image in which "die verzückten Zuschauer frohlocken sich fast außer Athem" in spite of the emptiness of the bait-and-switch game which theoreticians like Sulzer play with experience and schematic-symbolic currency. Theory's pernicious "*Nichts*" is a coercive, mystifying power that must be challenged. It is all the more problematic because it engages pleasure in a way that competes directly with art. In presenting the truth about art in a way that art itself does not, it threatens to displace art and make the detour through sense experience seem like a dispensable annoyance. The power of the theoretician, Goethe suggests, is directly opposed to that of the artist.

At stake in the question of aesthetic experience for Goethe is nothing less than the affective truth of Nature: *her* amorous-moral character, *her* benevolence or indifference, *her* "*Art*." In excluding discomfiting impressions (*unangenehme Eindrücke*) from Nature and defining art in relation to a domesticated image of her, Sulzer falsifies both:

Er will das unbestimmte Principium: *Nachahmung der Natur* verdrängen, und gibt uns ein gleich unbedeutendes dafür: *Die Verschönerung der Dinge*. [...] Gehört denn, was unangenehme Eindrücke auf uns macht, nicht so gut in den Plan

⁹⁴Ibid. 207.

der Natur, als ihr Lieblichstes? Sind die wüthenden Stürme, Wasserfluthen, Feuerregen, unterirdische Gluth, und Tod in allen Elementen nicht eben so wahre Zeugen ihres ewigen Lebens als die herrlich aufgehende Sonne über volle Weinberge und duftende Orangenhaine? Was würde Herr Sulzer zu der liebevollen Mutter Natur sagen, wenn sie ihm eine Metropolis, die er mit allen schönen Künsten, als Handlangerinnen, erbaut und bevölkert hätte, in ihren Bauch hinunter schlänge?⁹⁵

Not only is Sulzer's image of nature partial, but those discomfiting aspects of nature which he would rather see hidden away or prettified—her violence and her indifference—are precisely those in which Goethe will attempt to locate art's *raison d'être*. Against Sulzer's attribution of the *Bildung* of civilized moral-aesthetic virtues such as "Sanftmuth und Empfindsamkeit" to an intentional plan on the part of a "zärtliche Mutter," Goethe's Mother Nature runs a practical school of hard knocks: the limit of her pedagogical altruism lies in preparing her "echten Kinder" for self-preservation over-against "die Schmerzen und Übel [...], die sie ihnen unablässig bereitet." She subjects mankind to a trial by fire from which the happiest human emerges as the one who has learned "zum Trutz den Gang seines Willens zu gehen." Nature has no plan for man's salvation, and the only form of mercy she offers lies beneath the ruins of Enlightenment optimism's fangless images of her, in an individual—and individualizing—sense experience of her chaotic, cyclical, destructive, frustrating sensuality:

Was wir von Natur sehen, ist Kraft, die Kraft verschlingt, nichts gegenwärtig, alles vorübergehend, tausend Keime zertreten, jeden Augenblick tausend geboren, groß und bedeutend, mannichfaltig in's Unendliche; schön und häßlich, gut und böß, alles mit gleichem Rechte neben einander existirend. Und die *Kunst* ist gerade das Widerspiel; sie entspringt aus den Bemühungen des Individuums sich gegen die zerstörende Kraft des Ganzen zu erhalten. Schon das Thier durch seine Kunsttriebe *scheidet, verwahrt* sich; der Mensch durch alle Zustände befestigt sich gegen die Natur, ihre tausendfachen Übel zu vermeiden, und nur das Maß von Gutem zu genießen; bis es ihm endlich gelingt, die Circulation aller seiner wahren und gemachten Bedürfnisse in einen Palast einzuschließen, so fern es möglich ist, alles zerstreute Schönheit und Glückseligkeit in seine gläsernen Mauern zu bannen, wo er denn immer weicher und weicher wird, den Freuden des Körpers Freuden der Seele substituiert, und seine Kräfte, von keiner

⁹⁵Ibid. 208-9.

Widerwärtigkeit zum Naturgebrauche aufgespannt, in Tugend, Wohltätigkeit, Empfindsamkeit zerfließen.⁹⁶

Art, Goethe shows here, can serve as means of self-assertion in the face of nature precisely to the extent that it permits the artist to separate himself from Nature. By opposing art to Sublime Nature, Goethe exposes the divergent, individual interests which art serves and unmasks the Enlightenment universalist notion of moral-aesthetic improvement as ideology. In the poem *Prometheus*, Goethe makes his most unambiguous assertion of the ego-centrism of art against the image of Father Zeus. In swelling the concept of art to its limit meaning as the foil of nature, art becomes synonymous with self-preservation. The aesthetic agon is a struggle to survive by making the strange, hostile world more like oneself:

Wähtest du etwa,
 Ich sollte das Leben hassen,
 In Wüsten fliehen,
 Weil nicht alle
 Blüthenträume reifen?

Hier sitz' ich, forme Menschen
 Nach meinem Bilde,
 Ein Geschlecht, das mir gleich sei,
 Zu leiden, zu weinen,
 Zu genießen und zu freuen sich,
 Und dein nicht zu achten,
 Wie ich!⁹⁷

⁹⁶Ibid. 210-11.

⁹⁷WA I/2, 77-8.

The total aesthetic science of a Sulzer looked to Goethe and Merck like a petty, distasteful way of forming people after one's own image, because it put ribbons in the hair of repression and rewarded intellectual subordination with a false sense of mastery: "an einem großen Trupp Schüler kann's ihm so nicht fehlen, denn er setzt Milch vor und nicht starke Speise."⁹⁸ With "starke Speise" Goethe has in mind the undigested contradictions of the Enlightenment: hysteria in the Janus face of Mother Nature, the thinly veiled egoism of bourgeois society, the symbolic frailty of authority and hence of discursive knowledge. The ideological superstructure of false universalism, once dismantled, does not leave behind a schematic egoistic rationality ready to compete to its full potential in a meritocratic marketplace, but a hyper-sensitive plug of chaotically affected nerve-endings that must learn to posit itself or else sink into a formless clump like the fourth King of the *Märchen*.⁹⁹ If universalism can be salvaged at all, then only in the critique of bourgeois universalism's chronic partiality. Goethe finally suggests that the reliance on ideology has a limit beyond which it begins to undermine the interests of the class that rises to power on its force. Buffered too securely from the "Widerwärtigkeit" of nature's adversity, the philistine in his glass palace becomes "weicher und weicher" until "seine Kräfte [...] zerfließen."¹⁰⁰ Nature ultimately overcomes every insulation of ossified spirit from the pressure of living forces. Art cannot keep up, let alone push ahead, but is destined to respond and react to the whims and passions of its capricious Mother.

Goethe saw Enlightenment eschatology giving way to a dialectical image of history in which ideological control of the image of Nature would play a central role. We have seen that one of the ways he began to intervene in this discourse was by pointing out that his adversary's totalizing

⁹⁸WA I/37, 211.

⁹⁹WA I/18, 272-3.

¹⁰⁰WA I/37, 211.

image of Nature was partial and disingenuous. He countered it by creating images of Nature that included that sublime violence which the grey eminences saw fit to suppress. A concept and aesthetics of the whole are thus already indispensable to Goethe's critical project. By using distinctly sublime images of Nature to critique an Enlightenment mode of representing Nature as merely beautiful, Goethe began to disclose a view of Nature as intrinsically violent and infinitely partial.

2.2 Werther and the Janus of Nature

In the second letter to Wilhelm (10 May), Werther expresses how his experience of the unity of Nature and of his own unity with nature gives rise to a desire to capture and represent that experience to others. But the process of representation is an inherently individualizing one which requires him to distinguish himself from the natural world he wants to represent. The attempt to preserve the unity of Nature in representation leads Werther to end the letter with a representation of his own destruction. His aesthetic self-destruction is the culmination of an attempt to ground his individuality in the singularity of his perception of Nature's unity.

Ich bin allein, und freue mich meines Lebens in dieser Gegend, die für solche Seelen geschaffen ist, wie die meine. Ich bin so glücklich, mein Bester, so ganz in dem Gefühle von ruhigem Dasein versunken, daß meine Kunst darunter leidet. Ich könnte jetzt nicht zeichnen, nicht einen Strich, und bin nie ein größerer Mahler gewesen als in diesen Augenblicken. Wenn das liebe Thal um mich dampft, und die hohe Sonne an der Oberfläche der undurchdringlichen Finsterniß meines Waldes ruht, und nur einzelne Strahlen sich in das innere Heiligthum stehlen, und ich dann im hohen Grase am fallenden Bache liege, und näher an der Erde tausend mannichfaltige Gräschen mir merkwürdig werden; wenn ich das Wimmeln der kleinen Welt zwischen Halmen, die unzähligen, unergründlichen Gestalten der Würmchen, der Mückchen näher an meinem Herzen fühle, und fühle die Gegenwart des Allmächtigen, der uns all nach seinem Bilde schuf, das Wehen des Allliebenden, der uns in ewiger Wonne schwebend trägt und erhält. Mein Freund! wenn's denn um meine Augen dämmert, und die Welt um mich her und Himmel ganz in meiner Seele ruht, wie die Gestalt einer Geliebten; dann sehn ich mich oft und denke: ach könntest du das wieder ausdrücken, könntest du dem

Papier das einhauchen, was so voll, so warm in dir lebt, daß es würde der Spiegel deiner Seele, wie deine Seele ist der Spiegel des unendlichen Gottes! ---Mein Freund--- Aber ich gehe darüber zu Grunde, ich erliege unter der Gewalt der Herrlichkeit dieser Erscheinungen.¹⁰¹

Werther believes that the creative force within him is connected to his own feelings of joy and sorrow. This is the same vital force that went into his acts of artistic instantiation, but which, in doing so, seemed to stratify nature and individualize him. It is a force which creates distinctions which threaten to shatter the monistic, harmonious way Werther would rather think about society and Nature. But Werther does not know how to deal with the destructive flip-side of all creation, he cannot represent the daemonic principle without being paralyzed or destroyed by it himself. On 18 August, he writes to Wilhelm: "Ach damals, wie oft habe ich mich mit Fittigen eines Kranichs, der über mich hinflog, zu dem Ufer des ungemessenen Meeres geseht, aus dem schäumenden Becher des Unendlichen jene schwellende Lebenswonne zu trinken, und nur einen Augenblick, in der eingeschränkten Kraft meines Busens, einen Tropfen der Seligkeit des Wesens zu fühlen, das alles in sich und durch sich hervorbringt."¹⁰² But as soon as the destructive side of creativity comes into view, Werther refuses to identify with this force:

Ha! nicht die große seltene Noth der Welt, diese Fluthen, die eure Dörfer wegsülen, diese Erdbeben, die eure Städte verschlingen, rühren mich; mir untergräbt das Herz die verzehrende Kraft, die in dem All der Natur verborgen liegt; die nichts gebildet hat, das nicht seinen Nachbar, nicht sich selbst zerstörte. Und so taumle ich beängstigt. Himmel und Erde und all die webenden Kräfte um mich her: Ich sehe nichts, als ein ewig verschlingendes, ewig wiederkäuendes Ungeheuer.¹⁰³

Joyce S. Walker has suggested that in the letter of May 10, Werther draws on the register of the beautiful as well as on that of the sublime to describe his experience. She writes that "a latent sublime shimmers through the vocabulary of beauty," prefiguring what she sees as Werther's

¹⁰¹WA I/19, 7-8.

¹⁰²Ibid. 75.

¹⁰³Ibid. 76.

shift, over the course of the novel, from a preference for the beautiful (as exemplified by his allegiance to Homer) to a preference for the sublime (as exemplified by his allegiance to Ossian)¹⁰⁴. Walker is correct to point out that there is not yet a distinction between the Beautiful and the Sublime within Werther's aesthetics. But as I aim to argue, there is never going to be one—and this is precisely Werther's problem.

In the letter of May 10 it is also evident that Werther's self-image is not a literal representation of his corporeal self in the way that a self-portrait or mirror image would be. His self-image is, rather, the indivisible frame through which he pictures Nature: his artistic vision. Werther represents his way of imaging Nature as unhinged from narrative utility and continuity. In Werther's paratactic prose, every "und" functions as the equivalent of a painting's frame, or of a cinematic jump-cut, separating and creating distinctly bound images while stringing them together in a series. Each sentence begins with a dependent clause "wenn," signaling narrative intent, but the sentences consistently exhaust themselves in the images without completing the narrative logic from which they take off. Goethe shows Werther struggling to liberate his self-image from the tyrannies of narrative, of inheritance, and of self-identity founded in memory. And yet Werther, who is "nie ein größerer Mahler gewesen als in diesen Augenblicken," must nonetheless recuperate these images as indivisible self-images in a narrative construction of identity, even if—or regardless of whether—the process ends in self-destruction. Goethe shows us Werther between notions of identity and of individuality which he experiences as opposed. The more frantically Werther pursues his individual vision of Nature's unity, the closer he comes to extinguishing the narrative "I" who would thereby be liberated. Where the narrative shows us Werther's social being and his individual being as intricately knotted together, Werther insists on an indivisible whole.

¹⁰⁴Walker 211.

Werther's sense of self is tied up with his artistic vision, his images of an indivisible nature. He invests his images with his desire to transcend the class divisions of society and experience the human, social equivalent of nature's All. Goethe shows us Werther transposing his desire for the All into aesthetics, where it registers as the self-sameness of aesthetic experience.

The notion that Werther's problem is overreaching subjectivity has little basis in Goethe's treatment of the subject-object distinction, but rather reads a critical attitude back into the Storm and Stress. The excessive subject is one that needs to be readjusted to a pre-existing, objective reality through correction or subtraction of its subjective distortions. But in Goethe's state of Nature, subject and object are a primal unity, neither can yet be said to exist. It is not an excess of subjectivity but the real unity of subject and object in Nature from which Werther suffers. Referring to his inability to "draw even a single line" (*könnte jetzt nicht zeichnen, nicht einen Strich*), Werther uses the word "ganz" three times in just the first six lines of the letter of 10 May, modifying first the soul (*Seele*), then the heart (*Herzen*), and finally feeling (*Gefühl*). The word *zeichnen* gradually comes to refer in Goethe's symbolic repertoire not only to drawing but to the process whereby human subjects are marked and thereby separated out from Nature into distinct, self-conscious entities. The *distinguishing* of the subject from a world of objects in this act of marking is artificial, yet ontological for Goethe; in what pre-exists it, subject and world were not yet present. It is through *zeichnen*, this violent and surgical marking of Nature, that both subject and world come into existence. For Goethe, *zeichnen* is in this sense a fundamental function of art whereby the primal unity of subject and object in Nature is undone. Yet to the extent that this artificial and creative act of self-distinction proves to be necessary, it will have begun to mark a passage to a new, transfigured Nature in which subject and world can again coalesce in a rejuvenated indeterminacy. Werther cannot do this because he fails to create a unified image of

Nature which includes both her "Lieblichstes"¹⁰⁵ and her violence. Werther can only see Nature as either beautiful *or* as sublime, as benevolent or as violent, but never as both at the same time, in the same *Augenblick*. To do so would mean running the risk of becoming a participant in, and executor of, that violence (Hölderlin would eventually refer to this process as *Ur-Teilung*)¹⁰⁶ through which Nature is divided into subjects and worlds.

2.3 Wertherian Synesthesia

For Werther, aesthetic experience is not "just" a metaphor of social Nature, but a united, synesthetic *sense* of it, a sensuous tissue in which social rifts are felt and re-felt as the private property and distinguishing feature of a uniquely alienated individual. On May 22, when Werther looks at "die Einschränkung [...] in welcher die thätigen und forschenden Kräfte der Menschen eingesperrt sind," he can see nothing in human striving but an attempt to fulfill needs "die wieder keinen Zweck haben, als unsere arme Existenz zu verlängern."¹⁰⁷ When this attempt to extend one's existence beyond its limits fails, catharsis itself is nothing but "eine träumende Resignation [...], da man sich die Wände, zwischen denen man gefangen sitzt, mit bunten Gestalten und lichten Aussichten bemahlt."¹⁰⁸ The result of this failure to exceed his bounds, and his dissatisfaction with socially acceptable alternatives, leads Werther to an intensified inwardness: "Ich kehre in mich selbst zurück, und finde eine Welt! Wieder mehr in Ahnung und dunkler Begier, als in Darstellung und lebendiger Kraft. *Und da schwimmt alles vor meinen Sinnen*, und ich lächle dann so träumend weiter in die Welt. [my emphasis]" Werther links the darkness and obscurity of his desire to a chaotic confusion of his senses, a synesthetic screen which returns

¹⁰⁵WA I/37, 208.

¹⁰⁶Hölderlin 597.

¹⁰⁷WA I/19, 14f.

¹⁰⁸This theme is taken up again in Chapter 3, page 97.

him to a pacified, contented condition. Enchanted from within, he can again smile dreamily into a world he no longer sees as composed merely of, and by, similarly imprisoned individuals. The only means Werther can see of constraining the horror inherent in the possibility that "das Leben des Menschen nur ein Traum sei" is to return through his imagination to a re-enchanted, dream-like state of his own.

But Werther is not content with this solution: he wants to push the question of his dark desire to its limits in the form of society's constitution and reproduction, where he again finds the problem of desire obscured and in need of clarification.

Daß die Kinder nicht wissen, warum sie wollen, darin sind alle hochgelahrten Schul- und Hofmeister einig; daß aber auch Erwachsene gleich Kindern auf diesem Erdboden herumtaumeln, und wie jene nicht wissen, woher sie kommen und wohin sie gehen, eben so wenig nach wahren Zwecken handeln, eben so durch Biskuit und Kuchen und Birkenreiser regiert werden: das will niemand gern glauben, und mich dünkt, man kann es mit Händen greifen.¹⁰⁹

Werther both does and doesn't want to solve the riddle of desire once and for all because its solution, he believes—the solution offered, for instance, by the materialism of Burke or of the Baron d'Holbach—would mean an unbearable subjection to a disenchanting, purgatorial existence in which there is nothing more to say: "Das alles, Wilhelm, macht mich stumm."¹¹⁰ And yet at the same time, Werther intuits that the material basis of desire can be grasped "mit Händen," and he is driven to do so. Werther's crisis is that he, like Goethe, sees something deadly in totalizing anthropological visions based on biological determinism and self-interest. He is at a loss, however, to construct an equally complete, alternative ordering of the data of experience.

Those images which Werther creates to reflect the framing and binding of sexuality by social convention thus evince an unresolved ambivalence that clings unconvincingly to the idyllic while

¹⁰⁹WA I/19, 15.

¹¹⁰WA I/19, 14.

dissimulating the formative role of violence. Goethe thus makes use of the topos of the well—a site at which biblical prophets found wives—to show how Werther's aesthetics fall consistently short of the whole. "Da kommen die Mädchen aus der Stadt und holen Wasser, das harmloseste Geschäft und das nöthigste, das ehemals die Töchter der Könige selbst verrichteten. Wenn ich da sitze, so lebt die patriarchalische Idee so lebhaft um mich, wie sie alle, die Altväter, am Brunnen Bekanntschaft machen und freien, und wie um die Brunnen und Quellen wohltätige Geister schweben."¹¹¹ In the intertexts which this topos evokes, however, scenes of courtship at the well are embedded invariably in contexts of struggle or negotiation among men. This takes the form of open conflict (Moses' rescue of Zipporah from the shepherds, Exodus 2:18-20) or economic exchange (Isaac's gifts of silver and gold in exchange for Rebekah, Genesis 24) or a relation of servitude and deception (Jacob's fourteen years of service to Laban for the hand of Rachel, Genesis 29). Werther's treatment of the topos is determined, however, by his resistance to the agonistic nature of courtship as well as to structural social antagonism more generally. When, on 15 May, Werther narrates how he comes to the well to find a servant girl who can find no comrades to help her raise her water jug up from the bottom step to the top of her head, the scene is framed by a rumination on inequality which extends Werther's desire for wholeness to the level of society: "Die geringen Leute des Ortes kennen mich schon und lieben mich, besonders die Kinder. Wie ich im Anfange mich zu ihnen gesellte, sie freundschaftlich fragte über dieß und das, glaubten einige, ich wollte ihrer spotten, und fertigten mich wol gar grob ab. Ich ließ mich das nicht verdrießen; nur fühlte ich, was ich schon oft bemerkt habe, auf das lebhafteste: Leute von einigem Stande werden sich immer in kalter Entfernung vom gemeinen Volke halten, als glaubten sie durch Annäherung zu verlieren; und dann gibt's Flüchtlinge und üble Spaßvögel, die sich herabzulassen scheinen, um ihren Übermuth dem armen Volke desto empfindlicher zu

¹¹¹WA I/19, 9.

machen."¹¹² He thus casts himself not as one of the old testament patriarchs, but as Jesus in the story of his meeting with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well (John 4:4-26). In the Gospel of John, the well topos is associated with a water of life capable of breaking desiccated social bonds and transcending the social rift between Jews and Samaritans. But Werther ultimately conflates the Old and New Testament treatments of this topos in a way which elides the element of violence, rupture and transcendence in both: "Soll ich Ihr helfen, Jungfer? sagte ich. Sie ward roth über und über. O nein, Herr! sagte sie." For as Werther descends the steps to the well and helps the girl put the jug on her head, after which she ascends, the scene plays out a figuration of the sublime. This is the motif of heaven and earth reaching towards each other, and in which the earthly or fallen is borne up by the exalted and divine, as in the ascension of Christ or the apotheosis of Ganymed on the breast of Father Zeus. But precisely because Werther imagines the reconciliation between heaven and earth in this scene to play out between real bodies within the social order, rather than in an act of imaginative, aesthetic self-transformation, Werther and the girl can merely trade places, and there is neither rupture, renewal or transcendence. Werther's inability to distinguish between the beautiful and the sublime corresponds also to a failure to grasp the relationship between art and life.

A similar dynamic is at play in Werther's tendency to christianize Homer. At the Wahlheim inn where Werther drinks "his" coffee and reads "his" Homer, the children of the schoolmaster's daughter are, as he says,

ganz an mich gewöhnt. Sie kriegen Zucker, wenn ich Kaffee trinke, und theilen das Butterbrot und die saure Milch mit mir des Abends. Sonntags fehlt ihnen der Kreuzer nie, und wenn ich nicht nach der Betstunde da bin, so hat die Wirthin Ordre, ihn auszuzahlen. Sie sind vertraut, erzählen mir allerhand, und besonders

¹¹²WA I/19, 10-11.

ergetze ich mich an ihren Leidenschaften und simplen Ausbrüchen des Begehrens, wenn mehr Kinder aus dem Dorfe sich versammeln.¹¹³

In the image of the children and in a view of himself in the role of the patriarch, Werther is able to naturalize and delight in what would otherwise look to him like civilized perversions of the natural. The individual passions and desires of other males—which are unbearable to Werther when they appear as the passions and desires of adult males who can challenge his position or with whom he might have to compete—remind him in children only of himself. Werther tries to create for himself a world in which he is the only virile man, a world in which the Pietist individual's immediate relation to God becomes the relation of the solitary man to Nature: this is Werther's decision "mich künftig allein an die Natur zu halten. Sie allein ist unendlich reich und sie allein bildet den großen Künstler."¹¹⁴

To be Werther is to try to be both Odysseus and Penelope's suitors at the same time. Analogously to Werther's attitude towards the beautiful and the sublime, Werther cannot look at the Homeric world and his own pietist milieu at the same time without conflating them; his passion for indivisible totality prevents any distance or difference from opening between the two. They condense instead onto a single screen: in identifying with Odysseus and the suitors, Werther continues his imaginative resistance to chronic individuation in a way that prevents him from accounting for the real individuation which his solitary resistance exacerbates.

Werther doesn't yet seem to have finished reading the *Odyssey* when he thanks God, just after comparing himself to Penelope's suitors, for his ability to weave "Züge des patriarchalischen Lebens"¹¹⁵ unaffectedly into his way of life. Crucially, Goethe did not wholly share this naive

¹¹³WA I/19, 20-1.

¹¹⁴WA I/19, 17.

¹¹⁵WA I/19, 40.

sentiment. For the young Goethe, "patriarchal" already carried the connotation of an order that has been irrevocably lost, of a hegemony on the last leg of its relevance, having failed, like the Philistine aesthete in his glass house, to read the *Zeitgeist*. In *Von Deutscher Baukunst* (1773) Goethe had used this word to compare the dogmatism of French architectural aesthetics to the misgovernment of Paris, France's "new Babylon":

Schädlicher als Beispiele sind dem Genius Principien. Vor ihm mögen einzelne Menschen einzelne Theile bearbeitet haben. Er ist der erste, aus dessen Seele die Theile, in Ein ewiges Ganzes zusammen gewachsen, hervortreten. Aber Schule und Principium fesselt alle Kraft der Erkenntniß und Thätigkeit. Was soll uns das, du neu-französischer philosophirender Kenner, daß der erste zum Bedürfniß erfindsame Mensch vier Stämme einrammelte, vier Stangen drüber verband, und Äste und Moos drauf deckte? Daraus entscheidest du das Gehörige unserer heurigen Bedürfnisse, eben als wenn du dein neues Babylon mit einfältigem patriarchalischem Hausvatersinn regieren wolltest.¹¹⁶

For Werther, literary self-fashioning as social self-fashioning is in the middle of a transition from its former status as a liberatory technology to a new status as a technology of self-oppression. This is what Werther had seen in the young academician who read Sulzer's aesthetic lexicon from cover to cover: a boy estranged from his own embodied experience. He continues:

Wie wohl ist mir's, daß mein Herz die simple harmlose Wonne des Menschen fühlen kann, der ein Krauthaupt auf seinen Tisch bringt, das er selbst gezogen, und nun nicht den Kohl allein, sondern all die guten Tage, den schönen Morgen, da er ihn pflanzte, die lieblichen Abende, da er ihn begoß, und da er an dem fortschreitenden Wachstum seine Freude hatte, alle in Einem Augenblicke wieder mitgenießt.¹¹⁷

Friedrich Engels might have had this passage in mind when he referred to Werther's sufferings as the "Jammerschrei eines schwärmerischen Tränensacks über den Abstand zwischen der bürgerlichen Wirklichkeit und seinen nicht minder bürgerlichen Illusionen über diese Wirklichkeit, dieser mattherzig, einzig auf Mangel an der ordinärsten Erfahrung beruhende

¹¹⁶WA I/37, 142.

¹¹⁷WA I/19, 40.

Stoßseufzer..."¹¹⁸ Engels isn't far off the mark, although he makes the mistake of conflating Goethe and Werther. To the extent that Engels' critique implies an alternative to bourgeois illusions within bourgeois subjectivity, however, Goethe's position is closer to Marx.

One of the many ironies of Werther's speech against bad moods is that, when he delivers it, Herr Schmidt and Friederike have only just come from visiting the workers in the fields: "Lotte fragte nach seiner Tochter: es hieß, sie sei mit Herrn Schmidt auf die Wiese hinaus zu den Arbeitern,"¹¹⁹ a pleasure to which Werther in the entire novel never once treats himself. Here we meet again the significant and striking contradiction between Werther's overt theoretical indictment of social hypocrisy, and the images he creates of his own environs, what I called his self-images or his artistic vision. Werther's individuality permits a disconnect between the theoretical critique he advances in his analyses of subjectivity and his own acts of artistic instantiation. This incongruity had already come to a head in the letter of 26 May, where he narrated in detail a drawing he made of the children of the Schulmeisters Tochter and with which he invests with his wish for a whole humanity. In his hill-top village referred to in the text as "Wahlheim"¹²⁰ and which is an hour outside of the town, Werther has made a new temporary home for himself. "Die Lage an einem Hügel ist sehr interessant, und wenn man oben auf dem Fußpfade zum Dorf herausgeht, übersieht man auf Einmal das ganze Thal."¹²¹ Werther has a table set up for himself here in front of the village church, where the innkeeper brings him coffee while he reads "his" Homer. "Das erste Mal [...] fand ich das Plätzchen so einsam. Es war alles im Felde."¹²² The boy

¹¹⁸Quoted in Scherpe 89.

¹¹⁹WA I/19, 43.

¹²⁰Werther first refers to "Wahlheim" as a "Plätzchen [...] das mich angezogen hat." As a footnote explains, the name "Wahlheim" is a choice made by the Editor of Werther's papers. It underscores Werther's mobility and apparent freedom.

¹²¹WA I/19, 16.

¹²²WA I/19, 17f.

of four years sits on the ground, holding the six-month old in his lap, while Werther draws them, adding (*fügte... bey*) the closest fence, a barn door and a few broken wagon wheels "ohne das mindeste von dem meinen hinzuzuthun."

The sentence "Es war alles im Felde" is a reversible image. Its frame succinctly performs what happens in framing as such: it shows how insides and outsides are constituted simultaneously and in interdependence. On the narrative level, it is the threshold through which Werther passes into his drawing and becomes entangled in it. "Es war alles im Felde" simultaneously suggests both the fullness of the picture and the workers' constitutive absence from it. Once the absence of the peasants has been established, the "brüderliche Stellung" of the two boys replaces them as a comforting counter-image to their troubling masculinity. This is a condition of the image's constitution and investment. The absence of the peasants permits a transport into the fullness of a childhood idyll, a "wohlgeordnete sehr interessante Zeichnung." The drawing is interesting because it points to a contradiction in Werther's wish for an undivided society, and suggests that this contradiction is profoundly related to the projection of his wish onto the aesthetic field. This is not a singular instance; we have already seen how, in his representational practice, Werther makes consistently short shrift of his rivals, to the extent that he must mention them at all. As we see here, something similar happens with the peasantry. It is the very absence of male peasants, workers and servants from Werther's images of nature that creates the possibility for artistic fulfillment as such. The *Bauernbursche*, whose story—which mirrors Werther's—was added in the 1787 edition, is the only sexually mature peasant who ever appears. Its addition in 1787 in a significant way underscores the complete occlusion of male peasants from the first edition. In introducing a sole exception, Goethe draws attention to what is not an accident of plot, but a formally constitutive rule. This absence is a black hole into which the political and aesthetic prongs of Werther's desire vanish before they can unite.

The "so-called" Herr Schmidt who provokes Werther's speech on dark moods is apparently a different sort of man than Werther—not that Werther is really interested in him so much as in his betrothed Friederike, the pastor's daughter whom he describes as "eine rasche wohlgewachsne Brünette, die einen die kurze Zeit über auf dem Lande wohl unterhalten hätte."¹²³ Yet Werther induces from Herr Schmidt's physiognomy that "es sei mehr Eigensinn und übler Humor als Eingeschränktheit des Verstandes, der ihn sich mitzuteilen hinderte," a reading that Werther sees confirmed in the darkening of the latter's complexion in response to his own flirtation with Friederike. Werther, who comforts himself with the thought that, "so eingeschränkt er ist, [...] daß er diesen Kerker verlassen kann, wann er will,"¹²⁴ fails to grasp the practical irrelevance of his theoretical insights for his audience, these others grounded in attachments to human particulars. Werther's description of this scene—the same could be said of all beauty in the novel—that establishes its beauty as inscribed in, and dependent upon, narratives of intergenerational continuity, an embeddedness in human meanings which extend both into the past and into the future, beyond the lifespans of each individual, in the kind of historical existence from which Werther is trying to break free. Lotte's ideality is the flora of a continuum of historical intersubjectivity which binds her to her family and to Albert¹²⁵—and Werther suffers precisely from this. That Werther cannot take Lotte out of context in the same synaesthetic way he mashes up his literary sources like Homer, the Bible and Ossian—this is the realization he finally finds reflected in *Emilia Galotti*, an ironic detail which only further underscores what Lukács called his "transcendental homelessness." Whereas peregrine Werther lives in multiple, contradictory stories at the same time, the story in which Lotte is embedded is her home.

¹²³WA I/19, 43f.

¹²⁴WA I/19, 16.

¹²⁵WA I/19, 62-3.

And Werther rejects the conditions of admission into this context. If quiet, dark moods are an unavoidable side effect of the self-oppression required by enlistment in the ranks of bourgeois manhood, or of a real engagement with peasants and workers, Werther's only answer is "Ich liebe die Subordination nicht sehr..."¹²⁶ It does not occur to Werther that Herr Schmidt may be holding his peace in order not to burden his unexpected company with his own cares. As Werther puts it:

Und nennen Sie mir den Menschen, der übler Laune ist und so brav dabei, sie zu verbergen, sie allein zu tragen, ohne die Freudn um sich her zu zerstören! Oder ist sie nicht vielmehr ein innerer Unmuth über unsere eigne Unwürdigkeit, ein Mißfallen an uns selbst, das immer mit einem Neide verknüpft ist, der durch eine thörichte Eitelkeit aufgehetzt wird? Wir sehen glückliche Menschen, die *wir* nicht glücklich machen, und das ist unerträglich. [...] Alle Geschenke, alle Gefälligkeiten der Welt ersetzen nicht einen Augenblick Vergnügen an sich selbst, den uns eine neidische Unbehaglichkeit unsers Tyrannen vergällt hat.¹²⁷

The "tyrant" Werther refers to here is nothing less than his own desiring imagination, which he articulates as originating in a natural emptiness around and from which the properly human articulations of the force of nature emerge and congeal. By the 30th of August, Werther's senses have become occupied without remainder by the image of Lotte. His aesthetic interface, which previously had been dedicated to the whole of a Nature conceived as a proxy of universal humanity, now turns around Lotte alone. The contrast between his former condition—in which he was still able to steady his subjectivity through the form-giving practice of drawing—and his current one, could not be starker. Whereas Werther was formerly able to arrest the world and bring the past and present into a—however limited—coalescence, he can now only picture himself as a victim driven through space by his overwhelming passion. In the form-giving moment, Werther was able to say "Es war alles im Felde." In this new phase, however, when his ability to steady himself fails, when he is unable "meine Beklemmung auszuweinen," he "muß hinaus!

¹²⁶WA I/19, 56.

¹²⁷WA I/19, 46-7.

Und schweife dann weit im Feld umher."¹²⁸ In his previous condition, Werther could create self-images from which he believed his own image was excluded ("ohne das mindeste von dem meinen hinzuzuthun"). These images could be interesting in a way that depended on their very partiality, on the indeterminate mystery of his own naïveté: everything was not in the field, and this was a constitutive condition of the image's aesthetic coherence.

As Lotte becomes the sole fixture around which Werther's erotic orbit turns, his ability to perform this framing function breaks down. Rather than some other object, it is he himself who takes the field. He can produce what is formally first-person narrative, but to do so he is driven to spaces apparently outside of the social order. These places are, furthermore, general in a way that can only underscore the primacy of their symbolic function: they merely represent an outside as such rather than any specific place: "einen jähren Berg zu klettern ist dann meine Freude, durch einen unwegsamen Wald einen Pfad durchzuarbeiten, durch die Hecken die mich verletzen, durch die Dornen, die mich zerreißen! Da wird mir's etwas besser! Etwas! Und wenn ich für Müdigkeit und Durst manchmal unterwegs liegen bleibe, manchmal in der tiefen Nacht, wenn der hohe Vollmond über mir steht, im einsamen Walde, auf einem krummgewachsenen Baum mich setze, um meinen verwundeten Sohlen nur einige Linderung zu verschaffen..."¹²⁹ Goethe's irony approaches a precipice here: Werther cannot even properly picture these spaces, for his general narrative merely bounds through them, emphasizing instead the new fantasy of his own exile in a figurative desert.

In his last letter to Werner, Werther seemed to be trying to convince himself that life is but a dream and that "Die Blüten des Lebens sind nur Erscheinungen!"¹³⁰ This was a desperate

¹²⁸WA I/19, 79-80.

¹²⁹WA I/19, 80.

¹³⁰WA I/19, 78.

attempt to justify his position vis-a-vis Albert. In their last conversation, his contrast to Lotte's fiancée had reached a high point in the image of his picking flowers while walking with the latter. This again concerns Lotte's and Albert's rootedness in bourgeois history: "Ich gehe so neben ihm hin und pflücke Blumen am Wege, [...] werfe sie in den vorüberfließenden Strom, und sehe ihnen nach, wie sie leise hinunterwallen."¹³¹ Whereas Albert has history, family and society on his side, Werther has only the present moment and its fleeting impressions. Now on the 28th of August he asks Werner: "O mein Bruder! --- können wir gereifte Früchte vernachlässigen, verachten, ungenossen verfaulen lassen?"¹³² If Werther's duty commands him to keep his distance from Lotte, perhaps there is another, natural order, according to which his duty would be to seduce her. This would represent an intermediate solution before taking the more radical step of subscribing to a metaphysics of fleeting "Erscheinungen," a complete derealization of the world to a dream.

Here Goethe revisits ground he covered a few years before in the poem *Heidenröslein*¹³³, a poem which turns around the problem of sexuality, violence and the porous border between Nature and civilization. In the body of the poem itself, the rose is called "Röslein auf der Heiden," little rose on the heath, and although *Heidenröslein* usually refers to an uncultivated species (the derisive name "dog rose" retains the contradictory status of uncultivated-yet-domestic, as heath roses were in fact often planted *in the wild*), a *Heide* could refer to either a wild meadow or a planted field. The poem enacts the fantasy of a natural order of sexuality outside of its social negotiation. The personal individuation which law presupposes and enacts is, despite the use of the grammatical first-person, rendered merely formal. In this imagined outside, the "Weh und Ach"

¹³¹WA I/19, 63.

¹³²WA I/19, 78.

¹³³WA I/1, 16.

of natural language (pre-human or pre-conceptual language in Herder's sense) is not translated into a communicative language capable of negotiating the violence of sexuality, but neither is the violence or suffering one-sided. It does, however, leave an indelible impression in memory. The civilizing moment is displaced from law, but receives a lasting form in the recording of the folk song itself as a history of violence; it is reinvested as history into the ideal universality of the aesthetic. In this way, the poetic outside becomes a topos in which the social containment of sexuality is suspended, even as it tries, as memory, to assert itself as a moment in a series with an ultimately civilizational telos. Divestment of determinate moral content is a condition of the reentry of this memory of violence into a new civilizational futurity, of thinking the speculative transition from a moral to an aesthetic regulation of the inherent violence of sexuality.

Seen in this light, Werther's emerging failure is an aesthetic failure: he is unable to invent a poetics that can trump Albert's claim on Lotte. Even according to his own relation of events, his poetics of the self and his relationship to the "flowers" he picks along the way only to toss into oblivion, is a poetics of resignation. He is not himself convinced that he has developed a mythopoetic discourse that can compete with Albert, who is backed by the normative force of social convention. For all his speculative, critical insight, Werther falls back frightened and intimidated in the face of this civilizational machinery and its apparent advantages. The Wertherian poetics is underdeveloped and unprepared for the task of challenging convention's claim on performing the civilizing function which, according to Herder, poetry had performed for the Greeks, and which the Romantics would, some two decades later, again try to make it perform.

Werther's naive self-absencing from the field of his own desiring images could only result in exclusions which reinforced the social order he thought he wanted to undermine. This afforded

him, however, a stabler subjectivity, allowing him to take up a position from which to put the world into form and become aesthetically productive in an interesting and enjoyable way. Whenever, on the other hand, his tendency towards complete fusion with the world or some part of it (Nature, Lotte) becomes absolute, his over-proximity to the field gives way to a fantasy of self-destruction. This is the meaning of the "Mährchen vom Magnetenberg,"¹³⁴ that over-proximity leads to subjective disintegration and dissolution.

What Werther cannot do and what Goethe is trying to do is find a way to be both within the work and outside of it at the same time. This means developing a practice that can accommodate the beautiful and the sublime in a single form which can sustain the difference between the two without falling into the contented lull of beauty's closed circuits or dissolving into the sublime's limitless formal chaos. This aim can be described as one of rendering the world as—simultaneously—distinctly beautiful and distinctly sublime. The splitting of the narration of "Werther" into the voices of Werther and of the editor is only the most topical formal reflection of Goethe's search for a solution to this problem.

We have seen how the closer Werther gets to Nature, the more immediate and submerged his senses are in his environs, the more ecstatic his experience of unity with her—the more his powers of representation fail him. He can't "get hold of contours" (keinen Umriß packen kann)¹³⁵, can't stabilize and fix any subjective data. Not that the material world is receding from him—on the contrary: "wenn ich Thon hätte oder Wachs so wollt ich's wohl herausbilden. Ich werde auch Thon nehmen, wenn's länger währt, und kneten, und sollten's Kuchen werden!" The material world in its sensory tactility is closer and more real than it has ever been, it is a world he can "mit Händen greifen." What falls away in his approach is rather the moment of intersubjective

¹³⁴WA I/19, 58.

¹³⁵WA I/19, 57f.

mediation, the minting of a symbolic currency. Such a process was for Herder the operation which ultimately renders the human distinct among its animal cohort, it is what pushes human language beyond the organic automatism of Nature sounding itself, of Nature as a cacophonous, unified nervous system.

The closer Werther gets to the plasmic real of empirical experience, the more ephemeral and untenable, prop and token-like do the social trinkets of shared humanity seem to him. They slip through his fingers like sand while he is carried ever further from any harbor of mediation, from any ability to take pleasure in the warmth of shared approximations. In this sense Werther's crisis is a crisis about becoming human in the sense in which Herder had defined it in his essay on language. The central aporia in Herder's theory of language is—in a way that is both essential to and troubling for its normative ambitions—that language can never fully relinquish its natural, animal aspect. The development of a truly human language is a part of the task of becoming a *human animal*, and not of becoming a human rather than an animal, or substituting human language for the natural language of *Empfindsamkeit*. A human language must become abstract and distance itself from its origin in immediate, confined sensory experience without severing its ties to its origins in feeling. When Werther returns to Lotte after his falling out at court, and begins anew the project of justifying himself, he emphasizes that he and Lotte share an aesthetic affinity from which Albert is excluded. "Ein gewisser Mangel an Fühlbarkeit, ein Mangel --- nimm es wie du willst; daß sein Herz nicht sympathetisch schlägt bei --- oh! --- bei der Stelle eines lieben Buches, wo mein Herz und Lottens in Einem zusammen treffen; in hundert andern Vorfällen, wenn es kommt, daß unsere Empfindungen über eine Handlung eines Dritten laut werden."¹³⁶ In arguing that the mutual attraction between himself and Lotte is natural, Werther has in mind something similar to the sounding aesthetic Nature Herder theorized in his essay on

¹³⁶WA I/19, 113.

language. Literature acts as a stand-in for the natural environment in which animals find themselves: literature here plays the role of a second order natural human environment that is detached from spatiotemporal immediacy. This depends on language first having become human—having become abstract and capable of describing (Herder says "*schildern*") things in their absence. Werther's argument depends on a *re-naturalization* of literature, a reduction of it to an environment to which the proper response is a sounding of feeling. This problem was prefigured in the climax of Werther's and Lotte's first encounter, in the utterance of the name "Klopstock!" This is the first, primitive step towards developing a human language of literature, like when the humans in Herder's essay on language name the bleating sheep. The name "Klopstock" is a metonymy for a whole world of feeling, and the development of a language for it only begins with the act of naming. But if the world of literary experience that Werther and Lotte share is incapable of being integrated into the order of life lived—if these second-order natural environments are present within the world only as problematic exceptions to it—it is nonetheless the creation of such exceptional worlds on which Werther's recovery depends: "ich habe verloren was meines Lebens einzige Wonne war," he relates, "die heilige belebende Kraft, mit der ich Welten um mich schuf; sie ist dahin!"¹³⁷ It is at this point that we can begin to speak of a birth of Mephistopheles from the spirit of Werther. Werther is struggling to understand the economy of his individuation without internalizing it as guilt: "Weh mir! ich fühle zu wahr, daß an mir allein alle Schuld liegt, --- nicht Schuld! Genug daß in mir die Quelle alles Elendes verborgen ist, wie es ehemals die Quelle aller Seligkeiten."

But Werther is not quite able to take hold of this internal "Quelle" and imagine it as existing both within and outside of himself at the same time.

¹³⁷WA I/19, 128f.

2.4 The Birth of Mephisto from the Spirit of Young Werther

"Teufel! er ist nicht zu ersetzen..."¹³⁸

I have argued that Werther's identity is caught up in his visions of Nature which are simultaneously self-images. To create an operative image—a figure—of the principle of creativity would mean identifying with the destructive force of Nature: it would mean claiming not "Schuld" but acknowledging participation in the "ewig wiederkäuendes Ungeheuer" of Nature. Werther cannot take this step, but neither can he prevent the inevitable destruction which can be attributed to his merely being in the world. In Werther's early articulation of this desiring mystery, it was a matter of putting one's hands on the source:

Daß die Kinder nicht wissen, warum sie wollen, darin sind alle hochgelahrten Schul- und Hofmeister einig; daß aber auch Erwachsene gleich Kindern auf diesem Erdboden herumtaumeln, und wie jene nicht wissen, woher sie kommen und wohin sie gehen, eben so wenig nach wahren Zwecken handeln, eben so durch Biskuit und Kuchen und Birkenreiser regiert werden: das will niemand gern glauben, und mich dünkt, man kann es mit Händen greifen.¹³⁹

Werther's inability to aesthetically abstract the destructive face of vitality from within himself—to render it in some outside, to frame and aestheticize it as in some sense "other" is at once the cause of his suicide and the moment in which the character of Mephistopheles is born. In November 1772, Johann Christian Kestner sent Goethe the report he had requested of Karl Jerusalem's suicide. In adapting the language of Kestner's report for the scene of Werther's death, Goethe makes some changes; he removes names and rearranges and condenses the language while exchanging instances of the active and passive voice. Where Kestner's letter reads, for instance, "Es scheint sitzend im Lehnstuhl vor seinem Schreibtisch geschehen zu seyn,"¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸WA I/19, 101.

¹³⁹WA I/19, 15.

¹⁴⁰Berend 20.

Werther reads "er habe sitzend vor dem Schreibtische die That vollbracht."¹⁴¹ In the main, however, Goethe is faithful to the details of Kestner's report: in both accounts the bullet wound is over the right eye; the deceased is wearing his boots and his famous costume of blue and yellow, now stained from having flailed about in his own blood; it is *Emilia Galotti* that is found lying open on the lectern. The most important difference between Kestner's report and Goethe's aestheticization of it lies in a lexical choice. Kestner's report reads:

Dr. Held erzählt mir, als er zu ihm gekommen, habe er auf der Erde gelegen, der Puls noch geschlagen; doch ohne Hülfe. Die Glieder alle wie gelähmt, weil das Gehirn lädirt, auch herausgetreten gewesen; Zum Ueberflusse habe er ihm eine Ader am Arm geöffnet, wobey er ihm den schlaffen Arm halten müssen, das Blut wäre doch noch gelaufen.¹⁴²

Goethe's corresponding section reads:

Als der Medicus zu dem Unglücklichen kam, fand er ihn an der Erde ohne Rettung, der Puls schlug, die Glieder waren alle gelähmt. Über dem rechten Auge hatte er sich durch den Kopf geschossen, das Gehirn war herausgetrieben. Man ließ ihm zum Überfluß eine Ader am Arme, das Blut lief, er holte noch immer Athem.¹⁴³

Goethe's choice of "herausgetrieben" recasts Werther's suicide as a auto-exorcism, the extraction, externalization and objectification of a demon spirit. Werther had become convinced that the source of all joy and all suffering is within himself. We have seen that there is a link between this "heilige belebende Kraft" and the phenomenon I have described as Wertherian synesthesia, the sensuous immediacy of Werther's aesthetic interface to an imagined All of Nature and society. Werther's problem is a problem in the economy of this force within himself, an imbalance in its distribution in the face of God-Nature: "o! wenn da diese herrliche Natur so starr vor mir steht wie ein lackirtes Bildchen, und alle die Wonne keinen Tropfen Seligkeit aus meinem Herzen

¹⁴¹WA I/19, 190.

¹⁴²Berend 21.

¹⁴³WA I/19, 190.

herauf in das Gehirn pumpen kann, und der ganze Kerl vor Gottes Angesicht steht wie ein versiegter Brunnen, wie ein verletzter Eimer."¹⁴⁴ This is the total and ossified view of Nature of the subject who has been reduced to an object by his own inanimate vision. Mephistopheles, who will call himself "Ein Teil von jener Kraft, / Die stets das Böse will und stets das Gute schafft" (1335-6), has yet to find a form in which he can emerge into the worlds of Enlightenment and *Empfindsamkeit*. The emergence of Mephistopheles into the light—here, just barely, in that excessive mass of formless grey matter protruding from Werther's shattered skull—is the condition for the emergence of a distinction between the beautiful and the sublime.

2.5 Scavenger Sublime: *Harzreise im Winter* (1777)

One of the most important transformations in Goethe's early aesthetics, and one that is implied in the transition from the Storm and Stress to Classicism, was that Goethe by-and-by tried to speak more subtly about the violence of Nature. He was drawn to classicism because it offered the most thoroughly sublimated and externalized way of talking about the inherent violence of natural processes. This development eventually led Goethe to a renewed understanding of the classical concept of art as imitation of Nature, a development in which the aesthetics of the sublime becomes a crucial component. As an example of a work that is emblematic of the aesthetics of the sublime Goethe began to develop during his first decade in Weimar, the poem *Harzreise im Winter* (1777)¹⁴⁵ casts the aesthetic violence of the poem as a moment in the economy of literary vitality.

Dem Geier gleich,

Der auf schweren Morgenwolken

¹⁴⁴WA I/19, 128.

¹⁴⁵WA I/2, 61-4.

Mit sanftem Fittich ruhend

Nach Beute schaut,

Schwebe mein Lied.

With three words—"Like a vulture"—Goethe introduces the aesthetics of the sublime. The image of the vulture hovering above the world, scanning the ground for carrion, announces the sublime in a double aspect. One involves the bird's-eye-view of the world, the specular fiction of total vision. The other involves the blind violence of print as a quasi-anonymous medium. As weather's passenger, the lyrical thing is an object of myriad flows. But no poem is wholly object.

Denn ein Gott hat

Jedem seine Bahn

Vorgezeichnet,

Die der Glückliche

Rasch zum freudigen

Ziele rennt:

Wem aber Unglück

Das Herz zusammenzog,

Er sträubt vergebens

Sich gegen die Schranken

Des ehernen Fadens,

Den die doch bittre Schere

Nur einmal löst.

The poem's objectivity ends where its scavenger nature begins. It scours the anonymous public for an ear, an opening that will signify its destiny. "Der Glückliche" who rushes forward on his clearly marked path has no need of poetry. His view of his goal is unobstructed. Poetry cannot seize him. It is only once he trips that he may see the vulture circling high above. But the one whose heart is contracted in misfortune—this one rages at the edges of the bounded way unfurling before him. The losing battle he wages with destiny is the scavenger poem's opening. Through this opening, the scavenger's quarry packs itself into a dense, thrilling thicket:

In Dickichts-Schauer
 Drängt sich das rauhe Wild,
 Und mit den Sperlingen
 Haben längst die Reichen
 In ihre Sümpfe sich gesenkt.

Like more contented life-forms (who complacently sink into the wet Earth, consuming their hoarded abundance), the scavenger's quarry has stalled in its progress. But because it is hunted, it cannot grow soft like these with lethargy. Here in the thick brush of condensing images, the quarry invokes burgeoning life's ancient privilege to struggle at learning meanings. The scavenger's quarry is off the path in the *Dickichts-Schauer*, struggling with density, tarrying in its negotiations with the Book of Nature. There is an ease in following the *Königsweg*, the cleared and leveled path of established fortune and power, the gravy train of history's victors:

Leicht ists, folgen dem Wagen,
 Den Fortuna führt,
 Wie der gemächliche Troß
 Auf gebesserten Wegen
 Hinter des Fürsten Einzug.

But the vulture is unresponsive to that vision of easy fulfillment. He averts his gaze. Something, someone else distracts it: Who is it? Who is this wayward creature, off on his own?

Aber abseits, wer ists?
 Ins Gebüsch verliert sich sein Pfad,
 Hinter ihm schlagen
 Die Sträucher zusammen,
 Das Gras steht wieder auf,
 Die Öde verschlingt ihn.

This question draws the attention of the scavenger. From his position on high, he ought to know the answer. But here his exalted view is checked. On the question "Who is it," the hermetic surface of the poem breaks, and the vulture becomes entangled with the being who is seen to disappear into the thicket by the wayside. The tall grass closes behind him. The vulture's eye cannot penetrate it. Who *is* the poem's addressee? This indeterminacy is the vulture's opening, its propylaea between heaven and earth. It is through this opening that the poem moves.

Ach, wer heilet die Schmerzen
 Des, dem Balsam zu Gift ward?
 Der sich Menschenhaß
 Aus der Fülle der Liebe trank?
 Erst verachtet, nun ein Verächter,
 Zehrt er heimlich auf
 Seinen eigenen Wert
 In ungnügender Selbstsucht.

But the movement between earth and heaven cannot be accomplished without intercession. The vulture lets fly another *Who?*, indicating the poem's self-insufficiency. If at first the vulture

seemed to occupy a transcendent position above the earth on which it gazes down, by now it is clear that the poem's position is in-between. Outside help is necessary. The poem directs one *who* upwards and one *who* downwards. The asking of the question *who?* emerges as the central operation of the poem. Each *who* is a pool which can be filled by the imagination. The repetition of this question offers the imagination a division along the line separating earth from heaven, the fallen from the exalted. But the division so offered is simultaneously a doubling.

The wayward cipher on the ground has a history. The poison coursing through his veins was once a healing elixir, his misanthropy originates in overflowing love. He learned scorn from being spurned in his enchantment. Having become separated from the wellsprings of divinity, he consumes himself in unfulfilling solipsism. This is the melancholic to whom the scavenger poem is drawn, and having found him, the poem transforms into a prayer for intercession. For to fulfill its destiny of filling itself with its prey, the scavenger requires assistance.

Confronted with its own lack, in the next stanza the poem introduces the second person form of address. With the introduction of direct address, it is as if the question of *who* has been decided. But like the question of *who*, *Du* quickly splits and doubles. The shifter's indeterminacy means that *Du* by force raises the question of *Who?* once again. But it raises it now with a difference: when the poem says *Du*, the question of *Who?* is put into the mouth of the poem's virtual addressee. But against the hermetic surface of the poem, the question can only resound. If the question *who?* is to carve an opening into the poem, it must pass through the propylaea of indeterminacy and submit to the poem's self-dividing violence.

Ist auf deinem Psalter,

Vater der Liebe, ein Ton

Seinem Ohre vernehmlich,
 So erquicke sein Herz!
 Öffne den umwölkten Blick
 Über die tausend Quellen
 Neben dem Durstenden
 In der Wüste.

In its sudden address of the Father of Love, the poem offers its addressee a virtual bifurcation along the same line by which the lyrical voice in the first stanza originally divided itself into poet and scavenger-like, sublime poem. This divisive play with shifters is an essential technical feature of Goethe's lyric poetry from the first decade in Weimar (used to stunning effect in the love poem *Warum gabst du uns die tiefen Blicke*). The importance of this technique is that it enables Goethe to create lyrical objects that harbor the potential for immediate experiences of lyrical mediacy. The poem can thus become a precarious choose-your-own-adventure story at the deepest level of self-identification (or, inversely, an epigenetic landscape at the level of consciousness):

Der du der Freuden viel schaffst,
 Jedem ein überfließend Maß,
 Segne die Brüder der Jagd
 Auf der Fährte des Wilds
 Mit jugendlichem Übermut
 Fröhlicher Mordsucht,

Späte Rächer des Unbills,
 Dem schon Jahre vergeblich
 Wehrt mit Knütteln der Bauer.

In this stanza, the poem offers one second-person identification (through direct address) and two third-person identifications. The latter two, the "Brüder der Jagd" and "der Bauer" are, on one level, starkly opposed in their relationships to Nature. The "Brüder der Jagd" are coextensive with their drives, executors of unexamined imperatives, while "der Bauer" wages a losing battle against Nature's encroachments on his cultivated domesticity. Yet on another level the two share an identity in their reactive attitudes towards the "Unbill" of civilization's internment of Nature: both the "Brüder der Jagd" and "der Bauer" emerge as subjects of worlds that are determined and defined by the civilizational suppression of Nature's violence. Is there an alternative to these two, merely reactive, ways of construing human Nature?

Aber den Einsamen hüll
 In deine Goldwolken!
 Umgib mit Wintergrün,
 Bis die Rose heranreift,
 Die feuchten Haare,
 O Liebe, deines Dichters!

There is, but it requires the intercession of art. It is here that we can begin to see Goethe sketching explicitly a positive solution to Werther's synesthesia. It presages, in germ-like form, the development of Goethe's classicist didacticism. The poem's virtual addressee is offered a way out of the reactive double-bind in the face of Nature through identification with a third,

triangulating subject position. The price of this identification is finally answering the question of *Who?* with "Ich," whereby the virtual addressee may imaginatively slip into the body of the poem's actual addressee.

Mit der dämmernden Fackel
 Leuchtest du ihm
 Durch die Furten bei Nacht,
 Über grundlose Wege
 Auf öden Gefilden;
 Mit dem tausendfarbigen Morgen
 Lachst du ins Herz ihm;
 Mit dem beizenden Sturm trägst du ihn hoch empor;
 Winterströme stürzen vom Felsen
 In seine Psalmen,
 Und Altar des lieblichsten Danks
 Wird ihm des gefürchteten Gipfels
 Schneebehangner Scheitel,
 Den mit Geisterreihen
 Kränzten ahnende Völker.

The experience of the sublime began as a wayward struggle in the melancholic *Dickichts-Schauer* of meanings, and this struggle is what distinguishes the poet from the "Brüder der Jagd," on the one hand, and from the "Bauer" on the other. To the poet, neither alternative of reacting or

submitting to natural violence is tenable. The poet undertakes to read the Book of Nature; he endeavors to create an opening (*zeichnen*) whereby self and Nature can enter into a mutually responsive relationship. This opening is the bifurcation of Nature itself into subjects and worlds that are not defined by the suppression of natural violence, but are, rather, the outcome of a negotiation through which the subject chooses the terms on which he can become a participant in its creative execution. The sublime thus culminates, now transfigured, in the crossing of an abyss between the poem's question of *Who?* and its addressee's response of "I." The passage described leads from indeterminate but frustrating, synaesthetic confusion, through the determination of self and world in the bifurcation of Nature, back to a (transfigured) indeterminacy between a new subject and a new world:

Du stehst mit unerforschtem Busen

Geheimnisvoll offenbar

Über der erstaunten Welt,

Und schaust aus Wolken

Auf ihre Reiche und Herrlichkeit,

Die du aus den Adern deiner Brüder

Neben dir wässerst.

In writing the poem, then, Goethe has used the sublime to bifurcate himself into a scavenger and its victim, an exalted, blindly violent self and a wayward, melancholic self. The poem becomes the poet's new, scavenger body, in which his melancholic self is objectified and finally consumed by, and sublimated into, his vulture self. The scavenger sublime offers its quarry identification with divinity, but at a price. The price is participation in what Werther had called "das ewige

Ungeheuer der Natur," that creative force that "alles in sich and durch sich hervorbringt." This is the aspect of Nature that Werther could not assimilate into his view without destroying himself. We saw at the beginning of this chapter how Goethe's early aesthetics used totalizing images to reveal the inherent violence of nature. The transition to an aesthetics of the sublime involves an imitative doubling of natural violence in aesthetic violence, the creation of a space of mutual inquiry, negotiation and seduction between subject and drive.¹⁴⁶ The aim of the sublime is a return to a world governed by the *Erstaunen* which in melancholia had been foreclosed.

¹⁴⁶Cf. Powers 49: "For Goethe, the sublime was not cause for horror or disquiet but, rather, awe at the human ability to peer into Nature's secrets because of our own participation as living beings in her vital processes."

Chapter 3

Dialectics of Strategy: Die Qual der *Wahlverwandtschaften*.

3.1 Strategy

But Thucydides is one, who, though he never digresses to read a lecture, moral or political, upon his own text, nor enter into men's hearts, further then the acts themselves evidently guide him: is yet accounted the most politic historiographer that ever writ. The reason whereof I take to be this. He filleth his narrations with that choice of matter, and ordereth them with that judgement, and with such perspicuity and efficacy expresseth himself, that, as Plutarch saith, he maketh his auditor a spectator. [...] These virtues of my author did so take my affection, that they begat in me a desire to communicate him further: which was the first occasion that moved me to translate him.¹⁴⁷

"Strategy" and "strategic" are modern words. It was only in the first decade of the nineteenth century that they entered English and German common usage from Greek *strategia*, by way of French *stratégie*. In both languages strategy—from *stratos* meaning "multitude" or "army" and *agein* meaning "to lead"—was initially reserved for contexts of war. But its expansion into other regions began immediately. Referring to his scientific enemies, those "eigentlichen Newtonianer," Goethe wrote to Zelter on 28 February 1811:

Sie glaubten noch tactisch zu siegen, da sie strategisch lange überwunden waren. Wenn ihnen einmal die Augen aufgehen werden sie erschrecken, daß ich schon in Naumburg und Leipzig bin, mittlerweile sie noch bey Weimar und Blankenhan herumkröpel. Jene Schlacht war schon vorher verloren, und ist es hier auch. Jene Lehre ist schon ausgelöscht, indem die Herren noch glauben, ihren Gegner verachten zu dürfen. Verzeihen Sie mir das Großthun, ich schäme mich indessen so wenig als die Herren sich ihres Kleinthuns.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷These are Thomas Hobbes' words from the readers' preface to his translation of Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War* (Hobbes 8: viii).

¹⁴⁸WA IV/22, 49-50.

The context here is scientific strategy, but Goethe's meaning is clear owing to the military metaphor. Opposed to "tactisch," which is how to defeat one's opponent in the details, "strategisch" involves the overall plan, the paradigm. Here, Goethe's usage foregrounds this meaning of large-, as opposed to small-scale, thinking. Elsewhere, however, we can find him using "strategy" in what could be called its pure sense, in which it is opposed to "not strategic." Of the night of 19 September, in the Campaign in France, he writes:

Ich kannte niemand von den edlen Küchengesellen, unbekannt mocht' ich sie nicht ansprechen; als mir aber soeben ein lieber Bekannter begegnete, der so gut wie ich an Hunger und Durst litt, fiel mir eine Kriegslist ein, nach einer Bemerkung, die ich auf meiner kurzen militärischen Laufbahn anzustellen Gelegenheit gehabt. Ich hatte nämlich bemerkt, dass man beim Furagieren um die Dörfer und in denselben tölpisch geradezu verfare: Die ersten Andringenden fielen ein, nahmen weg, verdarben, zerstörten, die folgenden fanden immer weniger, und was verloren ging, kam niemand zugute. Ich hatte schon gedacht, dass man bei dieser Gelegenheit strategisch verfahren und, wenn die Menge von vorne hereindringe, sich von der Gegenseite nach einigem Bedürfnis umsehen müsse.¹⁴⁹

Although the usage is still authorized here by the military context, its meaning has already shifted away from the etymological sense and towards the sense that "strategy" and "strategic" ubiquitously enjoy in academic discourse today in fields as diverse as game theory, economics, management studies, political science, psychology and—how could it be otherwise?—the study of literature.

3.2 Biopolitical Strategy in Athens

The office of strategist (*strategos*) arose with the creation of Athenian democracy under Cleisthenes at the end of the 6th century BC. This went hand in hand with governmental reforms aimed at breaking the power of traditional tribal allegiances and redistributing it among geographic electorates in which citizens now had to register. The tribe (*phyle*) was redefined

¹⁴⁹WA I/33, 63-4.

from a hereditary and familial entity to a geographic one. As of the beginning of the 5th century, each year the Athenians elected ten *strategoï*, one from each *phyle*. Unlike other office holders in Athenian government, who were chosen by lot and could serve only one term, the *strategoï* were elected directly for a one year term and could serve multiple terms so long as they were re-elected. Since the ability of the *strategoï* to be re-elected was based on the influence that they wielded, they were often among the most gifted orators. And as their office combined the political power of a *politikos* with direct control over military operations, the *strategoï* were among the most powerful individuals in democratic Athens. Themistocles, Aristides, Pericles, Sophocles and Alcibiades were among the most famous Athenian *strategoï*. Direct subjection to popular will could also make the office a precarious one for the man who held it. If a *strategos*' performance of his duties was deemed unsatisfactory or if he was found to have abused his office, he could be tried by jury, deposed and fined (as Pericles was), ostracized (as Thucydides was) or even sentenced to death.

Athenian democracy arose with Athenian military, particularly naval, prowess. War under Pericles meant an increasingly unsustainable war of imperial expansion ending with the downfall of the Athenian Empire and the end of her Golden Age. In 5th century Athens, during the Age of Pericles and until democracy broke down with Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War, the *strategoï* symbolically embodied and enacted the biopolitical link between the people and the waging of this war. That is to say, the *strategos* formed a link between the *demos* and the *strategia*.

A further feature of the Athenian *strategoï* which would have interested Goethe was their denunciation of the political importance of poetic remembrance. Indeed, a *strategos* might even situate his own rhetorical project in overt opposition to Homer's poetic genius. The most famous

example of this is no doubt Pericles' Funeral Oration as narrated by another contemporaneous *strategos*, the historian Thucydides, in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. At the annual funeral for all who had fallen in the first year of the war, Pericles honored the dead by honoring the cause for which they had sacrificed their lives: the glory of Athens.

[T]he admiration of the present and succeeding ages will be ours, since we have not left our power without witness, but have shown it by mighty proofs; and far from needing a Homer for our panegyrist, or other of his craft whose verses might charm for the moment only for the impression they gave to melt at the touch of fact, we have forced every sea and land to be the highway of our daring, and everywhere, whether for evil or for good, have left imperishable monuments behind us. Such is the Athens for which these men, in the assertion of their resolve not to lose her, nobly fought and died; and well may every one of their survivors be ready to suffer in her cause.¹⁵⁰

What both Hobbes and Plutarch valued so highly in Thucydides was his ability to "maketh his auditor a spectator." In saying this, Hobbes and Plutarch are pointing out that Thucydides' modernity lay not merely in his dismissal of divine intervention in the search for historical causation and in his reliance on proven fact. Thucydides' technical and rhetorical accomplishment, his ability to show rather than to tell, was in fact his radically modern element, for it shows that he was tuned in to the increasing importance and power of the visual field—against the properly aural—for the transfer from tribally to democratically relevant truth processes. The demand for proof—for visual mediation of the unfamiliar voice—arises with the displacement of meaning from aural immediacy as developing societies are increasingly objectivized in dispersion from their origin. Unlike the ephemeral and fleeting voice of the epic poet, who retells his stories for each living audience anew, the modern historian, like the state itself, endeavors to leave indelible material traces as universal guarantors of intergenerational identity. The transformation of auditors into spectators—the dispersion and integration of the

¹⁵⁰Thucydides 106.

linguistic animal into conceptually mediated discursive fields—is a condition of democratic statehood, in which myth is displaced by ideology.

Goethe's interest in Thucydides was similar to Hobbes', but with a crucial difference. On 16 December 1797 he wrote to Schiller to tell him that he had of late been rereading Thucydides, and that for the first time, it was affording him "eine ganz reine Freude," because now he was reading him for form alone rather than for content.¹⁵¹ Like Hobbes, Goethe appreciated the historical necessity of Thucydides' visuality and saw in it a key to understanding the displacement of the older naive epic by the dramatic forms that flourished under democratic conditions. Goethe, however, was interested in how the visuality of Thucydides' naturalistic narrative form might be adapted to the radically different content of democratically fueled war in his own historical moment. In *Hermann und Dorothea*, which he had just finished in June of that year and which was printed in October, he had performed precisely such a translation of ancient form with modern content, only in epic hexameter. In the section of his *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* titled *Das romantische Epos*, Hegel called this poem "Goethes Meisterwerk." His enthusiasm was not owing to the historicist formalism of Goethe's hexameters, however, but to the particular way the poem makes use of the visual field.

Hier wird uns zwar der Blick auf den Hintergrund der in unserer Zeit größten Weltbegebenheit eröffnet, an welche sich dann die Zustände des Wirtes und seiner Familie, des Pastors und Apothekers unmittelbar anknüpfen, so daß wir, da das Landstädtchen nicht in seinen politischen Verhältnissen erscheint, einen unberechtigten Sprung finden und die Vermittlung des Zusammenhanges vermissen können; doch gerade durch das Weglassen dieses Mittelgliedes bewahrt das Ganze seinen eigentümlichen Charakter. Denn meisterhaft hat Goethe die Revolution, obschon er sie zur Erweiterung des Gedichts aufs glücklichste zu benutzen wußte, ganz in die Ferne zurückgestellt und nur solche Zustände derselben in die Handlung eingeflochten, welche sich in ihrer einfachen

¹⁵¹WA IV/12, 378. In this same letter, Goethe also writes "Da die alten Sprichwörter meist auf geographischen, historischen, nationellen und individuellen Verhältnissen ruhen, so enthalten sie einen ganz großen Schatz von reelem Stoff. Leider wissen wir aus der Erfahrung, daß dem Dichter niemand seine Gegenstände suchen kann, ja daß er sich selbst manchmal vergreift."

Menschlichkeit an jene häuslichen und städtischen Verhältnisse und Situationen durchaus zwanglos anschließen.¹⁵²

For Hegel, the key to understanding what Goethe is up to in *Hermann und Dorothea* was to be found in the way it presents effects rather than causes. The cause (of war) is present in the poem only as a marked absence. Goethe's argumentative style thus declines to provide proof in the form of teleological causation. Hegel saw in Goethe's refusal to gratify a demand for this missing link the possibility of dislodging the locus of objectivity from conceptual discursivity and returning it to a *Lebenswelt* of sense experience. Only then might truth arise in an objective form capable of mediating between the individual and the universal. If what Hobbes and Plutarch liked about Thucydides was his ability to turn his auditors into spectators, what Hegel liked about Goethe was the artful way he encouraged his audience to use its eyes to see, and its ears to listen.

Goethe repeatedly returned to Pericles in the remaining years of the 18th century,¹⁵³ and we can even find echoes of him in the *Wahlverwandtschaften*. Much more importantly, however, the Funeral Oration had by the turn of the century become a canonical point of reference. When we consider in this light Charlotte's conversation with the Architect about memorialization of the dead versus the value of the living, it emerges that a moment in her speech is marked as an intrusion of intertext.

Wir begegnen dem Geistreichen, ohne uns mit ihm zu unterhalten, dem Gelehrten, ohne von ihm zu lernen, dem Gereisten, ohne uns zu unterrichten, dem Liebevollen, ohne ihm etwas Angenehmes zu erzeigen. Und leider ereignet sich dies nicht bloß mit den Vorübergehenden. Gesellschaften und Familien betragen sich so gegen ihre liebsten Glieder, Städte gegen ihre würdigsten Bürger, Völker

¹⁵²Hegel 15: 414-15. Hegel continues, gushing: "Was aber die Hauptsache ist, Goethe hat für dieses Werk mitten aus der modernen Wirklichkeit Züge, Schilderungen, Zustände, Verwicklungen herauszufinden und darzustellen verstanden, die in ihrem Gebiete das wieder lebendig machen, was zum unvergänglichen Reiz in den ursprünglich menschlichen Verhältnissen der Odyssee und der patriarchalischen Gemälde des Alten Testaments gehört."

¹⁵³See for example Tagebücher 9.8.1798 (WA III/2, 217), 4.12.1799-5.12.1799 (WA III/2, 273).

gegen ihre trefflichsten Fürsten, Nationen gegen ihre vorzüglichsten Menschen. Ich hörte fragen, warum man von den Toten so unbewunden Gutes sage, von den Lebenden immer mit einer gewissen Vorsicht. Es wurde geantwortet: weil wir von jenen nichts zu befürchten haben und diese uns noch irgendwo in den Weg kommen könnten.¹⁵⁴

Charlotte's formulations of "Ich hörte fragen" and "Es wurde geantwortet" are awkward and mysterious until read as the anonymous quote they plainly indicate. They bracket a paraphrased line from Pericles' Funeral Oration: "The living have envy to contend with, while those who are no longer in our path are honoured with a goodwill into which rivalry does not enter."¹⁵⁵ The problem Goethe is addressing in his intertextual dialogue with Thucydides, which he here puts in the mouth of Charlotte, is the problem of the politicization and commercialization of language: what Francis Bacon in *Novum Organum* famously called *idola fori* and *idola theatri*. Goethe is concerned with the ramifications of war on society, the self-fulfilling prophecy of an increasingly Hobbesian world.¹⁵⁶

A few years later in 1813, Goethe was sent Johannes Schulze's new translation of the Oration. Schulze was a theologian and classical philologist who had formerly been a Gymnasium professor in Weimar, but having drawn attention to himself as an anti-Napoleonic patriot, he was called by Dalberg to direct the Gymnasium in Hanau near Frankfurt (he would later become one of the most powerful bureaucrats in the Prussian education machine and an influential proponent of Hegelianism). When Schulze was leaving Weimar for Hanau in 1812, Goethe mentioned him somewhat disparagingly in a letter to Caroline von Wollzogen, only to say that he wouldn't be missed, except perhaps by Weimar's ladies.¹⁵⁷ Schulze had gotten on Goethe's bad side with his

¹⁵⁴WA I/20 206-7.

¹⁵⁵Thucydides 109.

¹⁵⁶Horst Lange has argued that as early as *Götz von Berlichingen*, Goethe was concerned with the consequences of Hobbesian political philosophy. See Lange.

¹⁵⁷28.1.1812 (WA IV/22, 245).

publication of *Über den standhaften Prinzen des Don Pedro Calderón de la Barca Henao y Riano und seine Aufführung in Weimar* in 1811, a sort of learned historical companion to A.W. Schlegel's version of Calderón's tragedy which was produced in Weimar. According to Goethe, the book's enthusiastic portrayal of the heroic Don Fernando (in whom patriotism and religious zeal coalesce in a desire to wage war against the Moors, leading to his capture, imprisonment, martyrdom and canonization)¹⁵⁸ had "nicht die rechte, sondern die falsche Wirkung zum eigentlichen Zweck." And now upon reading, or at least upon glancing at Schulze's translation of Thucydides, Goethe wrote the following lines to Knebel: "Wie schade ist es, daß ein Mann von solchen Gaben wie Schulze in solche Fratzen verfällt, und nun als Lehrer manchen Jüngling wo nicht fürs ganze Leben, doch auf mehrere Jahre irre führt."¹⁵⁹ He went on to call Schulze's translation "etwas ganz fremdes, ungehöriges, unverständliches und abgeschmacktes," and concluded that "hinter allem diesen steckt doch eigentlich nur die falsche Sucht, Original seyn zu wollen. Wir können nur bedauern, was wir so deutlich einsehen." That Goethe was no stranger to fantasies of return to imaginary, more primitive stages of development was all the more reason for Schulze's eagerness to appear to him in so grotesque a light under the given conditions. To Goethe's eyes, Schulze's way of trying to produce social cohesion misjudged both what could be achieved under modern conditions of fragmentation as well as what forms of consensuality might still be capable of producing positive effects. When Goethe used the expression "Fratzen," he probably did not realize that he was quoting his own letter to Wollzogen of the previous year. It wasn't the accuracy of the translation that bothered Goethe, but the fact that Schulze was teaching the Oration as if its pathos were appropriate to contemporary German circumstances.

¹⁵⁸The historical part of the publication was reprinted in the *Journal des Luxus und der Moden*, November 1811.

¹⁵⁹13.11.1813 (WA IV/24, 31).

To Goethe's great frustration, this was not a new feature of German Hellenism but a recurrent problem linked to the turbulence of the Revolution. Already in 1793 in his *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität*, Herder had addressed this sign of the times in direct connection with the devaluation of Homer: "Wir kommen allmählich in die Zeiten zurück, da man von Homers Rohheit nicht genug reden konnte. In Frankreich warf man ihn vormals nur Mangel an Geschmack vor; in Deutschland scheint es ein Lieblingsgesichtspunkt zu werden, in den Sitten seiner Helden, mithin wohl gar Homer selbst Mangel an Bildung, an moralischem Geschmack zu finden [...]."¹⁶⁰ Herder follows this with a detailed defense of the morality of the Iliad which includes a distancing of the moral purity of Homer's representations of violence from those of the later tragic poets.¹⁶¹ Herder's point is to show what he sees as the non-partisan universality of Homer's wonder, praise and censure: what Diderot called Homer's simplicity he calls Homer's "Humanität." This humanity is formed in his art by nothing less than destiny (*Schicksal*): "Was überhaupt der Glaube an Schicksal, was die Thaten der Götter, ihre Hülfe und Feindschaft gegen Völker und Menschen, in die Composition Homers an Ruhe, Milde und hoher Ergebenheit bringen, ist unsäglich. Man nehme diese göttliche Farce, wie manche sie genannt haben, (*μωρον*) aus seiner Iliade; und das Ganze wird widrig oder platt, wie fast alle politische Geschichte."¹⁶²

In 1768, Herder had first published a piece called "Haben wir noch das Publicum und Vaterland der Alten?" After reworking and expanding it he included it in the *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität* of 1795. Here, Herder distinguishes between the publics of ancient peoples (Hebrews,

¹⁶⁰SW 17: 161 ff.

¹⁶¹"Weder mit der Gräueltat des Ajax vor dem Bilde der Pallas, noch mit des Priamus, der Polyxena und Andrer unwürdigen Morde hat seine Muße sich befleckt; die Künstler und tragischen Dichter nahmen ihre Vorstellung dieser Scenen aus andern sogenannten cyklischen Dichtern" (SW 17: 179).

¹⁶²SW 17: 168f.

Greeks and Romans) and those of German modernity. When it comes to the Greeks, he sketches a brief history of the creation of a Greek public through music and poetry in the archaic period:

Poesie mit Musik begleitet erschuf und bildete sich ein Griechisches Publicum, in einer feinern Sprache, und einer feineren Gedankenweise. Die Fabelnamen Orpheus, Linus, Musäus sind in Absicht der Wirkung, die sie hinterliessen, keine Fabelnamen; die Form ihrer Götter- und Menschengestalten, die Melodie ihrer Weisheitssprüche und Lehren, der rhythmische Gang ihrer Empfindungen und Bilder ward dem Ohr, dem Gedächtniß der Hörenden eingeprägt, und ging von Munde zu Munde, endlich auch in Schriften und Gebräuchen der Nachwelt. Die Gesänge, die Homer und andre Rhapsodisten in kleineren Kreisen sangen, waren nicht verhallet; sie kamen gesamlet nach Athen, sie erklangen am Panathenäischen Feste [...] So ward ein Publicum der Griechen für Poesie; bald auch für Prose.¹⁶³

Poetry's effect of creating community leads to increasingly larger constellations, culminating in a public for prose and the art of the orator in imperial Athens. At this point, however, the function of speech has transformed from that of producing community to that of binding it and directing it. "Indem alles vorm Publicum verhandelt wurde, so ward dies Publicum durch Rede gefesselt, durch Kunst der Rede geführt und gelenket."¹⁶⁴ Even in matters of justice, the art of oration held sway. Herder then goes on to inquire, however: "Haben wir dies Publicum der Griechen?" And his answer is straightforward: "Nein; und in mehreren Stücken ists vielleicht gut, daß wir es nicht haben. Wo über Krieg und Frieden, über Leben und Tod der Beklagten, über Verdienst und Belohnung die Kunst der Rede gebieten darf; wie vielen Verleitungen ist und bleibt die Seele eines unerzogenen Volks ausgesetzt, die mit ihrem ganzen Urtheil im Ohre wohnt!" The ear which had been so important an organ of consonance in pre-democratic Greece becomes under uprooted, democratic conditions subject to haphazard manipulation by an instrumental technology of oratory.

¹⁶³SW 17: 289-90.

¹⁶⁴SW 17: 290.

Die Geschichte der Griechischen Republiken, insonderheit Athens, zeigt uns davon eine große Gallerie fürcherlich-schön gemahlter Beispiele, bei deren Überblick mancher Nordländer oft mit frohem Schauder sagen wird: "o der leichtsinnigen Griechen! Wohl uns! Diese Zeiten sind vorüber!" Ein Gleiches wird er vielleicht von den Religions- und Staatsfeierlichkeiten, den öffentlichen Spielen, Tänzen, Uebungen und Wettkämpfen, vielleicht auch vom ganzen Theater in Athen sagen.¹⁶⁵

Herder is careful not to judge Athenian theater and politics by purely external standards: this would have gone against his own principles of historical and intercultural inquiry.¹⁶⁶ What he does say is that tragic theater in the Athenian style makes no sense in Germany because, not only do we not have a Greek public, we do not and have indeed never had a German public.¹⁶⁷ The intellectual class has, rather, enjoyed having a foreign culture hoisted upon it (*uns eine Cultur andichten lassen*) of which "ganze Stände und Provinzen nichts wissen,"¹⁶⁸ all the while abiding in the illusion that its cultural capital is worth more than what it provides the individuals for whom it is a way of life. The German nation does not know itself, does not exist as such, but is rather divided and forestalled in its *Bildung* by religious and political partisanship as well as class. Under such conditions, it is madness to imagine theater playing a political role at the level of state governance or policy. The task of the theater can only be that of first calling a public together in the same way poetry first had to create a public in archaic Greece and help it to its own voice. "Indessen geht der Weg der stillen Bildung fort."¹⁶⁹ We are, Herder argues, still waiting for poetry to perform the humanizing work it performed for Greek society and which was a precondition for the development of tragedy and indeed of philosophy as a critical

¹⁶⁵SW 17: 224

¹⁶⁶It is interesting that Herder does however parenthetically mark the absence of a discussion of an Athenian political public in his treatise: "(denn vom politischen Publicum der Griechen wollen wir nicht reden)," (SW 17: 296).

¹⁶⁷Although there is not yet a German national public, Herder argues, there are other public audiences in Germany. In addition to religion, there is the (largely international and cosmopolitan) public of young, impressionable students who attend the highly regarded German universities and schools.

¹⁶⁸SW 17: 297.

¹⁶⁹SW 17: 298.

discipline parasitic to poetry.¹⁷⁰ "So lange es Vernunft und Willen im Menschen giebt: so lange wird es ein verborgenes, stilles Publicum für Philosophie geben; nur erwarte man dieses nie sichtbar auf einem Markt, oder in einer Schule."¹⁷¹ For so long as the intellectual class still awaits the coming of a voiced, critical public, the teaching and learning of wisdom will remain a private, individual activity: "jeder, der es seyn kann und werden will, muß sich selbst zum Philosophen bilden. Der Lehrer hält ihm die Wahrheit vor, damit er sich solche autonomisch zueigne: denn Weisheit läßt sich so wenig, als Tugend und Genie von andern lernen." Two decades after the Revolution, German Hellenism was still making itself guilty of the same superficial, empty formalism that Herder, Goethe and the *Stürmer-und-Dränger* had found so deplorable forty years previously in the German subservience to neo-classicism. It was then that they had first turned to Shakespeare for a new aesthetic paradigm.

3.3 Shakespeare and the Critique of Theatre

ROMEO. O, teach me how I should forget to think!

BENVOLIO. By giving liberty unto thine eyes.

Examine other beauties.

We have seen how for Herder and Goethe, uncritically evoking the pathos of imperial Athens in the wake of the Revolution amounted to a grotesque, *gräcisierend* misapplication of antiquity, a project not unlike the one of grafting "frisch erhaltene Pfropfreiser an junge Stämme" that

¹⁷⁰Herder writes in the *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität* of 1793: "Die älteste grieschische Philosophie ging dahinaus, das Gemüth der Menschen vor jedem Aeuffersten zu bewahren; die älteste Philosophie der Griechen aber war bei den Dichtern" (SW 17: 170-1). In a similar vein, Durs Grünbein has recently demonstrated that because the most powerful critique of literature is found in its own history, literature may be self-sufficient in a way that philosophy cannot bear (Grünbein 166-7).

¹⁷¹SW 17: 296.

Eduard is involved with in the opening scene of the *Wahlverwandtschaften*. As we will see, it is no accident that this is the very moment in which it occurs to Eduard to invite his friend the *Hauptmann*—whose title in Periclean Athens would have been *strategos*—to come and live with him and Charlotte on their estate. In the introduction to the *Propyläen*, during the composition of which Goethe had again taken up Pericles,¹⁷² Goethe called the Greeks a "Volke [...] dem eine Vollkommenheit, die wir wünschen und nie erreichen, natürlich war, bei dem in einer Folge von Zeit und Leben sich eine Bildung in schöner und stetiger Reihe entwickelt, die bei uns nur als ein Stückwerk vorübergehend erscheint."¹⁷³ The *kairos* that Goethe believed the Greeks to have experienced as an organic whole could in his modernity only be experienced as a passing moment by the chronically individual producer of aesthetic fragments. "[D]as geheime Leiden der Goetheschen, der deutschen Klassik überhaupt," is thus, as Richard Alewyn put it, "daß sie die alte Überzeugung von der Vollkommenheit der Antike erhielt oder erneute und zugleich schon durch Herder von ihrer geschichtlichen Unwiederbringlichkeit durchdrungen war."¹⁷⁴ The consequences of the irretrievability of social *kairos* for aesthetic experience in modernity is also the central problem of Goethe's critical-theoretical essay "Shakespeare und kein Ende!" Here, the opposition of antiquity and modernity again appears as the opposition between an organic social whole and a pseudo-society of isolated individuals.

Two aspects of this essay make it of central importance for understanding the dialectics of strategy in the *Wahlverwandtschaften*. First, in presenting Shakespeare as a poet who wanted to suture the gap between ancient and modern aesthetic experience, Goethe suggests that the role of the sublime is one of historical mediation. Second, because the essay is an exemplary specimen

¹⁷²See note 6 above.

¹⁷³WA I/47, 6.

¹⁷⁴Alewyn 259.

of Goethe's literary criticism, we can develop from it an understanding of what aesthetic critique could be for him at its most sophisticated. This should set the stage for a better understanding of the immanent critique practiced by Benjamin in the *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay.

Formally, the Shakespeare essay in its final version is made up of two fragments. Goethe overtly draws the reader's attention to this formal problem and to its significance for the theoretical stakes of the essay. The first two parts of the essay, titled "Shakespeare als Dichter überhaupt" and "Shakespeare, verglichen mit den Alten und Neusten" were composed in March 1813, between the time of Schulze's departure from Weimar and Goethe's frustrated reception of his Thucydides translation. Goethe didn't publish these parts in the *Morgenblatt* until two years later, and when he did, he included an afterword informing the reader that they had been written in the summer of 1813. More importantly, the afterword announced that he was now going to focus his attention on "den dritten Punct, [...] welcher sich unmittelbar auf das deutsche Theater bezieht, und auf jenen Vorsatz, welchen *Schiller* gefaßt, dasselbe auch für die Zukunft zu begründen,"¹⁷⁵ with which he implied that the essay was incomplete and that more would follow. It is not until March of the next year, however, that there is any evidence of Goethe having worked on this third and final part, called "Shakespear als Theater Dichter."¹⁷⁶ He did not publish this third part until 1826, in the fifth volume of *Kunst und Alterthum*.

It would be easier to regard this curious publication history as an effect of mere forgetfulness or intervening circumstances, if the essay itself were not so concerned with the problem of timeliness and the possibility of effective intervention. In the afterword to the first fragment of 1815, Goethe had already established a relationship to the historicity of his essay as well as to its future development. When in the final fragment of 1826, he belatedly fulfills the afterword's

¹⁷⁵WA I/41, 64.

¹⁷⁶See Tagebücher, 31.03.1816 (WA III/5, 219).

promise of a third part, he does so in a performative way that dramatically shifts the first fragment's meaning. Considered as a whole, it now becomes possible to read the second fragment, in which Goethe critiques Shakespeare as "Theaterdichter," as a self-critique of the essay's first fragment. This critique is not a revision of the first fragment, however, but a response to a demand legible in its aesthetic failure. The second fragment thus completes the first by reconciling it with the aesthetic demands of contemporary theatricality, the nature of which Goethe explains in his discussion of Shakespeare.

Put simply, if the aesthetic failure of the first fragment lay in the apparent self-importance of its didacticism, the aim of the final fragment is, on Goethe's own account, to dissolve the first in irony. The resulting satire is both self-satire and social-satire, for it aims to uncover a link between individual failure and social failure. To understand this link Goethe looks to the historical and material conditions which provide the framework within which the production of social and individual meanings may take place. In Shakespeare's time as well as his own, this framework or genre was, notwithstanding significant differences, *Theater*.

In the first fragment, Goethe establishes the fundamental difference between ancient poetry and the poetry of Shakespeare's modernity, which is, as he puts it, "durch eine ungeheure Kluft getrennt, nicht etwa der äußern Form nach, *welche hier ganz zu beseitigen ist*, sondern dem innersten tiefsten Sinne nach."¹⁷⁷ To make this difference explicit, Goethe draws up a list of those core antitheses of the German *querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* which had helped establish the conceptual arsenal of aesthetic selfhood in the last years of the 18th century. To these he adds a new, final antithesis of his own.

Antik,

Modern.

¹⁷⁷WA I/41 58, my emphasis.

Naiv,	Sentimental.
Heidnisch,	Christlich.
Heldenhaft,	Romantisch.
Real,	Ideal.
Nothwendigkeit,	Freiheit.
Sollen,	Wollen.

Goethe states that his intention is not to unnecessarily lengthen this familiar list but to indicate that his new antithesis is already implied in all the others. Another way of putting this would be to say that *Sollen/Wollen* re-describes these common antitheses at a higher level of abstraction in order to unveil their common a priori structure. Putting it in Kantian terms is by no means trivial in light of the language Goethe uses in the first section of the essay to describe Shakespeare "*als Dichter überhaupt.*"

There he had already called him a poet who speaks to our "innern Sinn," a Kantian way of calling him a poet of the a priori.¹⁷⁸ At the same time, he suggests that it was only through his empirical disposition—through submitting his senses to his own historical and geographical situation—that Shakespeare was able to understand and represent psychic life in so convincing a fashion. Goethe thereby underscores the importance of embodied, individual sense experience for any trajectory towards universality. In this way he provides a radically empirical basis for interpreting the first section's introductory sentence: "Das Höchste, wozu der Mensch gelangen kann, ist das Bewußtsein eigener Gesinnungen und Gedanken, das Erkennen seiner selbst, welches ihm die Einleitung gibt, auch fremde Gemüthsarten innig zu erkennen."¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸WA I/41, 54.

¹⁷⁹WA I/41, 52.

In suggesting that antiquity and modernity are separated by an "ungeheure Kluft," he is pointing to a difference in the structure of consciousness itself. This historicization of space-time amounts to a truly post-Kantian philosophical innovation and it presages the direction that critical aesthetic theory would take in the 20th century. In a way that is already looking through Kant and over the head—or feet?—of Hegel, Goethe understands that a priori structuration cannot be timelessly bound to universal reason, absolute spirit, or even human nature, but that it must be understood as a product of historically and materially variable conditions. This means that at the limit of materially delimited mythical or ideological regimes, fundamentally different varieties of aesthetic experience become possible. In his opposition of *Sollen* and *Wollen*, Goethe aims to open up a discourse that can capture this difference between ancient and modern aesthetic limit experiences. This means that he proposes an historically differentiated theory of the sublime.

While the productive and indeed painful incongruence between *Sollen* and *Wollen* is a constant feature of both antiquity and modernity, their difference is to be found in which principle predominates or drives (*vorherrschend*) human life in each. In antiquity, it is the discrepancy between *Sollen* and *Vollbringen* that repeatedly leads people into embarrassing states of misplacedness (*Verlegenheit*), whereas in modernity this trick is achieved by the discrepancy between *Wollen* and *Vollbringen*. Minor misplacedness manifests as trivial mistakes (*leichten Irrthum*) which can be fixed without much ado. These give rise to base humor on the level of, say, Freudian slips (*lächerlichen Situationen*). Misplacedness of the highest degree, on the other hand—if it remains dissoluble or unresolved—results in properly "tragischen Momente."¹⁸⁰

According to this conception of tragedy, the scale of tragic effect is commensurate to the distance of meaning's displacement from its origin. This description in terms of scale achieves a

¹⁸⁰WA I/41, 59.

unification of the Kantian-Schillerian bipartite theory of the Sublime: it brings the mathematical and affective (pathetic/dynamic) sublimates into a unified field. Key to this unified theory is Goethe's reinterpretation of mathematical quantity in terms of distance, a central idea of his critique of mathematics and of Newtonian science more generally. Such a formal, a priori explanation of how tragedy works still does not, however, amount to a theory of the Sublime in Goethe's materialist sense, for it contains no facts about the experience of the sublime.¹⁸¹ From a rigorously Goethean perspective, neither Kantian subjectivism nor Schillerian supersensualism can explain what happens in the sublime. For in ancient tragedy there is usually no question of what one is supposed to do, just the problem of actually doing it. Modern literature is dominated, on the other hand, by the problem of achieving what one wants. Ancient *Sollen*, which favors the social whole, comes from without, and the failure to meet its demands is "fürchterlich," whereas modern *Wollen* favors the self-preservation of the individual. This is because *Wollen* is a mode of speculation which owes its resilience to a protean ability to transform through absorbing and incorporating even the most catastrophic failures into its own image: "bei einem festen Willen kann man sich sogar über das Unvermögen des Vollbringens getröstet sehen."¹⁸²

Goethe is not pleading for a return to *Sollen*. He is saying, on the contrary, that *Sollen* literally no longer makes sense. The epoch of *Sollen* was the epoch of tragedy and of Pericles' disavowal of Homeric mourning. "Die alte Tragödie beruht auf einem unausweichlichen Sollen, das durch ein entgegenwirkendes Wollen nur geschärft und beschleunigt wird. Hier ist der Sitz alles

¹⁸¹Prior to the Revolution it was in Italy that Goethe (according to his own account) last worked on the idea of an empirical understanding of the sublime. In the words of Michael Jaeger: "In der *Italienischen Reise* illustriert Goethe den allgemeinen erkenntniskritischen Befund in autobiographischen Bildern und berichtet von der Befreiung des Bewußtseins aus den Fesseln eines weltlosen Subjektivismus" (Jaeger 2002, 408).

¹⁸²WA I/41, 59. This point is more clear when Goethe's dialectic of *Sollen* and *Wollen* is read along with the speech (which it unpacks and riffs on) from *Hamlet*, Act IV, Scene VII, in which Claudius convinces Laertes to kill Hamlet: "There lives within the very flame of love / A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it; / And nothing is at a like goodness still; / For goodness, growing to a plurisy, / Dies in his own too much: that we would do / We should do when we would; for this 'would' changes / And hath abatements and delays as many / As there are tongues, are hands, are accidents; / And then this 'should' is like a spendthrift sigh, / That hurts by easing."

Furchtbaren der Orakel, die Region, in welcher *Ödipus* über alle Thront. Zarter erscheint uns das Sollen als Pflicht in der *Antigone*, und in wie viele Formen verwandelt tritt es nicht auf."¹⁸³ Goethe knew from Plutarch that Sophocles owed his dominance over the tragic poets of his time to the judgement of the ten Athenian *strategoï* (according to Plutarch this is what drove Aeschylus into exile and ultimately killed him) and that shortly after writing *Antigone* he was himself elected a *strategos* and drawn into the leadership of the imperialist war against Samos Island. In Goethe's classical aesthetics of the 1790s it wasn't an identification with the tragedians of Periclean Athens that was decisive but, as Michael Jaeger has shown, with the wandering doctor Hippocrates, whose aphorisms turn up in Wilhelm Meister's certificate of apprenticeship and ultimately in *Makariens Archiv*.¹⁸⁴ Just as the French Revolution seemed to result from a large-scale collusion of intergenerational conflicts among a political-intellectual class with military discipline and training, classical Athens was, on Goethe's view, a society in which the failure to make dialectical peace with oracles went hand-in-hand with the tyranny of Oedipus:

Aber alles Sollen ist despotisch. Es gehöre der Vernunft an: wie das Sitten- und Stadtgesetz, oder der Natur: wie die Gesetze des Werdens, Wachsens und Vergehens, des Lebens und Todes. Vor allem diesem schauern wir, ohne zu bedenken, daß das Wohl des Ganzen dadurch bezieht sei. Das Wollen hingegen ist frei, scheint frei und begünstigt den Einzelnen. Daher ist das Wollen schmeichlerisch und mußte sich der Menschen bemächtigen, sobald sie es kennenlernten. Es ist der Gott der neuern Zeit; ihm hingegeben, fürchten wir uns vor dem Entgegengesetzten, und hier liegt der Grund, warum unsre Kunst sowie unsre Sinnesart von der antiken ewig getrennt bleibt. Durch das Sollen wird die Tragödie groß und stark, durch das Wollen schwach und klein.¹⁸⁵

Although *Sollen* may appear here to be closely associated with nature's cycles of death and rebirth, the association is merely analogical. Goethe is not saying that *Sollen* is, despite its impersonal despotism, natural, and that we ought to submit to it as we might submit gracefully to

¹⁸³WA I/41, 61.

¹⁸⁴Jaeger 2004, 493-4.

¹⁸⁵WA I/41, 61.

the inexorability of death. He is careful to technically (by mobilizing nuances offered by the Kantian lexicon) and semantically (with the subjunctive and with simile) cushion *Sollen* from the key concepts between which the problem of morality is suspended. *Sollen* is precisely *not* Reason and *not* Nature, although it does materialize a relation that is similar to these: it affectively mediates between individuals and laws. Ancient tragedy is "great" and "powerful" to the extent that it traces an attempt to substitute the meaning of an originary cathexis—for instance the meaning of Antigone's relationship to her brother Polyneices—with individual cathexis of laws as formal proxies of the social whole. The power of the ancient tragic sublime is thus dependent upon history and memory: the emotional bonds that are physically severed in what Goethe calls the "tragic moments" must first be stretched to their limit.

Despite the a priori continuity of the ancient and modern situations, the "eternal" separation of our aesthetic mode—the material forms of our art as well as our material forms of experience—from that of the ancients is a *fait accompli*. When the role played by *Sollen* in antiquity is taken over in modernity by *Wollen*, tragedy becomes drama and the ancient experience of the individual's relationship to the social whole is lost. As *Wollen* displaces *Sollen*, the reflective dome of the Olympian universe metamorphoses into the floral wallpaper of each individual's personal monad. Identification is no longer with the tragic hero, but immediately with the self. The modern subject's "Wollen [...] scheint frei" while ultimately confirming the practical wisdom of those bourgeois parameters for rational behavior which ensure the continuity and exacerbation of existing social divisions.

Modern drama is unhinged from tragedy's basis in *Sollen* because the consensual *Ganze* upon whose coherence tragedy depended no longer exists. The fragmentary, modern image of the *Ganzen* cannot produce a *Sollen*. The *Ganze* becomes instead an hysterical question on which

every misplaced *Sollen* falters. In modernity, ancient tragedy is not about coming to terms with the poverty of the human condition, but about coming to terms with the poverty of individualized aesthetic experience *as the human condition* in the wake of an imagined whole society. In the modern aesthetic sublime, the individual mourns the loss of this social whole in chronic solitude. The dissolution of *Sollen* finally redelivers us to our *Wollen* as the locus of the real, to our fantasies as the only politically relevant realities—and "so fühlen wir uns gerührt, wenn wir nach peinlicher Erwartung zuletzt noch kümmerlich getröstet werden."¹⁸⁶

According to Goethe, Shakespeare's great achievement is that he represents the dialectical synthesis of *Sollen* and *Wollen*. Goethe is in effect telling his contemporaries that they still haven't achieved the level of Enlightenment afforded by Shakespeare's latent critique of ideology. Its central idea is to be found in the excessive form *Wollen* takes on in Shakespeare's tragic heroes: "ein Wollen, das über die Kräfte eines Individuums hinausgeht, ist modern." Shakespeare's master stroke is however to show that disproportionate *Wollen* is not a free, immanent *telos* of the individual but that it is excited by external causes (*durch äußere Veranlassung aufregen läßt*). In this way *Wollen* is transformed into a species of *Sollen* whereby it again approaches Athenian antiquity. This is to say that in modernity, *Wollen* takes over from *Sollen* the despotic function of affectively linking the individual to a social proxy. The modern proxy of the social whole, however, can only generate the further fragmentation of existing relations, for this is its only means of sustaining relations whatsoever. In ancient Athens, as we have seen, this power of the individual to exceed the power of the individual ("das über die Kräfte eines Individuums hinausgeht") was embodied in the *stratego*i who affectively linked the people to the imperialist war which was being waged in the name of Athens.

¹⁸⁶WA I/41, 61.

To his credit, the entropic gravity of this prosaic diagnosis of modernity was not lost on Goethe. It is this insight that gives rise to the necessity of the third and final section of his essay which he only published a decade later, and in which he wants to show himself to be a true student of Shakespeare. At the end of the second section, he indicates the direction in which the third section will take him.

Denn alle Helden des dichterischen Altherthums wollen nur das, was Menschen möglich ist, und daher entspringt das schöne Gleichgewicht zwischen Wollen, Sollen und Vollbringen; doch steht ihr Sollen immer zu schroff da, als daß es uns, wenn wir es auch bewundern, anmuthen könnte. Eine Nothwendigkeit, die mehr oder weniger oder völlig alle Freiheit ausschließt, verträgt sich nicht mehr mit unsern Gesinnungen.¹⁸⁷

This is the aesthetic reality in which classicism experiences its failure. Although we moderns may look on in awe at the heroes of classical literature, there is an objective limit to our ability to identify with their plight and be moved through it to a comparably beautiful harmony of *Wollen*, *Sollen*, and *Vollbringen*. This is because the intensity of our *Wollen* to return to a state of consensual *Sollen* leads us beyond our capacities of *Vollbringen*, resulting in disharmonious forms. A disharmonious form is a form that appears coerced and/or coercive. The threat that disharmonious forms signal to freedom gives rise to new, creative species of *Wollen* which increase the fragmentation of the desired consensuality. They may also result in the creation of new venues for it, but with the cost of jettisoning civilizational and intergenerational memory.

What Goethe wants to show in the third section is thus how "zu unserem freudigen Erstaunen," in a miraculous synthesis of the opposed forces of classical antiquity and romantic modernity, Shakespeare "das Nothwendige sittlich macht."¹⁸⁸ Goethe wants to grasp romanticism as a symptom of classicism's immanent contradiction: although we may never forget the heyday of

¹⁸⁷WA I/41, 63.

¹⁸⁸WA I/41, 63.

kairotic necessity or the awe that it inspired in us, neither can we, so far as it does not—to borrow a Homeric image—seize our locks and make immediate sense to us, submit to it. For *Sollen* was never *das Nothwendige* itself, but an historically specific strategy for its mediation which we have outgrown. The (fleeting, isolated) return of *das Nothwendige* can no longer be achieved under the compulsion of *Sollen*. It must pass by way of a chronic *Wollen* through the contemporary configuration of aesthetic power. This means that while *Wollen* itself may be compulsive and destructive, it is also destructive to forbid an already burgeoning *Wollen* from roaming the sensual world on what appear to be its own terms.

In what sense, then, is the essay's final section "*Shakespeare als Theaterdichter*" a critique of Shakespeare? It is a critique in the strict sense that Goethe wants to understand Shakespeare's art as limited by the necessity of negotiating what he wanted to communicate (the experiential insight of his natural religion)¹⁸⁹ with forms viable and available to him in Elizabethan England. The name of the contemporary aesthetic form which Shakespeare had to work with, and work through, was *Theater*. As we saw in the essay's opening gambit, Goethe's position is that he can only understand the form of Shakespeare's compulsion to the extent that he understands his own. For Goethe, the interrogation of the form of compulsion takes place in the search for a form that can capture self and other in their sameness *and* their difference.

The epitomical form Goethe finds for this in the third and belated section of his essay is tragicomic satire. To understand why, we should recall Goethe's (proto-Freudian) insight that humor is based on minor, resolved misplacement, while tragedy is based on distant, unresolved misplacement. Goethe has told us that in modernity, tragic pathos in the form of *Sollen* is out of

¹⁸⁹ As Goethe puts it in the last sentence of the second part of the essay: "Freilich hatte er den Vortheil, daß er zur rechten Erntezeit kam, daß er in einem lebensreichen protestantischen Lande wirken durfte, wo der bigotte Wahn eine Zeitlang schwieg, so daß einem wahren Naturfrommen wie Shakespeare die Freiheit blieb, sein reines Innere, ohne Bezug auf irgend eine Religion, religios zu entwickeln" (WA I/41, 64).

place. If the necessity it intended to convey is nonetheless to be preserved as the "starke, derbe, tüchtige Seite" of a modern aesthetic practice, it must be concealed by a form appropriate to the minor (*klein und schwach*) condition of fragmented aesthetic experience in the romantic age. Goethe argues that Shakespeare's use of comedy—within tragedy—limits the damaging effects of misplaced tragic pathos in modernity by recalling that tragedy is formally nothing but overblown, unresolved comedy. In Shakespeare's great romantic tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, Goethe focuses on the "comic" fan favorites, the punster Mercutio and Juliet's Nurse with her endless malapropisms. For Goethe it is these two characters—who "als possenhafte Intermezzisten auftreten"—who suture "jenen großen, unvereinbar scheinenden Gegensatz" of classicism and romanticism. Humor accomplishes this because, to return to Hegel's formulation, it depends on a "missing link" which delays recognition of the whole until what is missing is supplied by the other in the form of her own experience (*Einbildungskraft*). The modern aesthetic work conceals *das Nothwendige* not esoterically, but exoterically, in sensory experience of the world it replaces.

What is meant, then, by the claim that Shakespeare was a great poet but not a great poet of the theater? What Goethe says is still interesting today, because it can explain a strange phenomenon familiar to Shakespeare lovers everywhere: why is it that simple and unambitious but clearly spoken amateur productions of Shakespeare's works are often more enjoyable than professional ones? Goethe's point has to do with the way theater audiences and their expectations had evolved since Shakespeare's time. In short, the very meaning of the word *Theater* has shifted in a way that has dramatic consequences for his reception. Though Shakespeare, too, was dramatic after a fashion—"durch seine Behandlungsart, das innerste Leben hervozukehren, gewinnt er den Leser"¹⁹⁰—the aesthetic primitivism of Shakespeare's stage and his largely demotic

¹⁹⁰WA I/41, 66.

audiences meant that it could be a theater of the ears before it was a theater of the eyes. Theater audiences in Goethe's Germany, however, are first and foremost demanding spectators. As the visual aesthetic demands of audiences increase, so does the difficulty of understanding Shakespeare in the form of *Theater*. *Theater* and theatricality are for Goethe symptoms of modern processes of social fragmentation: "denn mit den 'Brettern die die Welt bedeuten' sind wir bekannter als mit der Welt selbst." He perceived that if the spectators who made up bourgeois German audiences, and whose visual demands were more highly developed than those of their English predecessors, were to see how far they had come from being Shakespearean auditors, the dramaturge would have to either negotiate with their demands or give up staging the Bard altogether. This is the conclusion Goethe draws from his experience of failed attempts to modernize Shakespeare for the theater in Weimar. Concluding this final attempt to bring the poet to life before his audience's eyes, Goethe finally suggests that it may be better to defer Shakespeare to literary history after all: by leaving him to the private enjoyment of "einsame oder gesellige Leser."¹⁹¹

For Goethe, the Shakespearean diagnosis of modernity encapsulated in the expression "all the world's a stage" represented a real political problem. *Theater* represents the aesthetic problem of a modernity in which *idea* and *logos* become entangled in a synesthetic spectacle which obstructs the development of both vision and hearing. For Goethe the task of theater was critique of *Theater*. This meant critique of the misplacement of sense and the referral of each of the senses—sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch—to its effective sphere and embodied domain.

We have seen that *Theater* and strategy have a common heritage in imperial Athens, and that *Theater* as strategy was patronized and practiced by the Athenian *stratego*i who had the task of

¹⁹¹WA I/41, 70.

garnering consent and democratic legitimacy for the *strategia*. If the Athenian *strategoí* symbolically enacted the biopolitical link between the *demos* and the *strategia*, modernity is to be understood as a *Theater* in which the role of the *strategos* is universalized in the citizen. In contemporary *Theater*, the *demos* and the *strategia* merge into the imaginary, transparent screen theorized by Diderot as the "fourth wall." The fourth wall of *Theater* is the form of consent to the occlusion of the *Urphänomene* by strategy.¹⁹²

3.4 What does Goethe want?

O dramatische Dichter! Der wahre Beifall, nach dem ihr streben müßt, ist nicht das Klatschen der Hände, das sich nach einer schimmernden Zeile hören läßt, sondern der tiefe Seufzer, der nach dem Zwange eines langen Stillschweigens aus der Seele dringt und sie erleichtert. Ja es giebt einen noch heftigern Eindruck, den sich aber nur die vorstellen können, die für ihre Kunst gebohren sind, und es vorauswissen, wie weit ihre Zauberei gehen kann: diesen nämlich, das Volk in einen Stand der Unbehäglichkeit zu setzen; so daß Ungewißheit, Bekümmerniß, Verwirrung in allen Gemüthern herrschen, und eure Zuschauer den Unglücklichen gleichen, die in einem Erdbeben die Mauern ihrer Häuser wanken sehen, und die Erde ihnen einen vesten Tritt verweigern fühlen.¹⁹³

We have seen that although its modern conceptual genealogy must no doubt be traced back to Hobbes, "strategy" enters our languages in the wake of the French Revolution as a key player in the social processes which Goethe represented in *Wahlverwandtschaften*. Eduard's invitation to the *Hauptmann*, who in Greek would have gone by the title of *strategos*, is the catalyst that sets in motion the apparently inescapable destinies of the characters.¹⁹⁴ It is in this appearance of inescapability that Walter Benjamin located what he called the novel's mythic content.

¹⁹²In a Foucauldian vein, Doris Kolesch interprets Diderot's fourth wall as an analysis of theatrical power: "Die vierte Wand ist ein kulturelles Dispositiv, das Diderot entwickelt, um die Doppelseitigkeit des Menschen als Subjekt und zugleich Objekt des Wissens und Handelns zu reflektieren" (Kolesch 238).

¹⁹³Denis Diderot, quoted in translation by Herder in SW 17: 188.

¹⁹⁴Kevin F. Yee has suggested that there has been a neglect of the *Hauptmann* in the critical literature and proposed that he be read as a catalyst of the chemical analogy. See Yee.

To the great frustration of generations of critics, Goethe destroyed whatever written traces existed of the process by which he plotted *Wahlverwandtschaften*. In doing so, he did his part in creating a myth that some grand strategy must lie at back of or behind it. Goethe could not, however, create such a myth alone—two centuries of academic criticism have responded to an apparent demand to turn this myth into a discursive reality. The question Benjamin posed was, however, whether the mainstream of the philological tradition might have been tragically mistaken about the nature of Goethe's demand. I maintain that Benjamin's interpretation of *Wahlverwandtschaften* ought to be read as a response to a different, thornier Goethean demand.

In the years following the First World War, Benjamin already understood that Freud's invention of the unconscious was not just the necessary stroke of genius which enabled his model of the psyche to take form, but that it was simultaneously his greatest theoretical misstep. Benjamin could see that the system-defining distinction conscious/unconscious determines not only the exclusivity of every discourse, but of civilization itself. Scientific interpretation—interpretation that would make an implicit claim to truth—must therefore involve an ongoing critical interrogation of this system-defining distinction.¹⁹⁵ In the *Wahlverwandtschaften* essay, Benjamin reflects this critical operation in his use of an inclusive disjunction¹⁹⁶ in the recurring expression *bewußt oder unbewußt*. This operation reflects how Benjamin, coming from the left, was able to perceive the historically determined necessity of Goethe's ideological position and achieve a critical perspective despite the resistance of his own. In thus separating the particular *Sachgehalt* of Goethe's novel from its universal *Wahrheitsgehalt*, he showed that the way towards a new

¹⁹⁵A connection between the limits of humanity and the *Hauptmann*-as-strategist has also been made by David Wellbery. Wellbery sees in the *Hauptmann*'s social welfare policy "eine kluge Strategie, die einerseits die Bettler aus dem Dorf entfernt, andererseits den Akt des Gebens insitutionalisiert. [...] [D]ie Besitz- und Arbeitslosen werden in ein asymbolisches Jenseits geschickt, wo sie kulturell unsichtbar werden. Die moderne Soziologie nennt solche Menschen 'marginal' (Wellbery 299).

¹⁹⁶Formally also called a *vel* or 1110 disjunction.

understanding of Goethe could lead directly through committed historical scholarship without detour through the particularist schools of contemporary myth. The bloated largesse of Gundolf's image of Goethe—which Benjamin calls a "Zwitter von Heros und Schöpfer"¹⁹⁷—aside, what angers and frustrates Benjamin is the way that Gundolf's book bars every avenue of thought and feeling towards recognition of the creaturely in Goethe's work and life. To counter this tendency, Benjamin's self-consciously critical project shifts the focus away from Goethe's Herculean successes and towards his failures and his *Lebensangst*. If we are to understand what is really valuable in Goethe, so goes Benjamin's argument, we have to learn to see both the forces against which the armature of his work was erected, as well as the wounded, oversensitive, and all too historical organism which it had the task of shielding. The stunning reconciliation Benjamin achieves does not foreclose critique; on the contrary, it shows reconciliation with historical circumstance to be the very condition of critique. Benjamin presents *Kritik*—the form-giving search for immanent limits—in its identity to Goethean *Bildung*.

Benjamin's reevaluation of *Elective Affinities* emerges from his assessment of Goethe's nature philosophy in light of Kant's critique of metaphysics. Benjamin problematizes the ambiguity of Goethe's concept of Nature, the fact that it "bezeichnet nämlich bei Goethe sowohl die Sphäre der wahrnehmbaren Erscheinungen wie auch der anschaulichen Urbilder."¹⁹⁸ Benjamin is referring to the way Goethe wanted to include "experiences" which Kant called a priori as belonging to experience in an inclusive empirical sense. On Benjamin's reading, Goethe's Kantian experience of the 1790s never cured him of this transcendental weakness. It did, of course, bring about a change in his language. By and by, Goethe learned to keep his daemon under wraps by ironically staging his acquiescence to doctrinaire, Reinholdian Kantianism as a

¹⁹⁷Benjamin I/1, 160.

¹⁹⁸Benjamin I/1, 147.

submission to a language game he played for the sake of congeniality. The "Glückliches Ereignis" with Schiller in 1794, "Anschauende Urteilskraft" and the epistemological-autobiographical "Einwirkung der neuern Philosophie" all stand as testimony to his subdued stubbornness in this regard. Goethe's Kantianism is an exemplary act of *Entsagung*. It doesn't exorcize the *Genieästhetik*; it transforms and delays it. Tact is a sublimated form of the *Genieästhetik* which ironizes the *Entsagung* of genius for the sake of apparent [*scheinbare*] coherence.

The second key to Benjamin's reading is his insistence on reading the natural scientific and the poetic in Goethe not as two expressions of one monistic nature-philosophical world-view, but as economically linked. In his commissioned encyclopedia article on Goethe he wrote: "Goethes naturwissenschaftliche Studien stehen im Zusammenhang seines Schrifttums an der Stelle, die bei geringeren Künstlern oft die Ästhetik einnimmt."¹⁹⁹ His natural science, that is, plays the role of a metaphysical doctrine. No matter how beautiful and true Goethe's vision of nature is—when it exceeds the properly theoretical domain, it visibly contorts his artistic practice. *Wahlverwandtschaften* is disfigured by this localization of the *Urphänomen*, the epistemic limit, as external to art, as a completed truth to be imported into art. "Die Urphänomene liegen der Kunst nicht vor, sie stehen in ihr."²⁰⁰ Benjamin means that Goethe's dependence on his nature philosophy increasingly resulted in a dislocation of the locus of truth beyond a humanistic, dialogical interface. This provided him with an extra-discursive ground from which to gaze upon human affairs without internalizing or becoming entangled—what he impishly refers to with *verfangen* and *verfänglich*—in the increasingly chaotic maelstrom of undependable, that is to say: modern, human and social, signs. In the words of the world-wise *Graf*: "Kinder halten nicht

¹⁹⁹Benjamin II/2, 719.

²⁰⁰Benjamin I/1, 148.

was sie versprechen; junge Leute sehr selten, und wenn sie Wort halten, hält es ihnen die Welt nicht."²⁰¹ Goethe's decades long conversation with the natural world was thus, on Benjamin's reading, a strategy for keeping the undependability of this world—the one Rilke would call the "gedeutete Welt"—at a manageable distance.

Prior to the French Revolution, however, and decades before the *Urphänomene* found didactic formulation in the *Farbenlehre*, Goethe had written quite movingly of what is sacrificed in the strategy of situating truth outside of inter-human divinity. This is how he put it in *Über den Granit*:

Auf einem hohen nackten Gipfel sitzend und eine weite Gegend überschauend, kann ich mir sagen: Hier ruhest du unmittelbar auf einem Grunde, der bis zu den tiefsten Orten der Erde hinreicht, keine neuere Schicht, keine aufgehäuften zusammengeschwemmte Trümmer haben sich zwischen dich und den festen Boden der Urwelt gelegt, du gehst nicht wie in jenen fruchtbaren schönen Tälern über ein anhaltendes Grab, diese Gipfel haben nichts Lebendiges erzeugt und nichts Lebendiges verschlungen, sie sind vor allem Leben und über alles Leben. In diesem Augenblicke, da die innern anziehenden und bewegenden Kräfte der Erde gleichsam unmittelbar auf mich wirken, da die Einflüsse des Himmels mich näher umschweben, werde ich zu höheren Betrachtungen der Natur hinaufgestimmt, und wie der Menscheng Geist alles belebt, so wird auch ein Gleichnis in mir rege, dessen Erhabenheit ich nicht widerstehen kann. So einsam, sage ich zu mir selber, indem ich diesen ganz nackten Gipfel hinabsehe und kaum in der Ferne am Fuße ein geringwachsendes Moos erblicke, so einsam, sage ich, wird es dem Menschen zumute, der nur den ältesten, ersten, tiefsten Gefühlen der Wahrheit seine Seele eröffnen will.²⁰²

The consequences of absolute subjection to what Goethe here calls the most primitive feelings of truth could not be stated more clearly. As Ernst Osterkamp has shown, subsequent history would prove that there was wisdom and substance to Goethe's trepidation before the aestheticization of the sublime.²⁰³ He reads the *Wahlverwandtschaften* as the first work in which Goethe's sublime

²⁰¹WA I/20, 115.

²⁰²WA II/9 173-4.

²⁰³See Osterkamp.

loneliness emerges as the central problem of his art. The immediate occasion for Goethe's loneliness was, on Osterkamp's reading, the death of Schiller in 1805. The rationale for what Benjamin saw as Goethe's tactical "Waffenstillstand" with him looked increasingly like an opportunistic illusion. This union—Benjamin saw it as a "Zweckehe"—devolved into impotence and wrought the personal consequences of alienating Goethe from many of his most promising contemporaries. In 1814, standing before the Boisserée collection in Heidelberg, Goethe reflected to Bertram on this demonic antinomy of classicism and romanticism:

Da hat man nun [...] auf seine alten Tage sich mühsam von der Jugend, welche das Alter zu stürzen kommt, seines eigenen Bestehens wegen abgesperrt, und hat sich, um sich gleichmäßig zu erhalten, vor allen Eindrücken neuer und störender Art zu hüten gesucht, und nun tritt da mit einem Male vor mich hin eine ganz neue und bisher mir unbekante Welt von Farben und Gestalten, die mich aus dem alten Gleise meiner Anschauungen und Empfindungen herauszwingt, – eine neue, ewige Jugend, und wollte ich auch hier etwas sagen, es würde diese oder jene Hand aus dem Bilde herausgreifen, um mir einen Schlag ins Gesicht zu versetzen, und der wäre mir wohl gebührend.²⁰⁴

Goethe is recalling here how the Romantic poets had bucked when they began to see his classical aesthetics as a strategy of coercion. As the elder and more experienced poet, he might have known better. But he had sorely underestimated and failed to recognize the poetic genius of his would-be heirs. In contradiction of the tenets of his own classical aesthetic theory, with its emphasis on harmony, the form taken by Goethe's *Wollen* visibly exceeded his powers of *Vollbringen*, resulting in artistic failure. The *Kulturkampf* and the strategic plan for psychotechnocratic management of the art world could thus in retrospect appear as an abdication of mythopoetic responsibility towards the romantic movement he had helped to spawn. Yet by the time he could see the truth content in Novalis' denunciation of *Wilhelm Meister* as "künstlerischer Atheismus," the damage had been done.

²⁰⁴WA Gespräche 3, 147.

3.5 Strategy and Truth

"Der Kritiker ist Strategie im Literaturkampf." -Benjamin, *Einbahnstraße*²⁰⁵

What Goethe shows us in *Wahlverwandtschaften* is that strategy inevitably fails. Not only that, but successful tactics do as well, to the extent that they rely on a pre-established strategy. We consider the latter case first, that of the *Baronesse*, before proceeding to Eduard. In Chapter 10 of Part 1, Charlotte and Eduard receive a visit from their old friends the *Graf* and the *Baronesse*. The narrator assigns to the world-wise *Baronesse* a novelist's command over Eduard's unreflected infatuation with Otilie. As soon as it is clear to the *Baronesse* that "hier sei eine Leidenschaft nicht auf dem Wege, sondern wirklich angelangt," she invites him and Charlotte to the wine harvest festival on her estate and tactfully answers Eduard's eager question: "ob sie Otilien mitbringen dürften, auf eine Weise die er beliebig zu seinen Gunsten auslegen konnte [...]." ²⁰⁶ At the bottom of the *Baronesse's* ability to manipulate Eduard is her schematic view of a real to which he in the moment has no access. This is the French materialist Real of Holbach's *Systeme de la nature* in which Goethe and his Storm and Stress friends, as he reports in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, had seen only nihilism. ²⁰⁷ And the *Baronesse's* tactics seem to succeed:

Eduard sprach schon mit Entzücken von der herrlichen Gegend, dem großen Flusse, den Hügeln, Felsen und Weinbergen, von alten Schlössern, von Wasserfahrten, von dem Jubel der Weinlese, des Kelterns u. s. w. wobei er in der Unschuld seines Herzens sich schon zum Voraus laut über den Eindruck freute, den dergleichen Szenen auf das frische Gemüt Otiliens machen würden. ²⁰⁸

²⁰⁵ Benjamin V/1, 108.

²⁰⁶ WA I/20, 120-2.

²⁰⁷ WA I/28, 68.

²⁰⁸ WA I/20, 122.

The economy of the *Baronesse's* game is a closed circuit of compensation between the inside and the outside, where the value of the compensation the *Baronesse* receives for her immense internal expenditures on self-mastery is left dangling in dialectical limbo.

[N]iemand besaß sich mehr als diese Frau, und diese Selbstbeherrschung in außerordentlichen Fällen gewöhnt uns, sogar einen gemeinen Fall mit Verstellung zu behandeln, macht uns geneigt, indem wir soviel Gewalt über uns selbst ausüben, unsre Herrschaft über die andern zu verbreiten, um uns durch das, was wir äußerlich gewinnen, für dasjenige, was wir innerlich entbehren, gewissermaßen schadlos zu halten.

An diese Gesinnung schließt sich meist eine Art heimlicher Schadenfreude über die Dunkelheit der andern, über das Bewußtlose, womit sie in eine Falle gehen. Wir freuen uns nicht allein über das gegenwärtige Gelingen, sondern zugleich über die künftig überraschende Beschämung.²⁰⁹

Not that strategy can only fail the tactician—Goethe shows time and again how it can also fail the other for whom the strategy is an attempt to construct a truth crisis. As in the case of Eduard, its failure arises from a wrong judgment about what can be achieved under particular circumstances.

Er faltete den Brief, überschrieb ihn; zum Siegeln war es zu spät. Er sprang in die Kammer, durch die er nachher auf den Gang zu gelangen wußte, und augenblicks fiel ihm ein, daß er die Uhr mit dem Petschaft noch auf dem Tisch gelassen. Sie sollte diese nicht zuerst sehen; er sprang zurück und holte sie glücklich weg. [...] Den Schlüssel hatte er beim Hineinspringen heruntergeworfen, der lag inwendig; das Schloß war zugeschnappt und er stund gebannt [...] O wie hätte er gewünscht als ein Geist durch die Spalten zu schlüpfen! Vergebens! Er verbarg sein Gesicht and den Türpfosten. Otilie trat herein, die Wirtin, als sie ihn erblickte, zurück. Auch Otilien konnte er nicht einen Augenblick verborgen bleiben.²¹⁰

"Even Otilie," that is, can see the desperation of long defeated strategy in this, Eduard's final of several attempts to lead her into an aesthetically staged truth event. In the haste of desire, the address of the beloved is reduced to an overwriting of her—a *Kommentar*. Schematically bound to the simulacral fourth wall of modern *Theater*, Eduard's attempt to force kairos necessarily fails to bring about the imprinting he desires. No less than the economically rationalized *Zweckehe* with

²⁰⁹WA I/20, 121-2.

²¹⁰WA I/20, 388.

Charlotte, the failed affair with Otilie presents the disharmony of Eduard's theatricality as the result of a *Wollen* beyond his individual capacity of *Vollbringen*. Goethe shows strategy's monadic impotence to even approach an erotics of truth, let alone a true erotics. Benjamin responds to the demand of this negative Goethean erotics—not only in the early gambit in which he elaborates a poetics of love from the standpoint of natural religion, but in his very conception of immanent *Kritik* as opposed to *Kommentar*.

The decisive moment in Benjamin's interpretation is his reading of the novella *Die wunderlichen Nachbarskinder*. For Benjamin, the mythic nature of the novel is redeemed through the novella. To show this, he juxtaposes the novella to the novel in light of the characters' relationships to strategy. In the novel proper, all the characters are transparent. The fact that everyone is so utterly transparent makes the novelistic world of the *Wahlverwandtschaften* a discouraging place to be. Schiller's technical term for this transparency was "*Mode*": it is what binds the characters to the see-through myth in which, according to Benjamin, "Es gibt keine Wahrheit, denn es gibt keine Eindeutigkeit und also nicht einmal Irrtum [...]." ²¹¹ That Goethe saw no hope for justice in a world dominated by strategy, and that he was never able to shake free of his anti-Hobbesian vision, is well-documented. On February 22, 1831, he wrote an entry in his diary in response to Eugen von Vaerst's pamphlet *Politisches Neujahrsgeschenk* (Breslau 1831) on the July Revolution in France:

Man mag die Sache auch einmal von dieser Seite ansehen, doch kommt es einem wunderbar vor von Recht reden zu hören, wo man eine dreyzehnjährige Strategie und Taktik zweyer Partheyen gegen einander im Auge haben muß, um die neuste Umwälzung natürlich zu finden. Carl X. und seine Minister waren verloren, als sie bey'm Antritt seiner Regierung die Presse frey gaben. Probiren doch einmal Holland und die Niederlande die Freyheit der Meereswogen und Bergströme zu proklamiren! Botanisches gefördert. ²¹²

²¹¹ Benjamin I/1, 162.

²¹² WA III/13, 35.

When Goethe looked at plants, he saw force and violence, life and death, but he didn't see unresolved interpersonal conflicts. This is one of the keys to understanding what he found so beautiful and calming in the botanical world and it is what led him to use it as an alternative model of development. But to the extent that he tried to apply his model to a society that was already in the process of being torn apart by the *veloziferische* crisis of modernity, it ran up against the same limits on which every inanimate vision inevitably will break.

For Benjamin, the significant difference between the see-thru novel, and the novella it contains, is that in the novella there is no strategy, no transparent fourth wall. In the moment on which Benjamin's interpretation depends, the text renounces its pretension to omniscience. There is neither perception of strategy nor strategic perception in the drama of the boy's seduction by his childhood enemy. "Die Kraft der Liebenden triumphiert darin, daß sie sogar die volle Gegenwart der Eltern beim Geliebten überblendet."²¹³ A single veil—mirrored in the Benjaminian operation "*bewußt oder unbewußt*"—brings the dialectic of strategy to a halt. And from this strategic dead-zone, a light flashes over the rest of the novel, exposing the crisis of modernity as the colonization of perception by strategy.

Strategy cannot drive interpretation any more than interpretation can discover strategy as its truth content.²¹⁴ The appearance of strategy in interpretation is the disfigurement of truth, the marker of its "Zweckehe" with barbarism. This is the exoteric meaning at the radical heart of Benjamin's aesthetics. His dialectic of beauty and appearance, of *Schönheit* and *Schein*, shows that beauty itself is "unendlich unscheinbar," infinitely non-aesthetic, and that ugliness is a mere appearance of dissonance between different formal expressions of suffering human life. The sublime is the

²¹³Benjamin I/1, 170.

²¹⁴According to Burkhardt Lindner's excellent entry in the 2006 *Benjamin Handbuch*, Benjamin's juxtaposition of the novel and the Novella "erfolgt, man kann es nicht anders sagen, ganz strategisch." I would argue that what Lindner in fact shows is "man *darf* es nicht anders sagen" (Lindner 485).

living body—the body *itself*, and strategy is this body's amnesiac substitution by aesthetic simulation. Strategy's perniciousness lies in its effect of foreclosing the sublime and refracting only its own inanimate, nihilistic reflection through the body as rift. Strategy is thus the name of the *myth* of humanity's powerless subjection to the "Auflösung eines verbindlichen Allgemeinen."²¹⁵ *Hauptmann* is not a name, but a function theoretically performed by every citizen. The myth of the *strategos*—to which this function corresponds—transforms living names into inanimate signs. Although it would and could not reinstate the *Sollen* of ancient tragedy, Goethe's modern aesthetic sublime attempts a movement beyond strategy: in mourning the foreclosure of the social body in self-reflection, aesthetics prepares the way for its own self-overcoming.

Benjamin viewed strategies as natural responses of bare life to the catastrophe of modernity, to what Hölderlin called "das Zürnen der Welt." He showed, however, that the truth content of *Wahlverwandtschaften* lay in its ability to read strategy as a sign of human despair, of the stifling of universal human poetic genius. He believed that if the "ältesten logoi" of literary tradition were to survive as something more than a projection screen "an dem sich nichts mehr unterscheiden, doch von dem sich mit dem Schein des Tiefsinns alles behaupten läßt,"²¹⁶ critical theory would have to recover its truth in the critique of strategy as such. In Goethe's and Benjamin's shared dialectic of history, this process separates individuals from one another while also uniting them in a common tradition in which they may hopefully one day find each other again. "Doch darum ist es Jugend und Leben überhaupt," Goethe wrote in *Dichtung und*

²¹⁵Wellbery 292.

²¹⁶Benjamin I/1, 160.

Wahrheit, "daß wir die Strategie gewöhnlich erst einsehen lernen, wenn der Feldzug vorbei ist."²¹⁷

²¹⁷WA I/29, 185.

Chapter 4

Faust als Puppenspiel: The Weight of the Word

4.1 Pupal Beginnings

A new trend in performances of Goethe's *Faust* may be to stage the work as a *Puppenspiel*.²¹⁸ Although it is often considered to be the greatest German drama, or even the quintessential myth of modernity, staging *Faust* as a *Puppenspiel* is as justifiable as any attempt to stage it with human actors within the frame of a proscenium. Perhaps the hubris evident in attempts at the latter may even serve as a reminder of the representational possibilities opened up by the former. While I do not intend to join in the debates about how or whether Goethe intended *Faust* to be staged, what I would like to do in this chapter is highlight a number of reasons why reading *Faust* as a *Puppenspiel* can bring to the fore a central aspect of the drama which is necessarily obscured when it is imagined as a stage drama played by human actors: the constitutive role of the inhuman in the project of imagining humanity.

To return Goethe's *Faust* to puppetry is, in a genre-historical sense, to bring it full circle. The best argument for reading *Faust* as a *Puppenspiel* is derived from Goethe's own childhood experience—as he recalls in the autobiographical work *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, it was as a *Puppenspiel* that Goethe first came to know the legend of Dr. Faustus. Goethe recalls the importance the *Puppenspiel* version of the legend had for him personally in various ways in the drama, including the final *Bergschluchten* scene in which Faust's soul or Immortal Thing

²¹⁸In 2013 *Freiburger Puppenbühne*, for example, will continue touring with "Goethes Faust: Die Puppenshow für Erwachsene," played by Dr. Johannes Minuth and directed by Bernd Lafrenz and Martin Thomas. This one-man hand-puppet show has been playing in various incarnations since 2009.

(Unsterbliches) is entrusted to the Blessed Young Boys (Selige Knaben), who accept the burden with the words:

Freudig empfangen wir

Diesen im Puppenstand. (11981-2)

Here as elsewhere, Goethe exploits the homonymy of *Puppe* (doll/puppet/chrysalis) as part of the drama's overall strategy of reflecting the morphological level of metaphor in the level of theatrical metaphor and vice versa. In the presentation of costume changes and of butterfly metamorphosis as parallel representations of a formal process of development, the advantages and limitations of both metaphoric regimes are explored and exploited. In thus leading the question of how to grasp transformation into a crisis of representation, this strategy drives one of the *Faust* drama's key arguments about the limits of knowledge: there is a moment in the life-cycle of knowledge in which epistemological questions proper are dissolved into a pragmatics of *Bildung*. In this moment, the drive as knowledge, which aims to represent the world as a reified totality, completes its task. In the closure thus achieved, totality is captured, but only in the sense in which we might speak of a camera's capture of reality: not only is the perspective on the whole finite and partial, but what is captured is also always already no longer there. And yet the non-object "world" remains a condition of the act of capturing and thus of the appearance of the photograph. Totality, the All or world cannot become an object of knowledge precisely because it is a condition of the act of knowing anything at all. In this chapter, I will show how Goethe lifts this basic structure of the transcendental argument—among the most powerful and resilient tropes of Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy—and naturalizes it to demonstrate how its structure is ubiquitous, yet only available *as living knowledge* in and through activity, the finite *Tat*.

4.2 Mixed Metaphors

The ubiquity of the structure of the transcendental argument is so important to Goethe because it suggests a formal link between nature and the second, human nature whose relationship posed such a thorny problem to the theoretical ambitions of the *Goethezeit*. But beyond establishing that there is always an abyss separating theoretical reflection from the activity of representation, the *Faust* drama's critique of theoretical knowledge can be difficult to pin down. This is because it relies so heavily on the disjunctions and elisions which separate the various discourses, intertextual references and metaphors from which it is woven. My aim in this chapter will not be to explain away or overcome this difficulty of reading *Faust*, but to show that this difficulty is the very phenomenon that is under discussion. I will show how Goethe's naturalization of the transcendental argument in the *Faust* drama aims to highlight the relationship between the act of representation and its conditions, foremost among them the constitution of the body. But as in the case of the world, we will see that the body-as-totality likewise escapes objectification. Devoid even of this ground, knowledge finds itself face-to-face with the problem of mixed metaphors. In taking the mixing of metaphors to an extreme, Goethe shows that the mixed metaphor is an *Urphänomen* of language, and that the notion of straight, pure or unmixed metaphors is a subreptive fiction. This critique of metaphorical coherence amounts, I will argue, to a critique of academic disciplinarity.

First, it will be necessary to recall some part of the vast range of meanings *Puppe* can have in Goethe's usage. One of the most broad and non-specific ways Goethe uses the word *Puppe* is to refer metonymically to every kind of childish toy or "kindisch-tollen Ding" (11840). This is in itself enough to justify calling the *Faust* drama a *Puppe*; while it is true that Goethe referred to *Faust* as his *Hauptgeschäft*, this does not mean he took it as an exclusively serious affair. To be

sure, epic warnings abound throughout *Faust* of the vital dangers posed by misplaced seriousness. In the Act V of *Faust II*, when Faust is venting his frustration about the sound of the bells that carry all the way from Philemon and Baucis' chapel, he expresses himself in a way that leaves undecided the question of whether his rage is merely subjective or in fact caused by an external stimulus:

Wie schaff ich mir es vom Gemüte!

Das Glöcklein läutet und ich wüte. (11258)

To which Mephistopheles responds:

Natürlich! daß ein Hauptverdruß

Das Leben dir vergällen muß.²¹⁹ (11260)

A few lines later, Faust gives Mephisto the oracular but fateful order: "So geht und schafft sie mir zur Seite! –" (11275), an imperative obviously constructed to have a potentially lethal ambiguity.²²⁰ When Faust is unable to sort out his *Hauptverdruß*—his frustration at having finally gained the sublime heights and achieved a reified, bird's-eye vision of everything far and wide, only to realize he is still not master of everything he can see—he gives a sloppy command which Mephisto can exploit for infernal purposes.

The tragedy of Philemon and Baucis is a metonym, no doubt, for the inevitable destruction of life under modern conditions of highly mediated imperial rule. But if *Faust* was the *Hauptgeschäft* with which Goethe tried to gain some relief from the *Hauptverdruß* of his modernity, it could serve this role because it also functioned as a plaything. In Book 20 of *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, Goethe has the husband of Valerine say to Lenardo and Wilhelm, "Glücklich ist der, dem sein Geschäft auch zur Puppe wird, der mit demselbigen zuletzt noch spielt und sich an

²¹⁹Note here also how Mephisto's *vergällen* (typically "to spoil," but in chemistry "to denature") ironizes his exclamation of "Natürlich!"

²²⁰Schöne 725.

dem ergetzt, was ihm sein Zustand zur Pflicht macht."²²¹ This passage, in which the travelers' host shows off the tools of his trade, also exploits the ambiguity of *Puppe*. Read simultaneously as the chrysalis, the *Puppe* is not only a plaything but also a phase in a cycle of life, death and rebirth. It is an anticipatory phase during which the preconditions of an imminent activity begin to emerge within the present *Zustand*, condition or position. This casts the *Puppe*—parallel to its function as a plaything—as a locus of serious thought, theoretical reflection and decision.

The passage from the *Wanderjahre* also demonstrates how the mixing of metaphors is an operative principle of lighting. The mixed metaphor allows one to read the passage from either outside of the *Puppe*, inside of it, or from both perspectives at the same time. Light and shadow interact and interpenetrate to produce color. The illusion of color is crucial because, as an essential technique of art's imitation of life, it drives the critique of knowledge at the level of affect. Attention to color reveals that as long as the interpretation of Valerine's husband's sentence remains exclusively within a single metaphoric regime—either that suggested by "puppet" or that suggested by "chrysalis"—it maintains a grey sense of stoic submission. But to the extent that interpretation remains open to the imaginative play the construction invites—that is, insofar as *Puppe* is treated as *Puppe* (and not interpreted as *either* a chrysalis *or* a puppet)—the sentence cascades indefinitely, refracting the free movement of philological desire onto the surface of its liberated object. In *Faust*, too, the lesson of such indeterminacy, that is to say, of the *weave* of the drama, is not skepticism, but agile, imaginative nominalism grounded in embodied experience.

From the basis of this metaphor-critical approach to the aporias of monism, I will now sketch a more systematic picture of how the Faustian drama constitutes a challenge to disciplinarity. For

²²¹WA I/24, 210.

the purposes of this argument, I define disciplinarity as the constitutive regulation and control of borders between metaphoric regimes. The systematic critique of knowledge performed by the *Faust* drama can be demonstrated on the basis of a series of object lessons taken from *Faust II*. Each of these lessons functions by showing the impossibility of answering Faust's basic theoretical question about modernity: "was die Welt / Im Innersten zusammenhält" (382-3), within any one metaphoric regime. To prepare for these object lessons, however, we will look first at the scene which marks Faust's last attempt to accommodate himself to professorial life.

4.3 The Sublime of Bildung: Auerbachs Keller in Leipzig

This strange, intermezzo-like scene is not the first stop of Faust's new *Lebenslauf*, as Mephisto puts it, but the last stop on his old *Lebenslauf*. *Auerbachs Keller* presents a critique of *Bildung* which, in the original conception, followed directly on Mephisto's acerbic deconstruction of higher education. Unlike the *Studierzimmer II* scene, however, in which Mephisto is alone with the prospective student, Faust attends and participates in *Auerbachs Keller*, though with a reluctance that is underscored by his only line: "Ich hätte Lust nun abzufahren." Only after this last spectacular failure in the milieu of *Bildung* can the dynamic duo finally depart for the alchemical cocoon of the *Hexenküche* and the street where Faust will encounter Gretchen.

In the *Prolog im Himmel*, the LORD justified the creation of the Devil with the following lines: "Des Menschen Tätigkeit kann allzuleicht erschlaffen, / Er liebt sich bald die unbedingte Ruh; / Drum geb' ich gern ihm den Gesellen zu, / Der reizt und wirkt, und muß, als Teufel, schaffen" (340-3). In the opening words of the scene in *Auerbachs Keller*, we find this motif echoed in the register of the barroom:

FROSCH

Will keiner trinken? keiner lachen?
 Ich will euch lehren Gesichter machen!
 Ihr seid ja heut wie nasses Stroh,
 Und brennt sonst immer lichterloh.

BRANDER

Das liegt an dir; du bringst ja nichts herbei,
 Nicht eine Dummheit, keine Sauerei. (2073-8)

According to this conception, life and liveliness are in need of a goad from without, life must be spurred into productivity and derailed from what would otherwise be a necessary course of entropy. This is the role which, according to the LORD, Mephisto is supposed to be playing in Faust's life, and in the original conception of this scene it is the role played by Faust himself in the life of the students. Goethe's ultimate decision to have Mephisto serve as the scene's sole illusionist is crucial: with Faust displaced by Mephisto from the role of illusionist, a triangulation of desire is achieved. In this triangulation, Mephisto functions as a prism for refracting the drive which mediates the relationship between Faust and his students. Through the prism of Mephistopheles, the scene in *Auerbachs Keller* exposes a view of how desire and illusion are shared in the classroom. This sharing is at the heart of Faust's ambivalence, because it finds both the promise and the risk of *Bildung*.

When Faust and Mephisto arrive at Auerbachs Keller, they find the students drinking and singing. The students' question upon seeing Faust and Mephisto can be paraphrased as "What are these two *Marktschreier* selling?" The answer turns out to be song and wine, something the students—at least from the perspective of form or genre—already have in abundance, though with

a difference: the travelers' offerings have the symbolic capital of their courtly aura. Mephisto's *Flohlied*, despite being a parody, suggests an intimacy with power as well as social mobility as the promise of education. And there are the wines the conjurer is able to offer: Mephisto's magical ability to provide any wine desired far outbids Jesus' miracle of transforming water into wine in a way that reflects the expansion of trade relations and their expression at the level of social class. Though in the eighteenth century grapes were still grown, as they had been since the middle ages, wherever they would take, the century also witnessed the emergence of famous imported brands associated with lifestyle, health and power, that were either grown in France or were associated with France. After earning a following at Versailles, for instance, the sweet Hungarian Tokaji (mentioned explicitly by Mephisto at 2276) became indispensable to Europe's upper crust, and was known as "Vinum Regum, Rex Vinorum," an epithet apocryphally coined by Louis XV. But when some of the spilled wine transforms into fire, the illusion it helped produce begins to unravel. The students draw knives with the intention of killing Mephisto. To save himself, Mephisto plays a final trick. Surrounded by the knife-wielding students, he declares—seriously, now (*mit ernsthafter Gebärde*):

Falsch Gebild und Ort

Verändern Sinn und Ort!

Seid hier und dort!

ALTMAYER

Wo bin ich? Welches schöne Land?

FROSCH

Weinberge! Seh' ich recht?

SIEBEL

Und Trauben gleich zur Hand!

BRANDER.

Hier unter diesem grünen Laube,

Seht, welch ein Stock! Seht, welche Traube! (2313-19)

The four students, tricked by Mephisto's displacement, are now mistaking one another's noses for bunches of grapes. When they raise their knives to cut the bunches, unwittingly about to murder each other, Mephisto's spell finally ends. The *Marktschreier* are nowhere to be seen.

When Mephisto and Faust arrived on the scene, the students were already drinking and singing in their own, simple way; in offering them a different song and better wine, Mephisto incited a differentiation of their taste that was entangled with their perception of the two *Marktschreier* as connected to power. The scene *Auerbachs Keller* thus articulates as a central problem of *Bildung* two parallel antagonisms of life: that between the simple and the manifold, and the static and the mobile. *Bildung* is thereby exposed to its inescapable insertion in political-economic processes that far outstrip what Faust the professor can account for in his quotidian decision-making about how to teach a diverse group of students. This aporia of *Bildung* sits like an undigested stone at the heart of the *Gelehrtenragödie*. Faust recoils from it in horror because he cannot accept how little control he has over the ultimate effects of his teaching, given the limits of his knowledge as defined by the mediation of the drive. Because he cannot accommodate the limits of his knowledge to the demands of his practice, he cannot continue on as a professor: "Ich hätte Lust nun abzufahren" (2296). This is a Faustian pattern. When Faust encounters and rears back in horror before the limits of his knowledge in a particular milieu, he responds by leaving that milieu behind for another one in which he again encounters what is, at least formally, the same problem. In Part I, he responds to the sublime of *Bildung* by drawing a tighter circle around

the sphere of his activity—in reducing his intervention into life to the body of one other person, Gretchen. His effects are more immediate and knowable, he can indulge in the fantasy of god-like control that comes closest to the relationship of the artist to the work. But ultimately Faust leaves Gretchen to her fate, just as he leaves his students to theirs, and his work to its (in the hands of Wagner). But once Faust fails to realize *Bildung* in the educational milieu, and also fails to realize it "in der kleinen Welt" of normalized domesticity with Gretchen, he looks instead to "die große Welt" of political-economy, war, trade and imperial expansion. This is a curious structure of development: an insight into the limits of knowledge and control leads Faust to narrow and intensify his sphere of influence. Catastrophe at this level leads, however, to Faust expanding his sphere of influence while accepting a (necessarily) higher degree of mediation between himself and the consequences of his actions. And just like in the life-cycle of the butterfly, Faustian metamorphosis culminates in colonization.

On 6.8.1796 Goethe wrote to Schiller of his recent entomological studies, calling the metamorphosis of the butterfly "das schönste Phänomen, das ich in der organischen Natur kenne (welches viel gesagt ist)."²²² But the aim of the metaphor mixing Goethe uses in *Faust* is not merely to ask whether Faust's course can be seen as necessary or beautiful as soon as we tear ourselves away from humanistic sentimentality and adopt a reductively naturalistic, morphological or biological view of human becoming. The mixed metaphors are meant, rather, to complement, critique and interrupt each other in a way which constantly frustrates the unilateral determination of relationships between representation and represented. Mixing thus serves as an incessant reminder of the ontological difference between representation and

²²²Goethe's letter continues in a tone of excitement, transgression and reverence reminiscent of the poem *Selige Sehnsucht*: "Sagen Sie niemand nichts davon. Ich habe zwar die Beobachtung nur an Einer Art machen können, wahrscheinlich aber ist es bey allen so, welches sich noch diesen Herbst entscheiden muß. Da die Veränderung so schnell vorgeht, und man nur wegen der Kleine des Raums die Bewegung nicht sehen kann, so ist es wie ein Märchen, wenn man den Geschöpfen zusieht." WA IV/11, 153. Cf. *Schöne* 803.

represented. The critique of the faculties is impotent if it is not supplemented by a critique of the metaphoric regimes which are continuously colonizing ontology. *Faust* in this light aims to expose the insufficiency of any one regime of metaphor to grasp metamorphosis in a way that does not simultaneously undermine the metamorphic process with which the production of knowledge is coextensive as but one of numerous parallel phenomena.

4.4 "Nach Golde drängt, / Am Golde hängt / Doch alles."

The *Mummenschanz* scene in Act I of Part II can be read as a sequel or potentiation of the *Auerbachs Keller* scene. Like the latter scene's position within the overall structure of Part I, it represents the first imaginative departure from the starting point of Part II (*Denkt nicht ihr seid in deutschen Grenzen*, 5065). And like the *Auerbachs Keller* scene, it functions to critique the aesthetics of the sublime by playfully travestying the one-sidedness of every aesthetically coherent or affectively consistent monism. Just before the *Auerbachs Keller* scene, Mephisto's tutorial for the prospective student in *Studierzimmer II* ended with the lines "Eritis sicut Deus, scientes bonum et malum" (2048, "You will be like God, and know what good and evil are"), and this warning about the forbidden fruits of knowledge is taken up again in the *Mummenschanz*. The fruit or final commodity-like product of the project of knowledge–didactic presentation of a system or theory—is treated here according to the problem of consumption and digestion. In the words of the *Gärtner*: "Früchte sollen nicht verführen / Kostend will man sie geniessen," (5160-1). The problem of seduction as it relates to the aesthetics of the sublime is central to the scene's culminating moment in which the Kaiser, in the mask of the great god Pan, "Freut sich des wundersamen Dings" (5927) and, seduced by it (5954), becomes "Verflochten in das Element" (5942), whereby the court is engulfed in flames, bringing the scene to a close.

In *Auerbachs Keller*, we saw how Faust recoiled from a vision of his students' insertion in global political-economic processes which, because of their enormity and complexity, seemed to lead his practical reason ad absurdum. Here, Faust and Mephisto present the court with a personified image of God-Nature's historical insertion into and entanglement with the abstraction of money. The *Flammengaukelspiel* (5987) into which this erupts is a representation of the limits of reflection which come into force simultaneously with this historical moment. Once Nature has been seduced into the *Puppe* of money, processes of knowledge production are beholden to its abstract mediation of value. Money's mediation of value becomes a systemic condition of human activity from which the individual subject is incapable of wholly subtracting its own essence. This material specification of the limits of knowledge suggests a critique of disciplinary metaphoric regimes in light of the embodied scenes in which they produce knowledge. Pure negativity, like that represented in this scene by the idealist sansculottism of Zoilo-Thersites, irreverent critic of Homer and Agamemnon, is easily dispersed by forces beholden to the new gods, whose ascendancy is acknowledged by the audience. When the audience of the *Mummenschanz* ("Gemurmel") remarks on the smiting and premature metamorphosis of Zoilo-Thersites (he devolves into a clump, then transforms into an egg from which hatch an otter and a bat), Goethe uses the opportunity to question the efficacy of the aesthetics of the sublime:

Keiner ist von uns verletzt–
 Alle doch in Furcht gesetzt–
 Ganz verdorben ist der Spaß–
 Und die Bestien wollten das. (5490-4)

These end-stopped lines echo the final lines of *Auerbachs Keller*, which also follow on a failed attempt to summon the power of negativity to force a monistic vision: "ALTMeyer. Nun sag

mir eins, man soll kein Wunder glauben! (2337)." But rather than enlightenment, the strategy produces disillusion; instead of enchantment, it leads to skepticism and nihilism.

The Kaiser's reaction to the *Mummenschanz*, however, is seemingly positive: at least it incites a desire for more entertainments. When he relates his experience of the sublime to Mephisto ("Ich schien ein Fürst von tausend Salamandern," 6002), Mephisto paints for him a picture of life transfigured by the mediation of aesthetic practice, suggesting that by means of the sublime he can maintain himself within a forcefield surrounding "dich den Mittelpunkt" (6011). In this fantastically redeemed, self-centered world in which "Die Wände selbst erfreuen sich des Lebens" (6013), the Kaiser would encounter, Mephisto claims, "farbig goldbeschuppte Drachen" (6017) at play without exposing himself to any danger: "Der Haifisch klafft, du lachst ihm in den Rachen" (6018). The Kaiser does not take the inverted christological bait, however: even when Mephisto offers him the throne of Olympus, he declares himself content with his worldly sovereignty and leaves majesty over the "luftigen Räume" (6028) to Mephisto: "Noch früh genug besteigt man jenen Thron" (6029), the Kaiser declares—indicating that he senses, consciously or unconsciously, that the apotheosis Mephisto has in mind for him passes necessarily through death. With nothing left on Earth to gain, the Kaiser can afford disdain in the face of Mephisto's overtures for partnership. As the angels had declared, "Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, den können wir erlösen" (11936-7)—they cannot redeem the Kaiser, that is, at least not so long as he is content to passively consume his sublime entertainments like a voracious caterpillar.

What is it like to be in a *Puppe*? The Kaiser, circumspect, doesn't want to go there, and Faust will eventually call it a "Schreckengang" (6489). In the poem *Selige Sehnsucht*, which narrates the metamorphosis of a butterfly, Goethe describes the pupal state as one of being enclosed or

"umfassen / In der Finsternis Beschattung,"²²³ a dark, shadowy place of anticipatory incubation from which the butterfly-to-be must finally be torn away by "neu Verlangen" to a higher state of consummation, namely the butterfly phase of its life-cycle, which can involve traveling vast distances for the purpose of colonization. The Kaiser, who demands to be entertained by visions of Helen and Paris, is after the delectable fruit of this process, but it is Faust who must descend into the pupal darkness of the underworld and tarry with the ideality of the Mothers in order to produce it. "Wohin der Weg?" (6222) Faust asks Mephisto: "Kein Weg!" (6222). This pupal phase in the underworld, into and out of which no chreod or path of necessity has yet been revealed, is a moment of uncertainty, reflection, negotiation and creation. During this pupal stage of metamorphosis, it may not appear from the outside as if anything at all is happening. But in fact, the larva trapped within the *Puppe* is metabolizing the mass of nourishment it consumed as a caterpillar, which it uses to transform into a butterfly.

Meanwhile - that is, while awaiting divine intervention, whether that of a minor daemon such as Mephisto, or that of The Infinitely Deferred Feminine (Das Ewig-Weibliche) represented by the Mater Gloriosa - this stage supports the appearance of all kinds of grotesques. And they are grotesque in the literal sense that they inhabit the murky, shadowed, grotto-like metamorphic space of the *Puppe*.²²⁴

4.5 "So herrsche denn Eros der alles begonnen!"

This appearance of the grotesque in the Walpurgisnacht scenes is for Goethe a metaphor for modernity's *veloziferisch* tendency to turn Nature inside out by forcing its in-dwelling spirit into

²²³WA I/6, 28.

²²⁴For another recent reading of the grotesque in the Walpurgisnacht scene, see Borchert. She also provides useful orientation in existing scholarship on Goethe's grotesque.

the light at increasingly premature stages of *Bildung*. This tendency of modernity, on Goethe's view, divulges the violence of Nature's internal self-division with an immediacy that could otherwise be sublimated into, for instance, the patterns on the wings of a butterfly. What *veloziferisch* modernity thus divulges is precisely the drive which the name Mephistopheles – as a metonym for the operation of culture as such – covers, *verpuppt*. Does money hold the world together in its innermost? We saw how the play with Pan and Plutus demonstrated the limits of reflection on life's entanglement with it. In the attempt to grasp the mediacy of money immediately, the subject can press pause on its particular relationship to money's illusion, but the rest of the world doesn't stop. Just like when Faust looks at the sun in Part II's opening scene: trying to grasp a condition immediately creates a short circuit which destroys the illusion. But this theoretical insight comes at the cost of physically exposing the body to the unmediated systemic violence of a world seduced.

This brings us to the second possible answer to Faust's question of "was die Welt / Im Innersten Zusammenhält": Eros. In having the *Klassische Walpurgisnacht* scene of Act II unfold under the sign of Luna, Goethe juxtaposes the becoming, anticipatory, pupal forms of life that appear in the Walpurgisnacht scene with the figure of Melancholy as she had been reinterpreted by the Florentine renaissance. As in Albrecht Dürer's famous etching *Melancholia I*, neo-platonism interpreted this winged victim of dark humoral imbalance as a frustrated artist. Whereas in her medieval representation she had merely been a contemptible victim of sloth, in the renaissance, Melancholia's status was upgraded to that of sublimity in the making. Melancholia, like Homunculus, wants to "entstehn," (7848) but also like him, doing so involves a struggle with the technical instruments of her self-fashioning and the limitations they impose on her range of activity. Homunculus is trapped within his vial as in a kind of artificial chrysalis, and Melancholia has fallen inert surrounded by her half-finished project and neglected tools. Here

already the comparison begins to break down and the contrast between Homunculus and Melancholia becomes apparent: the vial in which Homunculus finds himself is prefabricated by Wagner. Because Homunculus had no part in his own making nor in the creation of the artificial environment which conditions his life, when his vial breaks and he "ergießet sich," he cannot produce a vessel to capture his spilling excess; instead of *Bildung*, he experiences dissolution. The irony of the artificial man Homunculus is that, since he has had no hand in the making of his *Puppe*, his metamorphosis cannot proceed beyond the glass house of his chrysalis. Without it he is *ungebildet*, wholly at the mercy of the elements. Indeed, the transparency of the glass of the vial which surrounds Homunculus marks a stark departure from the typical Goethean imagery of sublimation, in which immersion in a medium entails an eclipse of the light of the sun, as in this stanza from the poem *Harzreise im Winter*:

Aber den Einsamen hüll
 In deine Goldwolken!
 Umgib mit Wintergrün,
 Bis die Rose wieder heranreift,
 Die feuchten Haare,
 O Liebe, deines Dichters!²²⁵

Unlike Goethe's pupal cloud, which shields the poet from the external world during a sensitive phase of maturation, the transparent incubator in which Homunculus comes to life exposes him to an unsustainable immediacy which reduces Eros to a false transparence and determinacy. The transparence of the homuncular cocoon (the psychic correlate of which is telepathy) means that immediacy is for Homunculus a chronic condition rather than a moment of liberation or

²²⁵WA I/2, 63.

transcendence. Wagner's project of creating the new man with "höhern, höhern Ursprung (6843)" is an attempt to bypass once and for all:

Die holde Kraft die aus dem Innern drang
Und nahm und gab, bestimmt sich selbst zu zeichnen,
Erst nächstes, dann sich Fremdes anzueignen (6841-3).

But precisely to the extent that the self does not *zeichnen* itself it ends up, on Goethe's view, *gezeichnet* by the world. This is also the point Mephisto hopes to make to the newly "born" man when he says:

Wenn du nicht irrst, kommst du nicht zu Verstand!
Willst du entstehn, entsteh' auf eigene Hand! (7846-7)

The word *zeichnen*, which in Goethe's oeuvre first attains critical significance in Werther's flagging ability to draw, refers in Goethe's symbolic repertoire not only to drawing but to the process whereby human subjects are marked and thereby separated out from Nature into distinct, self-conscious entities. The *distinguishing* of the subject from a world of objects in this act of marking is artificial, yet, similarly to Hölderlin's *Ur-Teil*, ontological for Goethe; in what pre-exists it, subject and world were not yet present. It is through *zeichnen*, this surgical self-marking of Nature at the level of the individual, that both subject and a corresponding, intelligible version of the world come into existence. *Zeichnen* is in this sense a fundamental function of art whereby the primal unity of subject and object in Nature is undone. Yet to the extent that this artificial and creative act of self-distinction proves to be necessary, it will have begun to mark a passage to a new, transfigured Nature in which subject and world can again coalesce in a rejuvenated indeterminacy.

Alles, was der Tod mir raubte,

Seh ich hier im Bilde wieder²²⁶

In these lines from the poem *Schadenfreude*, Goethe used the metaphor of butterfly metamorphosis to reflect on loss and the passing of life-epochs as stages in the perennial cycle of life and death. These lines describe how the *Zeichnen* that occurs during the pupal stage represents the lost totality, whereby the factuality of the loss is approached and recovered as living, certain knowledge. The death mourned in the pupa is here suggested by the proximity of Goethe's playful "raubte" to *Raupe*, the former life as a caterpillar which is split, severed and spliced in the cutting room of the chrysalis.

Simultaneously, *Schadenfreude* is as overt an erotic poem as any Goethe wrote. But it is precisely in those moments of apparent erotic immediacy that the mature Goethean lyric withdraws behind the veil of its medium. The position of the lyrical "I" is that of a butterfly which now recapitulates its former life "im Bilde" by voyeuristically fluttering about the bodies of a pair of embracing lovers:

Sie umarmt ihn lächelnd stumm,
 Und sein Mund genießt der Stunde,
 Die ihm gütige Götter senden,
 Hüpf vom Busen zu dem Munde,
 Von dem Munde zu den Händen,
 Und ich hüpf um ihn herum.

"Ich habe keine Wünsche als die ich würcklich mit schönem Wanderschnitt mir entgegen kommen sehe," Goethe wrote to Lavater on 8.1.1777.²²⁷ In what can be read as a demonstration

²²⁶WA I/1, 51.

²²⁷WA IV/3,131.

of this embodied erotics, the butterfly's kino-eye guides the gaze of the reader in this encounter in a diffusely playful circuit from mouth to chest to mouth to hands, while the butterfly's own movements are left indeterminately fluttering "about." This game relies, however, on the butterfly's remaining undetected by the lovers. When one of the partners becomes aware of its presence, the triangulation of desire which drives the poem breaks down and reverses:

Und sie sieht mich Schmetterling,
 Zitternd vor des Freunds Verlangen
 Springt sie auf, da flieg' ich ferne.
 "Liebster, komm, ihn einzufangen!
 Komm! ich hätt' es gar zu gerne,
 Gern das kleine bunte Ding."

It is no longer the eye of the reader that is led around by the butterfly, but suddenly, the girl begins chasing the butterfly. In this moment she begins trying to grasp the thing-like butterfly which, as the magician of the illusion, is a condition of her and her partner's poetic existence. Two parallel phenomena are represented: on the one hand the poem and the erotic play it supports come to an end in the moment that the gaze becomes *verdinglicht* (das kleine bunte Ding). On the other hand, the objective elusiveness of the poem/butterfly permits a delay or break with an appearance of necessity, a defusing and disarming of a merely potential Nature (Zitternd vor des Freunds Verlangen / Springt sie auf, da flieg' ich ferne). The elusiveness of the erotic poem, its diffuse, fluttering indeterminacy, is offered as an antidote to the *Verdinglichung* and paralysis of desire. She may not grasp the butterfly, but in attempting to, she begins to imitate its elusive, guiding movements. And if she can succeed in drawing her lover into this new game, the two may become privy to an embodied awareness of the course the butterfly's gaze

charts about their bodies. *Schadenfreude* can in this way be read as a lyrical response to the rhetorical question asked by Wagner in the moments before Homunculus is brought to "life" by the arrival of Mephisto:

Was wollen wir, was will die Welt nun mehr?

Denn das Geheimnis liegt am Tage. (6875-6)

Concomitantly with his project of creating the new man, Wagner believes he has demystified the world once and for all, and that the mystery which Faust has been after—"was die Welt / Im Innersten zusammenhält," is now divulged for all to see. For the sake of contrast, these lines ought to be read parallel to those of Goethe's poem *Im ernsten Beinhaus war's*: "Was kann der Mensch im Leben mehr gewinnen, / Als daß sich Gott-Natur ihm offenbare, / Wie sie das Feste läßt zu Geist zerrinnen, / Wie sie das Geisterzeugte fest bewahre."²²⁸ For on Goethe's perspective, Wagner's attempt to bypass the pupal stage of metamorphosis in which the *Selbstzeichnung* of the drive is carried out amounts to emptying the world of all mystery. A world in which "das Geheimnis liegt am Tage" is a flattened, see-thru world in which notions both of God and of Nature are drained of their capacity to name phenomena in which subjects explore and determine their limits. This is because the hyphen in Goethe's *Gott-Natur* represents not an equals sign, as it is often read, but the chrysalis in which the violence of God-Nature's internal self-division is digested, and from which emergent knowledge ultimately explodes the binary scab of ossified determinacy.

What is at stake in the chrysalis, then, is the meaning of the hyphen in *Gott-Natur*. In uniting the two words and their attendant systems of metaphor into a single *Zeichen* while also preserving their difference, this *Binde-Strich* represents the momentary suspension of the molar historical

²²⁸WA I/3, 94.

identity of God and Nature as the temporal delay or arrest—a kind of *Dialektik im Stillstand*—necessary for performing the work of self-determination. Wagner's approach, however, of jettisoning the hyphen, leads either to the absolute separation of God and Nature or to the loss of the critical moment of their differentiation. Goethe insists, however, on maintaining both in a relationship of mutually critical vitality, whereby both their identity and/or difference must always be renegotiated locally in the chrysalis. Once their relationship has been sorted out and the soul finally emerges from the chrysalis with the head, thorax and abdomen of a butterfly, God and Nature emerge with the body as the wings on which it lifts itself into the air.

In the final moment of struggle for Faust's soul, Mephisto exhorts his minions, the Fat Devils and the Skinny Devils, to drive the spirit out of Faust's expiring body and capture it. While Mephisto admits that the exact location of the soul within the body cannot be determined with any certainty (11666-7), he leaves no doubt that "die flatternde, die Flüchtige" (11673) is a condensation of a butterfly with *Psyche* (11660) and *Genie* (11675), an iconographical mash-up which also evokes the frustrated daemon Melancholia and, last but not least, the god Eros. In typically diabolical fashion, Mephisto slanderously dissects the relationship of the drive to its conceptual prostheses in a way that underscores the material conditions of mind's ascent:

Das ist das Seelchen, Psyche mit den Flügeln,
Die rupft ihr aus so ists ein garstiger Wurm. (11660-1)

In this image, the soul is imagined as shorn of, or liberated from, the historically accrued tools with which it continuously attempts to mark its distinction from the elements. This is precisely what Homunculus, "vom Proteus verführt" (8469), is unable to do. Insofar as he has no hand in

the making of his own chrysalis, he goes down a puppet of the elements. Act II of the second part of *Faust* thus ends with the orgiastic cry of the Sirens:

So herrsche denn Eros der alles begonnen! (8479)

and the final couplet, spoken by ALL ALLE! in a collective frenzy:

Hochgefeiert seid allhier

Element' ihr alle vier! (8486-7)

Is this, then, Goethe's answer to Faust's question of "was die Welt / Im Innersten zusammenhält?" On the contrary, Goethe shows the limits of our ability to objectify Eros. Severed from its cultural attributes, Eros loses all embodied particularity and dissolves into the rest of elemental Nature. As a condition of the process of knowledge, Eros can never divulge itself to knowledge as an object. Grasping Eros immediately can at most bring the process animated by his presence to a standstill. It is only in the encounter with physical bodies that Eros' indeterminacy is refracted into the "Taten und Leiden" of color. Eros, like light, remains an open question until the moment of its material entanglement. One can grasp and grasp again like Mephisto's *Firlefanze* groping after Faust's soul: "Greift in die Luft, versucht euch ohne Rast;" (11671), but the notion of erotic rule remains as senseless as that of obeying the imperatives of a Sphinx.

4.6 Beauty. "Was hilft der Augen schärfster Blitz! / Er prallt zurück an deinen Sitz."

...wenn ich Ihnen rathen darf, so werden Sie mehr Vortheil finden, zu suchen wo Schönheit seyn möchte als ängstlich zu fragen was sie ist. Einmal für allemal bleibt sie unerklärlich; [...] Mendelssohn und andre [...] haben versucht die Schönheit wie einen Schmetterling zu fangen, und mit Stecknadeln, für den neugierigen Betrachter festzustecken; es ist ihnen gelungen; doch es ist nicht anders damit, als mit dem Schmetterlingsfang; das arme Thier zittert im Netze, streift sich die schönsten Farben ab; und wenn man es ia unversehrt erwischt, so stickt es doch endlich steif und leblos da; der Leichnam ist nicht das *ganze* Thier, es gehört noch etwas dazu, noch ein Hauptstück, und bey *der* Gelegenheit, wie bey ieder andern, ein sehr hauptsächliches Hauptstück: das Leben, der Geist der alles schön macht. -Goethe an Hetzler, 14. Juli 1770²²⁹

²²⁹WA IV/1, 238-9.

Goethe kept his distance from aesthetic theory all his life. From his early crusade against Sulzer in the *Frankfurter gelehrten-Anzeigen* to his correspondence with Schiller in the 1790s to the Helena Act of *Faust II* and the aphorisms of the *Wanderjahre*, his basic attitude remained the same: if you try to approach beauty directly and fix it as an object of knowledge, it will elude you, evade you, or die in your hand. His mature position adds little to what he had already felt as a 20 year-old: rather than trying to understand beauty's mechanism, cause or essence, we should turn our attention to the conditions in which it flourishes. Beauty is for Goethe a telos or capacity of life, but its appearance is dependent upon environmental conditions. In the natural world as in aesthetic mediation, beauty only comes about within delimited spheres, frames, cocoons or clouds. For beauty to happen, the place where it happens has to turn inward from its peripheries and lose sight of the greater context in which it is enclosed.

For a frame to support the appearance of beauty, it must therefore fail to capture it—it must, in fact, be built to fail. But to close blindly in on itself, it must become forgetful of this inevitable failure. Not in the light of day and not in its nocturnal elision, but only in the half-lit "Dämmerung" of this enclosure can beauty emerge as "eine Gebuhr von Wahrheit und Unwahrheit."²³⁰ The frame can only continue this forgetful process of self-closure insofar as it begins to succumb to the illusion arising from its own center.

The dividing line between the truth and untruth of beauty is therefore the line of the frame in which beauty appears. Untruth constitutes beauty, manifest in beauty's blindness to the truth of worlds it cannot inhabit. Just as the frame of beauty turns inward, beholden to its own illusion, everything to be named by the beautiful illusion must find itself within the frame. This is Phorkyas-Mephisto's field of advocacy. She enters at the height of Faust's seduction by the Ideal

²³⁰WA IV/1, 199. An Friederike Oeser, 13.2.1769: "O, meine Freundinn, das Licht ist die Wahrheit, doch die Sonne ist nicht die Wahrheit, von der doch das Licht quillt. Die Nacht ist Unwahrheit. Und was ist Schönheit? Sie ist nicht Licht und nicht Nacht. Dämmerung; eine Gebuhr von Wahrheit und Unwahrheit. Ein Mittelding."

of beauty - "Denn wo Natur im reinen Kreise waltet / Ergreifen alle Welten sich" (9560) - to assault the purity and perfection of the circle.

She does this, first, by claiming to Helen's (ever jealous) Chorus to be the only servant called by Faust and Helena to attend them in their night of Arcadian love: "Abgesondert / Von der Welt, nur mich die Eine riefen sie zu stillem Dienste" (9588-9). Second, she narrates the birth of Euphorion in a way that emphasizes the role of limitation in producing the beautiful illusion. But her narration of Euphorion's discovery of his calling depicts Euphorion's experience at the edge of the ground of beauty as a pivotal moment of maturation. Euphorion, care-free, explores and tests the limits of the space within which he finds himself. "Doch auf einmal in der Spalte rauher Schlucht ist er verschwunden, / Und nun scheint er uns verloren. Mutter jammert, Vater tröstet, / Achselzuckend steh ich ängstlich. Doch nun wieder Welch Erscheinen. / Liegen Schätze dort verborgen? blumenstreifige Gewande / Hat er würdig angetan." (9614-18). The beautiful illusion fostered at the center must, if it will achieve a material form, proceed to the edges of the frame of its containment and lose itself there before turning back towards the center:

In der Hand die goldne Leier, völlig wie ein kleiner Phöbus

Tritt er wohlgemut zur Kante, zu dem Überhang; wir staunen. (9621)

Phorkyas has constructed the experience of the beautiful in such a way that the Chorus' absence from it becomes a constitutive dimension of its meaning. This not only highlights absence as a condition of epic narration, it also ignites a dynamic of response: the Chorus responds with a narrative of its own, a retelling of ancient mythic contents compared with which, they claim, the pseudo-epic account of Phorkyas pales in comparison:

Alles was je geschieht

Heutiges Tages

Trauriger Nachklang ist's
 Herrlicher Ahnheern-Tage
 Nicht vergleicht sich dein Erzählen
 Dem was liebliche Lüge
 Glaubhafter als Wahrheit
 Von dem Sohne sang der Maja. (9637-44)

What this constellation achieves is a potentiation of the Helen myth. Whereas the double aspect of the beautiful—its power of attraction, consonance, reconciliation, agreement, peace, on the one hand; its ability to become an occasion for conflict, envy, hatred, war, on the other—is the evident object lesson of the ancient Helen myth, what Goethe shows here is how also in its absence, that is, in its absolute absence or Ideality, the beauty which arises when "Natur / Im reinen Kreise waltet" becomes an object of contention. For this to happen, the discourse about beauty must act as a second for the contested thing itself, like a knight fighting in a medieval joust. It is only once this transfer of authority has taken place, once the narrative about beauty has been accepted as a surrogate of beauty, that this dynamic can gain any traction.

The Chorus' narration of Hermes' exploits, which follows on that of his birth and metamorphosis (Gleich dem fertigen Schmetterling / Der aus starrem Puppenzwang / Flügel entfaltend behendig schlüpft, 9657-9), was taken (from 9667 onward) by Goethe almost verbatim from Hederich and versified²³¹. As Schöne notes, this is an homage to one of Goethe's most useful encyclopedists, but it simultaneously serves to underscore and potentiate the problem of mediation which beauty poses. Since beauty, as we have seen, is not an object or a property of an object but a capacity of life, any discourse about it is forced to simulate the experience of it. Such that a discourse which

²³¹Schöne 624-5.

attempts to grasp beauty, but does not strike the reader as beautiful, will always seem to understand less about beauty than a beautiful discourse which doesn't grasp anything at all.

Goethe thus tears the question of the mediation of beauty wide open. He not only asks about whether and in what ways it is possible to mediate beauty, he also inquires, with a critical sociological turn, into its function. The answer Goethe gives is that in a mediated world, beauty has to be mediated so it can be recovered. The aim of the response of Helen's Chorus to Phorkyas' new-fangled blasphemy is the recovery of beauty, then, in a double sense. As we have seen, the Chorus first attacks Phorkyas' myth by invoking the authority of tradition. Second, they narrate an alternative myth of daemonic becoming which overwrites the metaphoric regime of the sublime with that of butterfly metamorphosis. But the beautiful genetic myth they narrate is, ironically, the birth of Hermes.²³² The Chorus' attempt to trump the beauty witnessed by Phorkyas is thus legible as an unconscious paean to the very spirit with whom they are quarreling, the one who is inside the *Phorkyas-Puppe*: Mephisto.

Mephisto, I have argued, is the puppet of the drive. Refracting the drive at the level of language, he draws out the Chorus' negativity. In the Chorus' attempt to negate the beauty witnessed by Phorkyas, they unwittingly sing the praises of the very spirit who animates her. In this way, Goethe presents the agon of aesthetic discourse as a comedy of errors in which the drive, entangled in the medium of language, fails to recognize itself in the unfamiliar particularity of opposed materializations. The result of this confused antagonism is that Nature's internal self-opposition is divulged at the level of a cultural practice which, according to Goethe's Ideal, has a higher potential of sublimation. Whereas the Chorus falls into a competitive logic of one-upping, Goethe's Ideal involves pushing expression to the depersonalizing limit at which the creative

²³²Peter Huber has shown the rich symbolic entanglement of Mephisto's character with Hermes/Mercury. Huber 40-54.

individual shatters the ideology of competition by recovering the beauty of the drive's self-recognition.

Goethe's view of beauty overlapped with that of Büchner's Lenz, for whom beauty was the self-announcement of consonant life. As we have seen, because beauty is for Goethe an organic phenomenon, its life-cyclical ephemerality is not just an accidental, frustrating attribute but one of its essential and defining features. The environmental limits within which beauty can occur and flourish are, as we have seen, a central concern of Goethe's aesthetic thought. This interest in the bounded nature of beauty leads, however, away from the beautiful itself and towards the edges of its frame. It leads, as we saw in the example of Euphorion, to the problem of the sublime.

In sections I and II, I showed some examples of how Goethe travesties the aesthetics and experience of the sublime in *Faust I* and *II*. But at the same time as he makes fun of it, Goethe also makes masterful and innovative use of the aesthetics of the sublime, pushing it to extremes that have not been equaled in modern literature. Why is it that Goethe, despite his apparent ambivalence, nonetheless maintains the aesthetics of the sublime as an essential tool in his rhetorical arsenal?

We saw how the scene of beauty turns inwards on its own illusion, and thereby loses sight of the context beyond its own realm—what Faust call's Helen's "Grenzunbewußten Reichs" (9363). As the scene of beauty is necessarily unconscious of its own limits, it is in need of a supplemental perspective, one capable of looking out over the bounds of the beautiful illusion and assessing its viability in a larger context of forces which may well prove indifferent to it (and to which it may be indifferent). For Goethe, this was the importance of the perspective the sublime could offer. In rupturing the beautiful, the sublime aims to keep the beautiful open—it aims, like Phorkyas, to

keep the circle impure by delaying its final closure and expiration. The sublime asserts the impurity of the circle by means of an ongoing challenge to read across the gaps which separate disciplinary regimes of metaphor.

But the sublime presents problems which it is likewise incapable of solving on its own. As mind or drive entangles itself in higher and higher (or, what is the same, further and further) degrees of mediation, it runs the risk of becoming increasingly the puppet of its own tools of mediation. As Mephisto puts it: "Am Ende hängen wir doch ab / Von Kreaturen die wir machten" (7003-4). Living language begins as a tool for naming and referring to the sensible world, but it ossifies gradually into a screen beyond which the rest of that world recedes. Just like the beautiful, then, the sublime has a point beyond which its life-affirming aim, alienated from sense, loses track of itself. Left to their own devices, both the beautiful and the sublime succumb, like the death drive, to the indifferent logic of the inanimate.

In the debates about whether or not Faust's soul is ultimately redeemed, it is often forgotten that on Faust's own account, he has two souls:

Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach! in meiner Brust,
 Die eine will sich von der andern trennen;
 Die eine hält, in derber Liebeslust,
 Sich an die Welt, mit klammernden Organen;
 Die andre hebt gewaltsam sich vom Dust
 Zu den Gefilden hoher Ahnen. (1112-1117)

Faust has a beautiful soul and a sublime soul, and both are essential conditions of the existence and renewal of life. In the apocotastasis of *Faust's* conclusion, both are redeemed: for both name the same drive which animates the *Mephisto-Puppe*. The beautiful and the sublime register the

drive as the violence of Nature's internal self-division at the level of aesthetic practice. As Goethe put it in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, they are interdependent aspects of life in aesthetic mediation:

Aber wie das Erhabene von Dämmerung und Nacht, wo sich die Gestalten vereinigen, gar leicht erzeugt wird, so wird es dagegen vom Tage verscheucht, der alles sondert und trennt, und so muß es auch durch jede wachsende Bildung vernichtet werden, wenn es nicht glücklich genug ist, sich zu dem Schönen zu flüchten und sich innig mit ihm zu vereinigen, wodurch denn beide gleich unsterblich und unverwüstlich sind.²³³

Whatever depersonalizing insight the experience of the sublime involves, Goethe argues further, if it is to have any force in the quotidian worlds in which we struggle for distinction, it must be brought into the bounded space of the beautiful (recall Faust and Helen's summoning of Phorkyas) where it can present itself as desirable to the desire for distinction. Only Eros himself, whether in the guise of Hermes or of Mephisto, can "trip up" Eros (6792); but to do so, Eros must come to a consciousness of his own internal division, which is only possible to the extent that he becomes conscious of the automaticity of his desire for the inanimate:

Es ist offenbar, daß das, was wir Elemente nennen, seinen eigenen wilden wüsten Gang zu nehmen immerhin den Trieb hat... und hier hat uns die Natur aufs herrlichste vorgearbeitet und zwar indem sie ein gestaltetes Leben dem Gestaltlosen entgegen setzt. Die Elemente daher sind als colossale Gegner zu betrachten, mit denen wir ewig zu kämpfen haben, und sie nur durch die höchste Kraft des Geistes, durch Muth und List, im einzelnen Fall bewältigen. Die Elemente sind die Willkür selbst zu nennen... Das Höchste jedoch, was in solchen Fällen dem Gedanken gelingt, ist: gewahr zu werden was die Natur in sich selbst als Gesetz und Regel trägt, jenem ungezügelter gesetzlosen Wesen zu imponieren.²³⁴

Goethe's redemption of the sublime thus walks a narrow tightrope: while at once trying to provide the maximum amount of space for the free movement of experimental philological desire—in the sense that he "wollte die Rechte der Natur nicht verkürzt wissen"²³⁵—it also aims to

²³³Dichtung und Wahrheit II, 6; WA I/27, 14f.

²³⁴Versuch einer Witterungslehre, Bändigen und Entlassen der Elemente. WA II/12, 102-3.

²³⁵Einwirkung der neuern Philosophie. WA II/11, 52.

provide an answer to the question of how to check the (self-)destructive tendencies of absolute freedom. His solution to the problem of absolute freedom is to offer the drive a plaything which, he hopes, may help it discover the immanent and environmental laws of its own unique capacity for beauty.

Mephisto as spirit of negation is thus not the advocate of *pure* negation (*reines Nicht*) which Faust often sees in him: his negation is always caught up in the flow of history, he refracts the "Rechte der Natur" onto the backdrop of social convention's perennial violence. But unlike the false Messiah Zoilo-Thersites²³⁶ speculatively overextended mode of negation, Mephisto's negation is always immanent to a particular scene of the incessant conflict between convention and natural right. It is precisely in his character as the spirit of negation that Mephisto is immortal: "Da ists vorbei! Was ist daran zu lesen?" (11600). There is no way death can become an object of knowledge, Goethe argues throughout Faust's expiration. As Kant demonstrated in the *Transcendental Analytic*, knowledge always requires a third, mediate term to keep the subject–object distinction from collapsing. For Kant this mediate role was served by the a priori categories. But what can we know a priori about death? This is Mephisto's question. The non-object death represents the limit of negation as a creative interpretive force. The philological desire refracted through Mephisto can make no sense of it. Though death cannot be negated, Mephisto suggests, life can be continuously affirmed through the figure of "das Ewig-Leere."

Mephisto's use of the subjunctive in the "Ewig-Leere" speech suggests that the distinction between the indicative and the subjunctive (the all-too subtle grammatical distinction on which Kant's critical use of teleology hinges) is of little practical consequence when it comes to the production of knowledge. An Idea is dead and *vorbei* when Nature outgrows it. But rather than

²³⁶Cf. Schöne 442-3.

harness the study of Nature to particular Ideas, Mephisto suggests, doesn't it make more sense—and wouldn't it be more open, inclusive, and potentially emancipatory—to confront nature with *emptiness in the form* of an Idea? As the void or ground of interpretation, the Eternally Empty is not pure negativity or nothingness. Emptiness, to be legible as emptiness, must be contained. Mephisto can only read what is past insofar as it is present to him in material form.

Through Mephisto's figure of the Eternally Empty, Goethe suggests an alternative to the teleological framework in which the Kantian subject experiences the sublime. Mephisto's question is whether the limiting conditions Kant puts on the use of Ideas can serve their intended purpose of governing the production of scientific knowledge. His charge is that the Kantian solution exaggerates the power of conceptuality vis-a-vis the erotic trajectory of the drive ("Es ist so gut als wär es nicht gewesen, / Und treibt sich doch im Kreis als wenn es wäre," 11601-2). Mephisto makes clear that he has no intention of abiding the death of an Idea as *vorbei*, just as the manifold catastrophes he and Faust leave in their wake show the "as if" to be an ineffective defense against the speculative excesses of a modernity in which knowledge (regardless of how it is grammatically qualified) is reduced to an instrument of technological advancement at a rate that outpaces the time-costly nature of rigorous critical procedure. "Ach Gott! Die Kunst ist lang," Wagner had already lamented with the impatience: "Und kurz ist unser Leben. / Mir wird bei meinem kritischen Bestreben, / Doch oft um Kopf und Busen bang'. / Wie schwer sind nicht die Mittel zu erwerben, / Durch die man zu den Quellen steigt! / Und eh' man nur den halben Weg erreicht, / Muß wohl ein armer Teufel sterben" (558-65).

When Goethe has Faust, in the scene of his blinding just prior to his most sublime moment ("höchsten Augenblick," 11586), state that "Des Herren Wort es gibt allein Gewicht," (11502) it is a recognition of the necessity of a third figure to keep the distinction between reality and

imagination from collapsing in on the space of freedom held open by their vital interdependence. "Des Herren Wort" is this third term and as such, it is the vessel which contains Mephisto's beloved "Ewig-Leere." The Eternally Empty permits individuals to project and experience the fate of subjective notions of purposiveness within a framework large enough to contain virtually infinite diversity without the necessity of arbitrating competing claims. By seducing the drive into entanglement with an inanimate word that refers in the beginning and end only to its own activity ("im Anfang war die Tat," 1237), the divine logos discloses to the drive the limit of its pursuit of emptiness. Just as the immovable Sphinxes contain the sublime upheavals of Seismos, the divine logos resists absolute freedom in a way that promotes the metamorphosis of imagination in increasingly intimate dialogue with the particulars of the sensible world. Faust's most sublime insight thus recovers the fundamental attitude towards divinity that had always governed Goethe's approach to language. As he wrote to Pfenninger on 26 April, 1774:

*Und so ist das Wort der Menschen mir Wort Gottes es mögens Pfaffen oder Huren gesammelt und zum Canon gerollt oder als Fragmente hingestreut haben. Und mit inniger Seele fall ich dem Bruder um den Hals Moses! Prophet! Evangelist! Apostel, Spinoza oder Machiavell. Darf aber auch zu iedem sagen, lieber Freund geht dirs doch wie mir! Im einzelnen sentirst du kräftig und herrlich, das Ganze ging in euern Kopf so wenig als in meinen.*²³⁷

In divulging the emptiness of the inanimate, the divine logos affords a view of the divinity that is universally expressed in human language. As the weight of "des Herren Wort" presses back against the drive's specular capture in imagination, continuously confronting ever forgetful Nature with the fact of its fall into particular forms, living language is increasingly infused with the gravity of the real.²³⁸

²³⁷WA IV/2, 157.

²³⁸Cf. Copenhaver 2 (Corpus Hermeticum 1: 6): "This is what you must know: that in you which sees and hears is the word of the lord, but your mind is god the father; they are not divided from one another for their union is life."

Chapter 5

Wilhelm Meister's Sublime Journey

5.1 Eros and Entsagung: Wer ist der Verräter?

What made *Werther* such a hit in 1774 was the clarity with which Goethe represented desire as a paradox. In the first chapter I discussed the overarching configuration of desire in the novel—the way consummation is foreclosed in the way Werther constructs Charlotte as an ideal—as well as the logic of elusiveness which governs Werther's representations of his attempts to commune with nature:

Am 1. Junius: [...]

Es ist wunderbar: wie ich hierher kam und vom Hügel in das schöne Thal schaute, wie es mich rings umher anzog. --- Dort das Wäldchen! --- Ach könntest du dich in seine Schatten mischen! --- Dort die Spitze des Berges! --- Ach könntest du von da die weite Gegend überschauen! --- Die in einander geketteten Hügel und vertraulichen Thäler! --- O könnte ich mich in ihnen verlieren! --- Ich eilte hin, und kehrte zurück, und hatte nicht gefunden, was ich hoffte. O es ist mit der Ferne wie mit der Zukunft! ein großes dämmerndes Ganze ruht vor unserer Seele, unsere Empfindung schwimmt darin wie unser Auge, und wir sehnen uns, ach! unser ganzes Wesen hinzugeben, uns mit aller Wonne eines einzigen, großen, herrlichen Gefühls ausfüllen zu lassen. --- Und ach! wenn wir hinzueilen, wenn das Dort nun Hier wird, ist alles vor wie nach, und wir stehen in unserer Armuth, in unserer Eingeschränktheit, und unsere Seele lechzt nach entschlüpftem Labsale.²³⁹

According to this formulation, desire can only happen in the distance between the self and something far off. The pleasure of eros consists in reaching out towards the distant object as if one could possess it; but to grasp it is to bring an end to that particular economy of delight. Goethe has Werther show the reader that he has grasped this in a paradox. But if Werther has

²³⁹WA I/19, 38-9.

understood the paradoxical nature of desire, why does his story end in suicide—why didn't his insight lead him to a less destructive solution to his problem? Is knowledge so useless?

Clearly, there must be something wrong with Werther's way of grasping desire as paradox, his account must be incomplete. But incompleteness, it turns out, is an intrinsic feature of paradox. In attempting to capture something real between two terms that can never be synthesized (such as the "Hier" and "Dort" of spatiotemporal extension), paradox would capture the very movement of desire—this is what makes it, in a favorite expression of Goethe's, so *verfänglich*. Paradox, then, is a trap for desire.

The failure of Werther's grasp of desire is thus—despite its compelling clarity—integral to the economy of the novel. Werther isn't content to grasp Eros paradoxically just once. He returns to it, and pitches himself again and again between its poles of "here" and "there"; Werther puts his body *in* the paradox. Goethe has his readers watch Werther reach for Eros and grasp it, and fail to grasp it in spite of grasping it. In this way, Goethe opened up a stereoscopic view of eros and knowledge as parallel economies.

What did Werther do wrong? Why didn't his paradoxical formulations help him? Goethe doesn't give a clear answer to this question in *Werther*. It wasn't until he developed the notion of the *Urphänomen* in his natural scientific writing that Goethe had a more straightforward way of talking about those aspects of reality we can only grasp in paradoxes. In the figure of the *Urphänomen*, Goethe proposed that we encounter a limiting condition of our knowledge. He further proposed that the right attitude towards such a limiting condition was to capture it symbolically. But once it had been captured symbolically, he proposed that the thing to do was leave it be and see what light it could shed on further empirical observation.

Early Romantic literary theory wanted to solve the problem of desire by embracing and sublating the paradox of Eros in the figure of *Witz*, as a way of managing its chaotic affective economy. Goethe was troubled by this Romantic theory of infinite, mutual self-reflection; it wasn't clear to him how such a theory could generate useful knowledge or a proper response to the law-like realia of Nature, which he saw manifested in the immutable limits of our reflective capacities. Romantic reflection, on Goethe's reading, failed to properly address these limits.

What, then, is the right response to the paradox of desire according to Goethe? My thesis is that Goethe thought we should treat Eros as an *Urphänomen*. But what would that look like?

In *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* there is a novella called "Wer ist der Verräter?" which I suggest can be read as an inversion of the *Werther* tale. The protagonist, a young man by the name of Lucidor, visits the estate of his father's friend, the Oberamtmann, to get to know his daughter, Julie, whom his father hopes he will marry en route to becoming the Oberamtmann's successor. To his horror, Lucidor does not fall in love with Julie, but with her older, more reserved sister, Lucinde. Upon retiring to his room each night, Lucidor gives voice to his desperation in monologues, but cannot muster the courage to tell anyone how he feels. For Lucidor is described as a superlatively obedient son, and the thought of contradicting his father's wish—something he has apparently never done—terrifies him.

Why have I called this an inversion of the *Werther* scenario? We saw how Werther threw himself headlong into the paradox of desire, and how his repeated attempts to grasp desire only blinded him to the realia that stood in the way of a union with Lotte. Werther recognized that Eros is a god, and he wrestled with him anyway. Lucidor, by contrast, has nothing of Werther's insouciance. Obedience blinds him to the fact that there is nothing standing in the way of a union with Lucinde but his father's wish. Again, Goethe makes use of a stereoscopic technique to

represent a parallelism of desire and knowledge. Lucidor tries but fails to know whether Julie wouldn't be happier with another suitor; he tries to know whether Lucinde likes the other suitor who is there to woo her, or whether she in fact prefers him. To the reader, though, nothing could be more clear than that Julie really would rather have the other suitor, and that Lucinde obviously does prefer Lucidor. In short, Lucidor's prospects couldn't be much better, even if he had written the story himself. This must be a further example, then, of the wrong way to grasp Eros. We saw how Werther's attitude was, after the manner of Goethe's Prometheus, one of disregard towards the power of the gods. But Lucidor's attitude of obedience is equally self-destructive. What can it possibly mean, to obey a paradox?

Goethe stages Lucidor's obedience as a passion of knowledge and desire. The Oberamtmann's estate is described as an artificial paradise that has been designed to the end of enabling a "geselliges Zusammensein." In the middle of a little forest, the narrator explains that there is,

auf der bedeutendsten Höhe, ein Saal erbaut, mit anstoßenden Gemächern. Wer zur Hauptthüre hereintrat, sah im großen Spiegel die günstigste Aussicht, welche die Gegend nur gewähren mochte, und kehrte sich geschwind wieder um, an der Wirklichkeit von dem unerwarteten Bilde Erholung zu nehmen: denn das Herankommen war künstlich genug eingerichtet und alles klüglich verdeckt, was Überraschung bewirken sollte. Niemand trat herein, ohne daß er von dem Spiegel zur Natur und von der Natur zum Spiegel sich nicht gern hin und wieder gewendet hätte.²⁴⁰

Entering this hall and submitting to its artifice is like stepping into a life-sized paradox. In the mirror, things furthest away are brought as close as can be. Crucially, though, the distance between them is preserved. "There" appears to be "here," even though it hasn't moved from "there." This is a space of rebounding desire, an erotic echo chamber. The subject who delights in the illusion looks from mirror to window to mirror and back again, oscillating between one view of "there" and another view of "there." But in doing so—this is the critical wedge—he turns on an

²⁴⁰WA I/24, 140-1.

axis which excludes from his field of vision precisely what is "here." This is the paradox of desiring reflection, and the obedient Lucidor walks right into the trap:

endlich trat er in die Thüre des großen Saals, und, wundersam genug, die untergehende Sonne, aus dem Spiegel zurückscheinend, blendete ihn dergestalt, daß er die beiden Personen, die auf dem Canapee saßen nicht erkennen, wohl aber unterscheiden konnte, daß einem Frauenzimmer von einer neben ihr sitzenden Mannsperson die Hand sehr feurig geküßt wurde. Wie groß war daher sein Entsetzen, als er bei hergestellter Augenruhe Lucinden und Antoni vor sich sahe. Er hätte versinken mögen, stand aber wie eingewurzelt, als ihn Lucinde freundlichst und unbefangen willkommen hieß, zuruckte und ihn bat, zu ihrer rechten Seite zu sitzen. Unbewußt ließ er sich nieder, und wie sie ihn anredete, nach dem heutigen Tage sich erkundigte, Vergebung bat häuslicher Abhaltungen, da konnte er ihre Stimme kaum ertragen.²⁴¹

In this scene, Goethe stages an encounter with the limits of reflection. We know that Lucidor's concern is to grasp Eros, and we have seen that the hall is designed like a paradox, as a trap to capture desire. But when Lucidor steps into the hall and is blinded by the light of the sun reflected in the mirror, both cognition and desire short circuit. Much like the way Goethe imagined a Newtonian scientist, Lucidor cannot "erkennen," cannot perceive the phenomenon according to its vital interrelations, he can only "unterscheiden," can only dissect it into constituent parts.

The aim of trapping Eros in a paradox is to capture its movement, to capture it *as* movement. The aim of trapping Eros in paradox is to preserve its indeterminacy. But when Lucidor steps into the hall his eyes encounter desire directly, and its movement is arrested in a (as will be revealed, false) determination: Lucidor believes that he knows Lucinde and Antoni are in love and that his own desire is thwarted. The result is a turn inward and a disengagement from sense: his encounter with the sun was not only blinding, but also deafening: "da konnte er ihre Stimme kaum ertragen. [...] Neben ihr hergehend, war er schweigsam und verlegen; auch sie schien

²⁴¹WA I/24, 148.

beunruhigt; und wenn er nur einigermaßen bei sich gewesen wäre, so hätte ihm ein tiefes Atemholen verraten müssen, daß sie herzliche Seufzer zu verbergen habe."²⁴²

In *Werther* Goethe showed why *disregard* is the wrong response to Eros, and in "Wer ist der Verräter?", he shows us that *obedience* is an equally self-destructive response: submitting to reflection ad infinitum cuts Lucidor off from the experience of his senses and, with them, from Nature. What, then, does Goethe propose? In the context of the *Wanderjahre*, it is the concept of *Entsagung* that is supposed to provide an answer to this question. How, then, can we understand Goethe's notion of *Entsagung* as a solution to this problem? Once we have recognized that desire is an *Urphänomen*, or a limiting condition of our experience, and grasped it in a paradox, what is the next step?

In the opening 'Anmutige Gegend' scene of *Faust II*, the sun is represented as a transcendent, godlike force with the power both to blind and to deafen those who fail to properly respond to its appearance. The elves, who bathe Faust in the waters of oblivion to liberate him from his moral quandary (that is to say, the process of reflecting on his actions and their consequences in *Faust I*), send him off with gestures of encouragement: *Wunsch um Wünsche zu erlangen*, they say, "Wish for real!" (4658); "Cast off the shell of sleep!" (4661); "Don't be afraid to put your hands on the world!" (4662-4665). From formless night a loud new day emerges, Apollo's chariot is on the move... *Welch Getöse bringt das Licht!* (4671). On Ariel's warning, the Elves flee the din of the approaching sun, hiding themselves in flower-tops and cracked rock under fallen leaves, shielding their ears from the deafening sound: *Triffst es euch so seid ihr taub* (4678).

But the solar noise that rends elven eardrums is for Faust the beat of life itself. As soon as he addresses an integral Earth: *Du Erde...* (4681), it is clear we are no longer dealing with the

²⁴²WA I/24, 148-9.

worm-eaten conjurer who addressed himself to spirits in Part I. It is not the sun *itself*—for which we, like the Elves, have no appropriate organ—that interests Faust, but the light's weave: *In Dämmerchein liegt schon die Welt erschlossen* (4686). Not a totalizing vision or macrocosm, but an intricate dance of light, dark and color, *Farb' an Farbe* (4692), is set off by the sun's music, revealing each thing in turn and in its time: *Zweig und Äste* (4690), *Blum' und Blatt* (4693), *der Alpe grüngesenkten Wiesen* (4699). In gradual succession, contours and bounded forms emerge—until the process of illumination is halted by its own light, the moment the rising sun catches Faust's eye directly:

Sie tritt hervor! – und, leider schon geblendet,
Kehr' ich mich weg, vom Augenschmerz durchdrungen. (4702-3)

This immediate encounter between sun and eye creates a short circuit that blinds Faust and crashes his nervous system. Run through with *Augenschmerz*, he can no longer perceive or name the world emerging in the sunlight. With his sense-bound cognition temporarily disabled, Faust attempts to capture the experience in a metaphor:

So ist es also, wenn ein sehnend Hoffen
Dem höchsten Wunsch sich traulich zugerungen,
Erfüllungspforten findet flügeloffen,
Nun aber bricht aus jenen ewigen Gründen
Ein Flammen-Übermaß, wir stehn betroffen;
Des Lebens Fackel wollten wir entzünden,
Ein Feuermeer umschlingt uns, welch ein Feuer!
Ist's Lieb? Ist's Haß? die glühend uns umwinden?
Mit Schmerz und Freuden wechselnd ungeheuer,

So daß wir wieder nach der Erde blicken,
 Zu bergen uns in jugendlichstem Schleier. (4704-4714)

Desire and cognition are bound up together in parallel physical dynamics, Faust says. Whatever it is that illuminates our world can only do so for as long as we respect the physical laws which govern our relationship to it. As we encounter the limits of a productive, responsive interaction between self and world, the mesh between the two becomes tenuous, and through the chinks we glimpse chaos raging beyond the weave of sense. Where this parallelism of desire and knowledge breaks down, we are engulfed in an eruption of excess, a *Flammen-Übermaß* (4708): *Des Lebens Fackel wollten wir entzünden, / Ein Feuermeer entschlingt uns, welch ein Feuer!* (4710-11).

And just like Werther, who said "es ist mit der Ferne wie mit der Zukunft!", Faust grasps desire in a paradoxical metaphor. But crucially, Faust then goes a step further. Having encountered the limit of immediacy between eye and sun, and grasped the phenomenon in language as paradox, Faust takes this crucial next step when he says, at the beginning of the next stanza:

So bleibe denn die Sonne mir im Rücken! (4715)

The next step, then, is to *not* throw oneself back into the paradoxical echo chamber of desire and try to catch Eros as he flits back and forth between "there" and "there." The solution Goethe offers in this Faustian gesture is precisely *Entsagung*, or renunciation. What is renounced in it is determinate knowledge *of* desire. In turning his back to the sun, Faust thunders a titanic "yes" to the twin lights of reason and desire. But in renouncing direct knowledge *of* reason and desire, he signals the way in which he believes reason and desire can serve life. Like the sun, both reason and desire illuminate and animate our world; working in parallel unison, they reveal reality in

forms that respond to our vital interests. But they can only perform this function so long as we are content to remain on the path they illuminate.

In his natural scientific writings, Goethe called this path the *Urphänomen*, and he suggested that it could serve as a crucial methodological touchstone for avoiding the short circuits of immediacy that blind Werther and Lucidor. In turning away from the sun and towards what it can show us, Faust respects his body's law-like relationship to the sun and affirms that he is beholden to solar phenomena. But in accepting the limits imposed by the sun's overwhelming force, he sets himself free to enjoy the illuminated World (4717).

That this "solution" is not in any sense final goes without saying: in placing it at the very beginning of Faust's second journey, Goethe underscores the point that it is only ever the beginning of the new problem.

5.2 After the World: "Im Schatten eines mächtigen Felsen..."

In beginning *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, the sequel of his novel of *Bildung*, with this allusion to the Old Testament²⁴³, Goethe places at the center of the nexus of problems with which he is concerned the relationship of the *Bildungstrieb* to the inanimate, ossified or accrued. The narrator of the *Wanderjahre* presents the inanimate in the aspect of the sublime. It is a double-aspect: on the one hand the rock is a massive, threatening presence, immovable, impenetrable and unscalable, more ancient than experience and indifferent to the stirrings of life. On the other hand, through its function of mediating the direct impact of the sun and other elements, the rock creates an environment in which lifeforms threatened by exposure can take temporary refuge from the immediate struggle for survival and its effects. The sublime can thus serve, like the just

²⁴³As commentaries regularly point out, the trope became an ancient cliché and can also be found in Virgil (Georg. 3:145) and Hesiod (2:206).

princes whose coming is prophesied in Isaiah, "wie eine Zuflucht vor dem Wind und wie ein Schirm vor dem Platzregen, wie die Wasserbäche am dürren Ort, wie der Schatten eines großen Felsen im trockenen Lande" (Luther 1545, Jesaja 32:2).

These similes share a way of imagining the asylum of the sublime as always temporary, as a makeshift solution to a problem that necessarily recurs. These imagined solutions do not work in a deep way, by reconfiguring nature (a wish closer to the heart of the demands Faust first makes on Mephistopheles); rather, they operate in accord with the laws of nature: every umbrella will catch an awkward gust and break, and every shelter will eventually collapse. The asylum-seeker will eventually be pressed by other needs to leave the solitary oasis behind. Such sublime oases can appear, in a way that is definitive for modernity, yet already anticipated by the ancient intertextual reference points, in the guise of either nature or of art. But at the level of their intended function—that is, of delaying the refugee's return to elemental exposure for the sake of bringing something into Being—both natural products, such as stones and streams, and products of human invention, like the umbrella, appear in the horizon of what Aristotle called *techne* or the "sphere of the variable,"²⁴⁴ that is, what cannot be predicted with *a priori* certainty.

In the *Wanderjahre*, I will argue, Goethe is concerned with a parallel structure: necessity is always there, but it only concerns us to the extent that it appears. The appearance of necessity, however, is variable. The *Wanderjahre* thus locates the domain of freedom in the variability of the appearance of necessity. The variability of the appearance of necessity is expressed in two intimately related variables: the variable *timing* of its appearance (ideally regulated by *kairos*) and its variable formal presentation. The art of narrative is displayed in the *Wanderjahre* as the art of the timely revelation of formal necessity.

²⁴⁴Aristotle 1139b18-36.

Yet I tried to show in the chapters on *Elective Affinities* and *Faust*, that in Goethe's modernity, neither timeliness (*kairos*) nor necessity can henceforth appear in the horizon of a single, coherent World. The paradigmatic shift from *Faust I* to *Faust II* is the shift from the question of *the* World to the question of worlds (Denn wo Natur im reinen Kreise waltet / Ergreifen alle Welten sich, 9560-1). Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* might in this respect more aptly be called *Weltenliteratur*, because it imagines a way of sharing human difference *within the world* by renouncing the reduction of discursive reference to one imaginary self-same World. The beginning of the *Wanderjahre* thus begins to mark out and symbolically layer its titular problem: that modernity increasingly entails a universalization of the experience of wandering or diaspora, but that this modern experience necessarily leads to a renunciation of the World *just in the moment of its coming-into-view*. The problem of the derealization of the World, often associated with postmodernity, is already among the indefatigable specters of modern, diasporic subjectivity. To inhabit living, particular worlds and invest them with reality, the diasporic subject must renounce (*entsagen*) the World by coming to an understanding of both its contingency and its necessity as an imaginary figure. Real, living worlds, like the one inhabited by Philemon and Baucis and merely visited by the Wanderer, are only revealed in the half-light of the World's receding horizon.

5.3 Narrative Mechanics and Human Meaning

Heftiges Pochen und Rufen an dem äußersten Thor, Wortwechsel drohender und fordernder Stimmen, Licht und Fackelschein im Hofe unterbrachen den zarten Gesang. Aber gedämpft war der Lärm ehe man dessen Ursache erfahren hatte; doch ruhig ward es nicht, auf der Treppe Geräusch und lebhaftes Hin- und Hersprechen heraufkommender Männer.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁵WA I/24, 316.

In Genesis 9, Noah—a man of the soil—having survived the deluge, plants a vineyard. He wastes no time getting drunk on its grapes, and falls asleep naked in his tent, where he is discovered by one of his sons, Ham, the father of Canaan. Ham, true to his name in English, is a prankster. He discloses to his brothers, Shem and Japheth, the shame of their father's debauchery, but the two are not amused. The obedient sons walk backwards into the tent, averting their eyes from the manifest secret of their father's nakedness, and cover him back up. Upon waking, Noah discovers Ham's treachery, flies into a rage and curses his wayward son's offspring. The sons of Ham will be his brothers' slaves, Noah declares. The ones who veil, and keep their father's secret—are destined for mastery.

Genesis is the quintessentially sublime book, the one to which 18th century scholars and literary critics most often turned for examples of sublimity. It was one of the sources from which they derived the idea that there must be a "mechanism" of the sublime, or such a thing as a sublime rhetoric. As we have seen, this was a major problem for German critics of the eighteenth century, such as Bodmer and Mendelssohn, who wrestled with the ancient text of Longinus or with the English discourse on the sublime, most famously that of Edmund Burke. In England, the sublime had been a topic of rhetorical interest since at least the 16th century, and the rhetorically preoccupied English discourse got German critics thinking about the possibility that the sublime might be an effect that could be produced. We saw that critics wrestled with, and indeed resisted, the idea that the sublime was about rhetoric and hence about aesthetics, but also that they gradually gave up more and more ground to the aesthetic-rhetorical interpretation.

In Mendelssohn's first notes on Burke's *Inquiry*, he writes that he was impressed by the author's precise observations on the workings of nature. This *Bewunderung* led Mendelssohn to take up the pen both against and with Burke, in developing his own divergent discourse on the sublime.

Mendelssohn argued against the reduction of the sublime to a mechanically produceable rhetorical effect, but at the same time, he pondered its mechanism and ultimately reinforced the impression that rhetorical tricks could at least help transmit the sublime.

Because Wilhelm's journey is regulated by a code according to which he must keep on the move, the fundamental principle or "open secret" of narrative is formally articulated within the plot as one of its structuring elements. This feature creates a reflexive feedback dynamic through which the novel's form and content, setting off from this primary mirroring, can constantly refer to each other. By installing this reflexive mechanism within the formal and thematic structure of the novel and multiplying and layering the techniques of self-reference to an extreme degree while rapidly creating and taking apart novelistic space in plain view of the reader, the novel aims to draw out an imaginary excess which can only be explained through an investigation of how narrative garners and directs a reader's attention. But because the content of the novel is constantly in dialogue with its own form, it also offers a seemingly endless register of explanations for precisely this phenomenon: that is, it provides answers to its own questions. The many, formally analogous answers serve not only as a reminder of the overdetermination of all natural phenomena but also that common forms subtend all languages and discourses, and that these can provide a way of bridging the gaps between various metaphoric regimes. In this way, Goethe's aesthetics of the Sublime in the *Wanderjahre* aims to capture the dynamic of the *Bildungstrieb* within a machine-like, symbolic body.

As Wilhelm's journey is drawn forward by a transparent narrative logic which constantly draws attention to its own mechanics, the meanings Wilhelm attributes to his experience accumulate and disperse like clouds. Readerly attention is divided between the desire to enjoy the novel (by pushing through and continuing to read it, that is, submitting to the narrative logic) and the desire

to understand *how* the novel works by interrupting its progress, rereading it and analyzing its construction (which involves resisting and breaking down the novelistic illusion). The gap between the deconstructive materialism of the *Wanderjahre's* narrativity, and Wilhelm's ephemeral experiences of shared humanity, is extreme. The formal construction of the *Wanderjahre* is designed to represent these two experiences in a stereoscopic perspective that critically poses the question of their interrelation as the crisis of modern, diasporic humanity: the apparent contradiction between knowledge (*Wissenschaft*) and happiness (*Glück*). This contradiction, Goethe aims to show, is the inner contradiction of Nature itself, formally expressed at the level of human Being. If Werther's anthropological *Ur*-question is: "was ist der Mensch, daß er über sich klagen darf,"²⁴⁶ then the late Goethe's answer is: the human is the formal expression of Nature's constitutive ambivalence.

5.4 The Beautiful and the Sublime

Goethe perceived in the experience of the sublime a pitfall of pure reason, a temptation to speculatively map the "experience" onto all previous and subsequent experience in a totalizing, purposive metaphysical system, an Experience compared to which other experience was merely a derivative or modality. An aphorism in the collection *Aus Makariens Archiv* states:

Da wir überzeugt sind, daß derjenige, der die intellectuelle Welt beschaut und des wahrhaften Intellekts Schönheit gewahr wird, auch wohl ihren Vater, der über allen Sinn erhaben ist, bemerken könne, so versuchen wir denn nach Kräften einzusehen und für uns selbst auszudrücken ---insofern sich dergleichen deutlich machen läßt --- auf welche Weise wir die Schönheit des Geistes und der Welt anzuschauen vermögen.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶WA I/19, 5.

²⁴⁷WA I/48, 196.

Using the aphoristic form to address the status of metaphysics or pure intellection is in itself an ironic gesture, for it brings into immediate relief the problem of abstraction as that of the portability of knowledge across contexts. The late Goethe was fond of aphorism because the brevity and generality of its form plainly expose its lack of a foundation within itself. At the same time, however, aphorism represents a rigorous attempt to bring a thought into sharp focus *despite* such groundlessness. Aphorism is a special manifestation of the "open mystery" of language, and it allows Goethe to talk about language as an open system which is simultaneously thoroughly self-referential *and* only meaningful by reference to a particular world. The first task undertaken by this aphorism is thus one of grounding itself in a causality of *Überzeugung* and *Einsicht*. The aphorism is staged as arising from a notion of conviction which for Goethe represents an irreducible epistemic grounding in the individual. This irreducible ground is not ineffable so much as unavailable to a discourse with universalist aspirations, because it involves the most personal experience of the subject's mystery and opaqueness to itself. By grounding discourse in *Einsicht* in this way, Goethe secures for the enunciating subject a ground of radical individual freedom.

The aphorism simultaneously demonstrates how any attempt to explain the *Einsicht* on which the subject's activity is based can only occur by way of exposing its relation to the social as particular: the only way to maintain the self necessary for the existence of a social relation whatsoever is through a degree of perceptual violence necessary to protect the individual from assimilative and homogenizing social pressures. This perceptual violence or *Einsicht* is exercised by the subject in recalling to itself its own experience.

Goethe thus frames the founding *Überzeugung* as an *Einsicht* into the universal and necessary form of *Überzeugung*. The use of the first person plural *Wir* throughout the aphorisms

rhetorically suggests this universality while also leaving the question of the reader's assent to such "belonging" up to him or her. This individual self-grounding to which *Überzeugung* refers is central to Goethe's late stance on the sublime. The experience of the sublime cannot be discounted as madness, but neither can it be given priority over other moments in the economy of knowledge. Although the sublime is a moment in which the affective and cognitive economies are experienced as causally interpenetrating one another, our determinations of the ways in which they do so inevitably involve personal content. This means that *Überzeugung* involves an irreducible "esoteric" element, that is, a personal history upon which society has no claim, for the individual cannot outsource the question of its meaning to another agency even if it wants to. Conversely, the individual cannot reasonably make normative demands based on its experience of the sublime, since the "data," personal content or *Sachgehalt* of the sublime is not transferable. To draw universally applicable conclusions from such experience is to misunderstand the sense in which abstraction can be socially useful: "Das Esoterische schadet nur, indem es exoterisch zu werden trachtet."²⁴⁸ This, however, does not prohibit and cannot prevent the subject from making personal use of the experience of the sublime when it comes to the development of the *Überzeugung* and *Einsicht* which form the ground from which it acts and speaks.²⁴⁹ The sublime is neither "irrational" or even non-rational so much as too personal and fragile to survive transposition into higher order mediation without loss. The first aphorism *Aus Makariens Archiv* states that: "Die Geheimnisse der Lebenspfade darf und kann man nicht offenbaren; es gibt Steine des Anstoßes, über die ein jeder Wanderer stolpern muß. Der Poet aber deutet auf die Stelle hin."²⁵⁰ By "pointing to the spot," the poet argues that what is universal in truth is its

²⁴⁸WA II/11, 123.

²⁴⁹"Nur durch eine erhöhte Praxis sollten die Wissenschaften auf die äußere Welt wirken: denn eigentlich sind sie alle esoterisch und können nur durch Verbessern irgendeines Tuns exoterisch werden. Alle übrige Teilnahme führt zu nichts" (WA II/11, 115).

²⁵⁰WA I/42, 184.

formal founding—an act involving both discursive and extra-discursive moments—in an irreducibly personal relation to a world.

This means that the sublime is to be interpreted on two different levels. On the one hand, the sublime has a personal meaning that involves the subject's relationship to a particular transcendent entity (for instance God(s), Nature, God-Nature, the Law, the sovereign, capital, spouses or lovers, others, the multitude, *Neigung*, etc.). On the other hand, the sublime is experienced within a larger context of experience which includes (mediated) experiences of both the formal similitude and substantial otherness of others' experiences of the sublime.

In the aphorism above, Goethe refers to the transcendent entity suggested by the experience of the sublime as the "father" of the "intellectual world" and of the "beauty of the veritable intellect," who is "sublime relative to all sense." The notion of such a "father" appears as an effect arising from pure intellection or the contemplation of form disjunct from any object, a thoroughgoing structuration of spirit as it reflects itself only within itself. Conviction about the authoritarian tendency of one-dimensional self-consistency is given in the aphorism as the ground for a methodological reflection ("Da wir überzeugt sind... so versuchen wir denn..."). Goethe, then, is writing against a position correlate to the one adopted by Jacobi in the Spinoza debate: deterministic monism is the only consistent philosophy (which makes philosophy worthless for life, because it expunges freedom). This led Jacobi to the position that faith and revelation are necessary for securing human freedom over-against mechanistic determinism. When Goethe speaks of "noticing" the "father" of the intellectual world, he is pointing out faith's logical reliance on the deterministic alternative, its silent acknowledgment of determinism as a "real" danger which can only be avoided by faith. We can thus see how Goethe uses *Überzeugung* to critically interrogate the unconscious of faith.

The "father" is the anthropomorphized, single-minded creator we may imagine as the cause of every appearance of design, a projection of the synthetic striving our own transcendental unity (the ground of determination in Kant's lexicon) onto the totality of the world. Determinism is the result of a transcendental subreption that arises when a pure rational idea ("father") that is "sublime relative to all sense" is imaginatively mapped onto the world. This can lead to the collapse of the animate tension between imagination and the world and trap the subject in a mechanistic world-view it no longer recalls as its own creation.

Seeing as we are convinced of the ease with which this can happen..., Goethe explains, "we thus try to discern [*einzusehen*] and to express according to our powers—to the extent such things can be made clear [*deutlich*—how we are capable of intuiting the beauty of the spirit and of the world."²⁵¹ Read as a response to the transcendental pitfall in which the sublime is reduced to a rhetorical mask for cognitive closure in a totalizing image, the unassuming conjunction "and" functions like a prism capable of refracting the aphorism in multiple ways. Contemplative insight or discernment (*Einsicht*) and expression can thus intertwine in a shared material base, even while they remain distinct activities. The second "and" maintains a comparable relation between the beauty of spirit and of the world: neither is reducible to the other, but each is also a constitutive moment of the total movement through which the other likewise achieves definition. The prism-like aphorism thus refracts four intertwined activities, which, taken together as distinct but interdependent strands of a unified project, represent Goethe's response to the tendency of a reified sublime towards cognitive closure:

discerning how we intuit (*anschauen*) the beauty of spirit

expressing how we intuit the beauty of spirit

discerning how we intuit the beauty of world

²⁵¹The emphasis is my own.

expressing how we intuit the beauty of world

Put this way, it is clear why for Goethe, theory of knowledge cannot express the fundamental mode of relating to world or to spirit. Epistemology proper is thus approached with pragmatic circumspection before it is ultimately dissolved in a critical practice involving reflective contemplation and representation. The interdependence among these four activities means that our ability to discern truth processes is coextensive with our powers of expression. Furthermore, each of the four helices has a common vanishing point in the subject's "esoteric" or personal *Überzeugung*, its self-grounding in its irreducibly personal relation to the objective prism of materiality (i.e., its body or sense experience): "Was einem angehört, wird man nicht los, und wenn man es wegwürfe."²⁵²

Common to each of the four activities directed against the transcendental illusion of the sublime Creator is the intuition of beauty. Because it was the intuition of intellectual beauty that led to the Idea of a Creator, it is only through a critical investigation of experiencing beauty *and* instantiating beauty that beauty can be defended as a real force against tendencies towards idealization and aestheticization (defended, that is to say, against displacement). For the late Goethe, beauty itself becomes an intensive principle active in the natural world and subject to the same physical laws as the rest of the knowable universe:

Denn indem die Form, in die Materie hervorschreitend, schon ausgedehnt wird, so wird sie schwächer als jene, welche in Einem verharrt. Denn was in sich eine Entfernung erduldet, tritt von sich selbst weg: Stärke von Stärke, Wärme von Wärme, Kraft von Kraft; so auch Schönheit von Schönheit.²⁵³

²⁵²WA I/42, 187.

²⁵³WA I/48, 198.

The analogy to power, heat and force renders beauty a species of energy. In specifying in this way the internal divisiveness of beauty, Goethe can speak of beauty in a way that at once acknowledges the undecidability of questions about its subjective or objective origins without letting them determine or prevent the development of a discourse about it as real and physical. This means opening the possibility for thinking beauty in economic terms, as a capacity of interconnected nature, rather than as a merely "aesthetic" feeling or experience.

One of the central concerns of Goethe's mature art is the condition of exile from participation in the shared energy, or immediate medium, of beauty. As the individual recedes from immersion in this shared medium, it attempts to imaginatively reconstruct the World within the self—a process which leads ultimately to its destruction in the experience of the sublime.

5.5 The Aesthetic Mediation of Life

Steine sind stumme Lehrer, sie machen den Beoboachter stumm, und das Beste, was man von ihnen lernt, ist nicht mitzuteilen.²⁵⁴

One of the nearly ubiquitous demands made on and in German philosophy at the end of the eighteenth century was that it ought to become a way of giving expression to life. This a commonplace of post-Kantian philosophy, but the demand's cultural expression in fact pre-dates the ascendancy of Kantianism, as can be seen in the influence the aesthetic notions of Herder and Hamann had on the poets of the Storm and Stress movement. As is often the case, philosophy only registered this change belatedly. Nonetheless, in the post-Kantian Idealist philosophers' attempts to overcome the multi-dimensional architecture of Kant's critical system, the demand for a philosophy of life made itself felt with a special fervor. After Kant, the philosopher who had the greatest impact on emergent romantic theories of art and literature was Fichte, with the

²⁵⁴WA II/11, 122.

publication of the first version of his *Wissenschaftslehre* in 1794. When Friedrich Schlegel famously stated in Fragment 216 of the *Athenaeum* that the three greatest tendencies of his age were Fichte's emergent philosophical system, Goethe's *Meister*, and the French Revolution²⁵⁵, he was associating Goethe with something like a philosophy of mind (in the most general sense of going further than Kant had gone in talking about life *as* the life of the mind, and in describing fundamental structure/s and processes of consciousness) and, in a connected sense, with the cause of freedom. When it came to the metaphysical image which underlay the Romantics' attempts to think political freedom, the key figure was Spinoza. The Idealist project has thus often been described as one of trying to update Spinoza for the Kantian era of freedom, by liberating him from the "determinism" which, largely owing to Jacobi's influential interpretation, was thought to have marred his metaphysics.

As the correspondence between Goethe and Jacobi makes abundantly clear, Goethe did not share many of his contemporaries' view that Spinoza was a determinist. Furthermore, and contrary to many interpretations of Goethe's so-called worldview, it is impossible to corner Goethe into any positive version of monism, either of mind or of Substance. As in the following passage from Makarie's Archive, Goethe takes a position that recasts the question of monism in pragmatic terms focused on the problem of representation:

Man kann den Idealisten alter und neuer Zeit nicht verargen, wenn sie so lebhaft auf Beherzigung des Einen dringen, woher alles entspringt und worauf alles wieder zurückzuführen wäre. Denn freilich ist das belebende und ordnende Prinzip in der Erscheinung dergestalt bedrängt, daß es sich kaum zu retten weiß. Allein wir verkürzen uns an der andern Seite wieder, wenn wir das Formende und die höhere Form selbst in eine vor unserm äußern und innern Sinn verschwindende Einheit zurückdrängen.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁵KFSA 2: 198.

²⁵⁶WA I/48, 199.

Goethe concedes that the monist's insistence on ultimate oneness is based (reasonably) on the experience that, in sense experience, the "animating and ordering principle" is constantly being pushed to the margins of perception, that it is under threat of disappearing completely from consciousness. However, Goethe sees that every attempt to represent the "formative principle" and "higher form" as a positive, unified reality involves extending form beyond the domain of both inner intuition and of sensory perception. When we do this, Goethe argues—when we try to stuff all form back into a single vanishing point of the imagination, we sell ourselves short, because in doing so we are substituting iteration for embodied empirical development. Only the latter mode of production leads to the kind of incremental and mutual transformation of both subject and object that for Goethe made the production of knowledge individually and socially valuable. Once oneness has become axiomatic, simply reiterating it leads to the dismissal of empirical messiness rather than to cognitive gain. And it is precisely this perceptual tug-of-war with empirical messiness that makes representation a difficult and valuable critical activity.

For Goethe representation, as our mode of knowing, necessarily imparts a dualistic structure to our experience. But to conclude from this limiting condition that reality is one is simply another way of letting the limiting conditions of our experience determine how we imagine reality. For Goethe, there is no way out of dualism within representation. Idealist or positive doctrines of monism thus flirt with a kind of *Jenseitsphantasie* that can too easily lead to frustration or exhaustion with quotidian symbolic exchange. And yet the image and idea of the One is a central and indispensable tool in the symbolic repertoire of Goethe's poetry, which emerges repeatedly as one of two, affectively opposed figures of the sublime: as the telos of idealism, on the one, and as a figure of the return of the repressed, on the other. Structurally speaking, however, the figures appear in the same place.

At least since Blumenbach's *Über den Bildungstrieb* (1781), it had become appealing to conceptualize life in terms of an indeterminate immanent force or striving: the notion of drive that would achieve a more systematic philosophical elaboration through Fichte. In *Meister*, this drive is extracted from the protagonist's inner world (in *Faust*, it manifests primarily in asides and in dialogue with Mephisto) and woven into the narrative space, or line, through which Wilhelm moves. The first image in which this externalization of striving—which characterizes the novel as a whole—is represented, is provided by Saint Joseph the 2nd, the first character Wilhelm meets in the *Wanderjahre*. More precisely, it is Saint Joseph's pack-ass that serves as an image of how the drive can be represented in an external but still integral relation to the subject:

Und so erhalten wir mit freundlicher Gewohnheit den äußern Schein, zu dem wir zufällig gelangt und der so gut zu unserm Innern paßt: denn ob wir gleich alle Fußgänger und rüstige Träger sind, so bleibt das lastbare Tier doch immer in unserer Gesellschaft, um eine oder die andere Bürde fortzubringen, wenn uns ein Geschäft oder Besuch durch diese Berge und Thäler nötigt.²⁵⁷

The line of the *Wanderjahre* takes over the role of representing the striving which in *Faust* is an internal engine. The upward-downward-driven sublime striving of *Faust* is in the *Wanderjahre* countered by a flattened, successive, horizontal spatialization. Whereas the Faustian sublime is worked out in a metaphorically vertical space that stretches from low to high as from heaven to hell, the sublime of *Meister* is, in a double sense, only ever *Mittel*. This flattening of the sublime architecture to conform with the possibilities of prose narrative is announced early in the book by Joseph the 2nd's parable of carpentering the throne of Herod:

Dem heiligen Joseph war nichts Geringeres aufgetragen, als einen Thron für den König Herodes zu machen. Zwischen zwei gegebenen Säulen soll der Prachtsitz aufgeführt werden. Joseph nimmt sorgfältig das Maß von Breite und Höhe arbeitet einen köstlichen Königsthron. Aber wie erstaunt ist er, wie verlegen, als er den Prachtsessel herbeischafft: er findet sich zu hoch und nicht breit genug. Mit König Herodes war, wie bekannt, nicht zu spaßen; der fromme Zimmermeister ist in der größten Verlegenheit. Das Christkind, gewohnt, ihn überallhin zu begleiten,

²⁵⁷WA I/24, 35-6.

ihm in kindlich demütigem Spiel die Werkzeuge nachzutragen, bemerkt seine Not und ist gleich mit Rat und Tat bei der Hand. Was Wunderkind verlangt vom Pflegevater, er solle den Thron an der einen Seite fassen; es greift in die andere Seite des Schnitzwerks, und beide fangen an zu ziehen. Sehr leicht und bequem, als wär er von Leder, zieht sich der Thron in die Breite, verliert verhältnismäßig an der Höhe und paßt ganz vortrefflich an Ort und Stelle, zum größten Troste des beruhigten Meisters und zur vollkommenen Zufriedenheit des Königs.²⁵⁸

Like *Faust*, *Meister* interrogates the stakes of mediation. But in doing so within narrative prose, *Meister* opens itself to a different range of critical engagements. Most significantly, it allows Goethe freedom to experiment with the narrative evocation of space in a more relaxed and reflective diction than is impossible under the metric compulsion of verse and the imperative of lyrical density. Although Wilhelm is, like Faust, self-sworn to incessant, restless motion, ambivalence towards the heights of sublime agonism can be rendered more thoughtfully, in more and finer degrees of difference. Wilhelm and the narrator can thus speak in a benevolently admonishing way of the steep, rugged mountains through which Wilhelm is consensually wandering at the beginning of the novel, referring to them as "dieses unwirthbare Gebirg," (7) "diesen unfruchtbaren Mooswäldern," (14) "dieser Bergöde," (16) and (to Jarno) "deine starren Felsen," (45) in a more diffuse and critical manner than Faust's gruff and direct complaints about "diesem Bücherhauf, / Den Würmer nagen, Staub bedeckt, / Den, bis an's hohe Gewölb' hinauf, / Ein angeraucht Papier umsteckt." (402-5) The only aspect of the heights to which Wilhelm ascribes life and fertility are the "fruchtbaren Abhängen" of the "Berghöhen des untern Landes." (18) It is thus Felix's poor playmate Fitz, who is dependent on the villagers' alms, and "der sich eben brauchen und mißbrauchen ließ, wie es gerade das Spiel mit sich brachte," (38) who has to

²⁵⁸WA I/24, 22-3.

lead the wanderers to Wilhelm's friend Montan/Jarno,²⁵⁹ where they find him on his perch atop the "ältesten Gebirge, auf dem frühesten Gestein dieser Welt" (42).

In this way, Goethe articulates the problem of the sublime at the level of language and social stratification. As Tsang Lap-Chuen has argued, the most basic and universally accepted feature of the experience of the sublime is that it is a limit experience.²⁶⁰ The problem of the sublime arises wherever subjects attempt to move from one language to another. In this sense, the sublime often appears as a gatekeeper between symbolic worlds or as a mechanism of social control. The sublime can deny the subject entry to the world to which she desires access or afford her access to it, even while seeming to function as an imperative to cross. But none of these appearances is wholly independent of the subject's approach to the sublime. The aim of Goethe's articulation of the sublime in the *Wanderjahre* is to delay this approach in a way that allows the subject to reflect on the form of the imperative and on the stakes of heeding it. We have already seen Wilhelm's apprehension about life on the cliffs—his sense that the aesthetically negotiated life, experienced always at a circumspect distance to itself, suffers from a poverty of immediacy. But Joseph the 2nd, who is already at home in the mountains, and who can coherently articulate the formative role aesthetic representations have played in his life, sees things differently. For him, the aesthetic mediation of life does not merely create distance between and within individuals, it affords the subject ("wenn man will") greater control over managing distance to others while also uniting practitioners in the "gemeinsamen Treiben" of a second human nature.

Überhaupt hat das Gebirgsleben etwas Menschlicheres als das Leben auf dem flachen Lande. Die Bewohner sind einander näher und, wenn man will, auch ferner; die Bedürfnisse geringer, aber dringender. Der Mensch ist mehr auf sich gestellt, seinen Händen, seinen Füßen muß er vertrauen lernen. Der Arbeiter, der

²⁵⁹Jarno's character as a mentor or mediator of the sublime to Wilhelm was established at least since he introduced Wilhelm to Shakespeare in the *Lehrjahre*.

²⁶⁰See Lap-Chuen.

Bote, der Lastträger, alle vereinigen sich in einer Person; auch steht jeder dem andern näher, begegnet ihm öfter und lebt mit ihm in einem gemeinsamen Treiben.²⁶¹

And yet: in these mountains littered with *Katzengold*, no form of symbolic mediation is immune to the charge of dissimulation or theft. The flows of language, images and capital that break down existing forms of sociality and make new ones possible are, like weather, aspects of a faceless and indifferent god. To the extent that subjective freedom is possible, it requires coming to terms with the manifestations of these forces as both internal and external to the self. Yet there is no neutral space where such reflection can take place. As revealed already in the *Lehrjahre*: practice makes the subject increasingly dependent upon aesthetic mediation as the only means of liberating herself from the same. The novelistic situation is one of constant crisis, in which every appearance of sublimity is attended by the suspicion that it will turn out to have been false *Katzengold* which has led the subject—for better or for worse—away from something more real. "Wilhelm folgte mit einiger Beschwerlichkeit, ja Gefahr: denn wer zuerst einen Felsen hinaufsteigt, geht immer sicherer, weil er sich die Gelegenheit aussucht; einer, der nachfolgt, sieht nur, wohin jener gelangt ist, aber nicht wie."²⁶² When Wilhelm, Felix and Fitz arrive at Montan/Jarno's summit, the latter launches straight away into an apologia of the sublime as the only authentic mode of aesthetic enjoyment:

Es ist Jarno! rief Felix seinem Vater entgegen, und Jarno trat sogleich an eine schroffe Stelle, reichte seinem Freunde die Hand und zog ihn aufwärts. Sie umarmten und bewillkomnten sich in der freien Himmelsluft mit Entzücken.

Kaum aber hatten sie sich losgelassen, als Wilhelmen ein Schwindel überfiel, nicht sowohl um seinetwillen, als weil er die Kinder über dem ungeheuren Abgrunde hängen sah. Jarno bemerkte es und hieß alle sogleich niedersitzen. Es ist nichts natürlicher, sagte er, als daß uns vor einem großen Anblick schwindelt, vor dem wir uns unerwartet befinden, um zugleich unsere Kleinheit und unsere

²⁶¹WA I/24, 20.

²⁶²WA I/24, 41.

Größe zu fühlen. Aber es ist ja überhaupt kein echter Genuß als da, wo man erst schwindeln muß.²⁶³

5.6 Sublime Enjoyment

Jarno's advocacy of the sublime de-realizes the physical, embodied immediacy of mutual affection while locating authentic enjoyment in a mode of aestheticization born of and beholden to crisis. As a way of learning to come to terms with and enjoy crisis, it leads to the reproduction and intensification of crisis as a means of sustaining and repeating the form of enjoyment that corresponds to it. The aesthetics of the sublime, through encouraging the independent confrontation of fear and danger—in leading the children to the precipice—, put its *Nachwuchs* in unnecessary physical danger so that its advocates can continue enjoying the "herrliche" feeling of "unsere Kleinheit und unsere Größe," the difference between the ego's nullity and reemergence, the "Mittelzustand zwischen Verzweiflung und Vergötterung."²⁶⁴

But Jarno's response in this moment of speculative overextension is to use what power he has to command "alle sogleich niedersitzen"; he encourages the dizzy to ground themselves. Perhaps, after all, Jarno has done little more to encourage his friends to follow him than that he has left something behind: a box of "schöne, in die Augen fallende" stones that remained as a surplus of his own geological preoccupation. "Der kleine Fitz sagte gestern, er wolle den Herrn wohl aufspüren, der schöne Steine bei sich habe und sich auch gut darauf verstünde," Felix had informed his father.²⁶⁵ Following Jarno's trace may involve exposing oneself to *Schwindel*—but does that make Jarno a swindler? Or is the swindle in the nature of language itself?

²⁶³WA I/24, 41-2.

²⁶⁴WA I/24, 44.

²⁶⁵WA I/24, 39.

Sind denn das da unten die großen Berge, über die wir gestiegen sind? fragte Felix. Wie klein sehen sie aus! Und hier, fuhr er fort, indem er ein Stückchen Stein vom Gipfel loslöste, ist ja schon das Katzengold wieder; das ist ja wohl überall? --- Es ist weit und breit, versetzte Jarno; und da du nach solchen Dingen fragst, so merke dir, daß du gegenwärtig auf dem ältesten Gebirge, auf dem frühesten Gestein dieser Welt sitztest. --- Ist denn die Welt nicht auf einmal gemacht? fragte Felix. --- Schwerlich, versetzte Montan; gut Ding will Weile haben. --- Da unten ist also wieder anderes Gestein, sagte Felix, und dort wieder anderes, und immer wieder anderes! indem er von den nächsten Bergen auf die entfernteren und so in die Ebene hinab wies.²⁶⁶

In the speech of Jarno, Goethe performs the saturation and exhaustion of the aesthetic sublime by exposing the limits of linguistic self-referentiality. When Jarno speaks of the "Pflicht, ihnen nur dasjenige zu sagen, was sie aufnehmen können, [...] ihnen eine Benennung, eine Bezeichnung zu überliefern, ist das Beste, was man tun kann. Sie fragen ohnehin früh genug nach den Ursachen,"²⁶⁷ his point is that, in interrogating the causes of language as world-reference,—in asking how and why language works in this way—the subject approaches the self-referentiality of language on her own terms. Jarno shows that, because the approach to the self-referentiality of language is always a personal one, and that because it always ends and recommences where it started (that is, in the mode of world-reference), the first and most fundamental step of pedagogy involves helping learners acquire the tools to name those phenomena which command their attention. A purely self-referential language is impossible, because it can only appear in the space vacated by its other: the equally impossible language of pure correspondence. Language includes both moments of self-referentiality and moments of world-reference, and each is dependent on the other for language to work.

Jarno has come to rely on linguistic self-referentiality as a personal form of reclusive ascetic enjoyment. In treating the geological formations as a language of nature which he can read in isolation, he has no need to fear "daß ein scharfer Criticus kommt und mir versichert, das alles

²⁶⁶WA I/24, 42.

²⁶⁷WA I/24, 43.

sei nur untergeschoben."²⁶⁸ In an imagined one-suitor world, Jarno can let his interpretive ego range in a kind of scholastic ideality, but only so long as this solitude is maintained: "Und doch wird man auch hier deine Lesarten streitig machen," Wilhelm quips, and his objection is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Jarno's final response, which brings the game to an end, can do so only by re-injecting his self-referentiality with a *Bezeichnung* of that which lies outside of language, and which is, because it is outside, legible within language only as its cause and as the cause of its failure. "Eben deswegen [...] red ich mit niemanden darüber und mag auch mit dir, eben weil ich dich liebe, das schlechte Zeug von öden Worten nicht weiter wechseln und betrieglich austauschen." It is only in naming its own cause that language can reach the end of its self-referential agon and dissolve, to begin the process of naming over anew.

But why does Jarno prefer the heights to the flatlands? Why does he prefer the distance of his lonely, "starren Felsen" to the vibrant immediacy of life in the valleys below, which Wilhelm finds so fascinating?

Warum denn aber, fiel Wilhelm ein, gerade dieses Allerseltsamste, diese einsamste aller Neigungen? --- Eben deshalb, rief Jarno, weil sie einsiedlerisch ist. Die Menschen wollt' ich meiden. Ihnen ist nicht zu helfen, und sie hindern uns, daß man sich selbst hilft. Sind sie glücklich, so soll man sie in ihren Albernheiten gewähren lassen; sind sie unglücklich, so soll man sie retten, ohne diese Albernheiten anzutasten; und niemand fragt jemals, ob du glücklich oder unglücklich bist. --- Es steht noch nicht so ganz schlimm mit ihnen, versetzte Wilhelm lächelnd. --- Ich will dir dein Glück nicht absprechen, sagte Jarno.²⁶⁹

Jarno's answer is that his misanthropy is a form of mutual benevolence, to himself and to the other people whom he can't help. For Jarno, there is no sense in disabusing people of their illusions, because people's happiness and will to live are dependent upon illusions. Disillusionment will come of its own, with time, and there is no sense in hastening it through

²⁶⁸WA I/24, 46.

²⁶⁹WA I/24, 44-5.

zealous interventions. The longer people "in ihren Albernheiten gewähren," the more time they have to develop new illusions to take over from the old ones that are no longer working. In this sense, Jarno's position on the precarious life of the imagination is analogous to the familiar classicist position which prefers gradual, immanent evolution to violent revolution: one ought not to do away with something that serves an essential function before its replacement is ready.

Loneliness is a fate to which Jarno has resigned himself. His answer to Wilhelm is historical: "Die Menschen wollt' ich meiden," and in so answering he reveals how personal the path to his chosen *Neigungen* has been. "Unterhaltender scheinen [die Menschen] mir doch", versetzte Wilhelm, "als deine starren Felsen." - "Keineswegs", versetzte Jarno, "denn diese sind wenigstens nicht zu begreifen."²⁷⁰ Again, Jarno answers in the negative, that what draws him to the heights is not any particular quality save for that of not being people. But if the inanimate retains for him a mystery and a promise which his quest for knowledge has emptied from the realm of animate human life, it is because he has come, over time, to resemble his inanimate interlocutor in its very inanimateness: "Steine sind stumme Lehrer." Jarno's discomfort around people is an effect of self-transparency, and through it, the illusion of the transparency of others. Jarno has gained a self-knowledge which gives him power over others, but at the cost of an ambivalent but necessary loneliness, an inability to relate to others about life.

5.7 Happiness

We saw how Lucidor, like Werther, was caught in a situation in which his desire conflicted with itself. The goal which was long ago set for him had since become his own goal, and he is wary of giving it up. But at the same time, he believed that in order to achieve it, he would have to give

²⁷⁰WA I/24, 45.

up his desire for Lucinde. He thus found himself torn between two different desires, each of which seemed to rule out the possibility of attaining the other.

Why did Lucidor think he could only have it one way or the other? What drove him into the mechanistic logic of the either/or? Simply put, he was afraid of contradicting his father's wish. When Goethe has the narrator of "Wer ist der Verräter?" call Lucidor "zu ungeduldig brav," he is pointing to his tendency to overemphasize the letter of the law ("You will marry Julie and become the Oberamtmann's successor") at the expense of the spirit of the law (i.e., the spirit of friendship between the Professor and the Oberamtmann, who think something like "We will see our children married, which will secure their happiness and material well-being while also putting our own minds at ease, etc."). Lucidor clings obediently (that is to say, pedantically) to the letter of the law, for he has been promised that submission to it would one lead to his liberation and empowerment.

Lucidor wants power, but he has begun to turn the tool that was supposed to lead to his empowerment against himself: the law has been revealed in its double-aspect, and now he is using it against himself as a tool of self-oppression. Lucidor is halted at the juncture between attaining power's tools and making use of them—as Kant had put it in his definition of Enlightenment—, "ohne Leitung eines anderen." When he finally arrives at the "Schwelle des Saals" in which all the characters, including his father and the Oberamtmann, Julie and Lucinde, are assembled and waiting for him,

fühlte sich Lucidor abermals als Beauftragten, und gestählt von seiner ganzen Rechtswissenschaft, rief er sich jene schöne Maxime zu seinen eignen Gunsten heran: Wir sollen anvertraute Geschäfte der Fremden wie unsere eigenen behandeln, warum nicht die unsrigen in eben dem Sinne? --- In Geschäftsvorträgen wohl geübt, durchlief er schnell, was er zu sagen habe. Indessen schien die Gesellschaft, in einen förmlichen Halbzirkel gebildet, ihn zu

überflügeln. Den Inhalt seines Vortrags kannte er wohl, den Anfang konnte er nicht finden.²⁷¹

Here Lucidor asks himself the question: why don't I fight for myself the way I would fight for others who have entrusted me with their fate? Why don't I take my fortune into my own hands?

This is also the question to which Goethe's poem *Erinnerung* responds:

Willst du immer weiter schweifen?

Sieh, das Gute liegt so nah.

Lerne nur das Glück ergreifen,

Denn das Glück ist immer da.²⁷²

But what makes the poem both strangely hermetic, on the one hand, and, on the other, tautologically simple, is its imperative mood: it answers the question by saying: "just do it," which is, of course, no answer at all. This refusal to give an answer other than with an imperative is, however, crucial. The imperative tautology of the poem in fact reflects a structural feature of the process Goethe is trying to represent: the collusion between subjective synthesis and external contingency such as that which is experienced in the moment of artistic instantiation. But the paradigm of artistic creation and the theory of genius are raised to the level of power as such, as is manifested both in beginning to speak for oneself and in Eros. Lucidor is standing at the threshold of power, but he cannot take the last step towards becoming his own advocate; cannot find the words to transform his sense experience into an intersubjective phenomenon and bring it before the tribunal. And yet doing just this is written into "jene schöne Maxime" as a condition of being able to effectively advocate for others.

²⁷¹WA I/24, 159-60.

²⁷²WA I/1, 67.

According to the poem, the good is always near or obvious (in the sense of *naheliegend*), and becoming an advocate of it means taking hold of contingency. The problem of doing so is captured in the verb *ergreifen*: it is transitive, but grasping its (non-)object (*Glück*) in fact entails a suspension of the object relation. So long as *das Gute* and *Glück* are mistaken for objects (such as might be imagined to preexist subjective synthesis), the subject remains outside of them and can only experience them as the negation of his own subjectivity, as the crushing force that reduces him to an object as well. But the fortune that is "always" there is nothing other than the beautiful appearance of necessity, that is: contingency raised to the level of necessity in a conscious act of self-determination.

For Goethe, the experience of Eros is one in which divinity is felt at its most palpable. It is a moment in which the transcendent and the immanent pass into one another, in which the eternal is given finite expression and the finite becomes conscious of itself as part of the eternal. It involves the same psychotic collusion of subjective synthesis and external contingency—through which the contingent is transformed into the necessary—which structures the experience of learning to speak for oneself. Just as falling in love involves a mutual submission to, and belated redemption of, complementary forms of madness, all creativity involves speaking through the psychotic rifts that seem to separate and exclude the individual from the external world. Lucidor's fear of paternal censure prohibited him from opening up his personal madness to the possibility of intersubjective corroboration. The mechanistic either/or logic of paternal authority, which, we have seen, is a subreptive effect of the illusion of a World authored by a senseless Creator, prevented the emergence of what everyone, save for Lucidor's absent father, saw as necessary.

In his Sonnet 56, Walter Benjamin makes a similar point, but in a way that makes more explicit the relationship between language, erotic submission, and the de-objectivization of the world:

Wenn ich ein Lied beginne
 Und es hält ein,
 Werd ich deiner inne,
 Es ist ein Schein.

So wollte dich die Minne
 Gering und klein
 Auf daß ich dich gewinne
 Mit Einsamsein.

Drum bist du mir entglitten
 Bis ich erfuhr
 Nur fehlerlosen Bitten

Verrät Natur
 Und nur entrückten Tritten
 Die selige Spur.²⁷³

Like Lucidor, the lyrical *I* of Benjamin's sonnet cannot believe that what he imagines to be his is real (*Es ist ein Schein*). In the second stanza, the *I* explains how the appearance of the beloved other as disappearing *Schein* is an effect of the passionate mode of romantic desire (for which Benjamin makes use of its medieval form, *Minne*) which transform the beloved into a "gering

²⁷³Benjamin VII/1, 56.

und klein" object which can only be won through obedience to an ideological imperative of self-isolation (from which, as we saw, follows the becoming object of the subject). As in *Minnesang*, this amounts to a reduction of poetry to a hopeless pleading within a genre in which failure is structurally predetermined. In the third stanza, the *I* explains that this self-isolation and reduction of the beloved to an object is the cause of the receding of the beloved, of her slipping away (*Drum bist du mir entglitten*).

In the courtroom in which Lucidor remembered the task for which he had been spending his life preparing, and saw the chair in which he was supposed to one day sit, and thought of the sphere of activity that would be his, he realized that it would be difficult for him to give all this up. This was also the moment "indem die Gestalt Lucidens zu gleicher Zeit sich von ihm zu entfernen schien."²⁷⁴ Because all the progress Lucidor has experienced towards his career goals has taken the form of submission to paternal authority, insofar as it seems to involve a transgression of paternal authority, Lucidor cannot think the possibility of uniting his own happiness with further progress towards his goal. But whereas Lucidor therefore "fand sich gefangen," and was immobilized by that authority, the *I* of Benjamin's sonnet experiences a dissolution of the objectified figure of his beloved and, concomitant with it, nature's revelation of what he calls "die selige Spur." This is the same collusion of subjective synthesis and external contingency which is associated with artistic instantiation and which Goethe refers to in the poem *Erinnerung* as "das Glück ergreifen." Everything that exists is experienceable as *Schein*, whether it is real or not. But just as the *Schein* of the unreal is often mistaken for reality, that which is real is often mistaken for mere *Schein*. Both Benjamin's and Goethe's poems attempt to describe how that which is real, but at risk of being taken for mere *Schein*, and therefore unrealized, is brought into the world to have its reality corroborated and confirmed. In both poems this involves a relaxing

²⁷⁴WA I/24, 158.

of reductive, object-oriented perception and an opening up of the self to "das Gute" that is "nah" and the "Glück" that is "da." In this way, both poems aim to represent the other end of aesthetic practice—that is, the one opposite the "asylum" of the sublime from which we set out at the beginning of this chapter—as the opening of the self to emerging realities.

5.8 Conclusion

In this final chapter I have attempted to show one more instance of how Goethe uses the aesthetics of the sublime to mediate between two counterposed experiences of modernity: that of the joy of creating, and that of exclusion from participation in the production of reality. Knowledge appears to Goethe as one of the greatest obstacles to this mediation. For Goethe, knowledge is the *difference* between these two experiences. It is what separates them—what alienates the subjectivity quartered at one pole from the subjectivity quartered at the other—and simultaneously, it is the name of the process by which the distance between them is overcome. In the sublime we experience a particular instance of the limits of this knowledge, when *Wollen/Sollen* meets its material condition in the capacity for *Vollbringen*.

I have tried to show that Goethe's sublime self-consciously recovers the displaced meaning of *das Erhabene* as social affect. Goethe was thus able to critically intervene in the invention of an autonomous "aesthetic" sphere. The senseless chaos of *bellum omnium contra omnes* reemerges in this new, autonomous sphere of "taste" as a world of objects related to one another by their relative "beauty" or "sublimity." The aesthetic cannot be autonomous because it is, in its very emergence, legible as a move to repress knowledge about social reality that would otherwise paralyze the subject.

Goethe's presentation of this problem is thoroughly inflected by his understanding of the parallelism of knowledge and life, as well as by his pessimistic view of the developmental trajectories of technology and society in modernity. Goethe celebrates repression and forgetting in moments where it serves a life-affirming function for the individual, where it is the only way to bring the "sickness" of reflection to an end. However technology and society develop, individuals have to negotiate a relationship to them. The light of Goethe's sublime is that of the bright and dark sides of this conundrum dynamically interpenetrating with the force of truth. It settles nothing, justifies nothing.

But Goethe was equally concerned with the leveling and de-realizing effects of conformism, both for society and for the individuals who must stifle, repress or shed their individuality in order to participate. The development of knowledge passes always through the expression of individuality. Whatever drives knowledge, its development has always been tied to the fates of particular human individuals. Conformism hinders the development of knowledge through masking the very difference which knowledge represents (that is, the difference between exclusion and participation). In modernity, knowledge is always in danger of being reduced to a pluralism of assertions of individuality. To conform means to agree to do nothing but strategically assert one's individuality, while to develop individuality is to reach for the forbidden fruit. This is what Samuel Beckett had in mind when he described the humanities of his day as a world "politely turning / From the loutishness of learning."²⁷⁵ It is as apt a representation as any of the hydra against which Goethe lived and wrote.

²⁷⁵Beckett's poem "Gnome," which sums up *Wilhelm Meister*, reads "Spend the years of learning squandering / Courage for the years of wandering / Through a world politely turning / From the loutishness of learning."

Abbreviations

For quotations from Goethe, I refer whenever possible to volume and page numbers from the *Weimarer Ausgabe* (WA). When quoting from *Faust*, I refer parenthetically to line numbers as they appear in volume 1 of *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: Faust*. Ed. Albrecht Schöne. Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 2003.

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FA: Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. *Sämtliche Werke*. [Frankfurter Ausgabe]. Ed. Dieter Borchmeyer. Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985ff.

KFSA: Schlegel, Friedrich. *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*. Ed. Ernst Behler. München: F. Schöningh, 1958ff.

SW: Herder, Johann Gottfried. *Sämtliche Werke*. Hrsg. von Bernhard Suphan. Berlin: Weidmann, 1877.

WA: Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. *Goethes Werke*. [Weimarer Ausgabe]. Hrsg. im Auftrage der Großherzogin Sophie von Sachsen. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1887-1919.

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