

Goethe's Elective Affinities

Dedicated to Julia Cohn

I

Whoever chooses blindly is struck in the eyes

By the smoke of sacrifice. —Klopstock

The writings we have on works of literature suggest that the minuteness of detail in such studies be reckoned more to the account of the interests of philology than of critique. The following exposition of *Elective Affinities* [*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*], which also goes into detail, could therefore easily prove misleading about the intention with which it is being presented. It could appear to be commentary; in fact, it is meant as critique. Critique seeks the truth content of a work of art; commentary, its material content. The relation between the two is determined by that basic law of literature according to which the more significant the work, the more inconspicuously and intimately its truth content is bound up with its material content. If, therefore, the works that prove enduring are precisely those whose truth is most deeply sunken in their material content, then, in the course of this duration, the concrete realities rise up before the eyes of the beholder all the more distinctly the more they die out in the world. With this, however, to judge by appearances, the material content and the truth content, united at the beginning of a work's history, set themselves apart from each other in the course of its duration, because the truth content always remains to the same extent hidden as the material content comes to the fore. More and more, therefore, the interpretation of what is striking and curious—that is, the material content—becomes a prerequisite for any later critic. One may

compare him to a paleographer in front of a parchment whose faded text is covered by the lineaments of a more powerful script which refers to that text. As the paleographer would have to begin by reading the latter script, the critic would have to begin with commentary. And with one stroke, an invaluable criterion of judgment springs out for him; only now can he raise the basic critical question of whether the semblance/luster [*Schein*]¹ of the truth content is due to the material content, or the life of the material content to the truth content. For as they set themselves apart from each other in the work, they decide on its immortality. In this sense the history of works prepares for their critique, and thus historical distance increases their power. If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as a burning funeral pyre, then the commentator stands before it like a chemist, the critic like an alchemist. Whereas, for the former, wood and ash remain the sole objects of his analysis, for the latter only the flame itself preserves an enigma: that of what is alive. Thus, the critic inquires into the truth, whose living flame continues to burn over the heavy logs of what is past and the light ashes of what has been experienced.

Not the existence but for the most part the meaning of the concrete realities in the work will no doubt be hidden from the poet and the public of his time. But because what is eternal in the work stands out only against the ground of those realities, every contemporary critique, however eminent, comprehends in the work more the moving truth than the resting truth, more the temporal effect than the eternal being. Yet however valuable concrete realities may be for the interpretation of the work, it hardly needs to be said that the production of a Goethe cannot be viewed in the same way as that of a Pindar. On the contrary, there was surely never a time before Goethe's when the thought was more foreign that the most essential contents of existence are capable of stamping their imprint on the world of things, indeed that without such imprinting they are incapable of fulfilling themselves. Kant's critical work and Basedow's *Treatise on the Elements*²—the one dedicated to the meaning and the other to the perception of the experience of their times—testify in very different yet equally conclusive ways to the poverty of their material contents. In this crucial feature of the German if not of the entire European Enlightenment, an indispensable precondition of Kant's lifework, on the one hand, and of Goethe's productivity, on the other, can be glimpsed. For at the exact moment when Kant's work was completed and a map through the bare woods of reality was sketched, the Goethean quest for the seeds of eternal growth began. There came that direction of classicism which sought to grasp not so much the ethical and historical as the mythic and philological. Its thought did not bear on the evolving ideas but on the formed contents preserved in life and language. After Herder and Schiller, it was Goethe and Wilhelm von Humboldt who took the lead.³ If the renewed material content available in the

literary works of Goethe's old age escaped his contemporaries whenever it did not call attention to itself, as in the *Divan*, this stemmed from the fact that, utterly unlike the corresponding phenomenon in the life of antiquity, the very search for such a thing was foreign to them.

How clearly the most sublime spirits of the Enlightenment had a premonition of the content [*Gehalt*] or an insight into the matter [*Sache*], yet how incapable even they were of raising themselves to the perception of its material content [*Sachgehalt*], becomes compellingly clear with regard to marriage. It is marriage, as one of the most rigorous and objective articulations of the content of human life, that in Goethe's *Elective Affinities* attests, also for the first time, to the author's new meditation, turned toward the synthetic perception of the material contents. Kant's definition of marriage in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, which is now and again remembered solely as an example of a rigoristic stereotype or a curiosity of his senile late period, is the most sublime product of a *ratio* that, incorruptibly true to itself, penetrates infinitely deeper into the facts of the matter than sentimental ratiocination. Of course the material content itself, which yields only to philosophical perception—or, more precisely, to philosophical experience—remains inaccessible to both, but whereas the latter leads into the abyss, the former attains the very ground where true knowledge is formed. Accordingly it defines marriage as

the union of two persons of different sexes for the purpose of lifelong mutual possession of their sexual organs. The goal of begetting and rearing children may be a goal of nature for which the inclination of the sexes to one another was implanted; but it is not requisite for human beings who marry to make this their end in order for their union to be compatible with rights, for otherwise the marriage would dissolve of its own accord when procreation ceases.

Of course, the philosopher made his gravest mistake when he supposed that from his definition of the nature of marriage, he could deduce its moral possibility, indeed its moral necessity, and in this way confirm its juridical reality. From the objective nature of marriage, one could obviously deduce only its depravity—and in Kant's case this is what it willy-nilly amounts to. That, however, is precisely the crucial point: its content can never be deduced from the real matter [*Sache*] but instead must be grasped as the seal which presents this matter. Just as the form of a seal cannot be deduced from the material of the wax or from the purpose of the fastening or even from the signet (in which one finds concave what in the seal is convex), and just as it can be grasped only by someone who has had the experience of sealing and becomes evident only to the person who knows the name that the initials merely indicate, so the content of the matter cannot be deduced by means of insight into its constitution or through an exploration of its

intended use or even from a premonition of its content; rather, it is graspable only in the philosophical experience of its divine imprint, evident only to the blissful vision of the divine name. In this way the achieved insight into the material content of subsisting things finally coincides with insight into their truth content. The truth content emerges as that of the material content. Nonetheless, the distinction between them—and with it the distinction between the commentary and the critique of the works—is not futile, insofar as the striving for immediacy is nowhere more misguided than here, where the study of the matter and its intended use, like the intuition of its content, must precede each and every experience. In such a materially real determination of marriage, Kant's thesis is perfect and, in the consciousness of its cluelessness, sublime. Or, amused by his theses, do we forget what precedes them? The beginning of that paragraph reads:

Sexual commerce (*commerdum sexuelle*) is the reciprocal use that one human being makes of the sexual organs and sexual capacities of another (*usus membrorum et facultatum sexualium alterius*). This is either a natural use (by which procreation of a being of the same kind is possible) or an unnatural use, and this unnatural use takes place either with a person of the same sex or with an animal of a nonhuman species.

Thus Kant. If Mozart's *The Magic Flute* is put alongside this passage from *The Metaphysics of Morals*, they would seem to represent the most extreme and at the same time most profound views of marriage which the age possessed. For to the extent that this is possible in opera, *The Magic Flute* takes precisely conjugal love as its theme. This is something which even Cohen, in whose late study of Mozart's librettos the two works meet in so dignified a spirit, does not really seem to have recognized.⁴ The subject of the opera is not so much the desires of the lovers as the steadfastness of husband and wife. They must go through fire and water not only to win each other but to remain united forever. Here, however much the spirit of freemasonry had to dissolve all material bonds, the intuition into the content has found its purest expression in the feeling of fidelity.

Is Goethe in *Elective Affinities* really closer than Kant or Mozart to the material content of marriage? One would have to deny this roundly if, in the wake of all the literary scholarship on Goethe, one were seriously determined to take Mittler's words on this subject as the writer's own.⁵ Nothing authorizes this assumption; but it is only too understandable. After all, the vertiginous gaze looked for support in this world, which sinks away as if circling in a whirlpool. There were only the words of the grim blusterer, which readers were glad to be able to take just as they found them.

"Anyone who attacks the state of marriage," Mittler cried, "who undermines this foundation of all moral society by word or deed, will have to reckon with me; or else, if I cannot better him, I will have nothing to do with him. Marriage

is both the base and the pinnacle of culture. It makes barbarians tame, and it gives the most cultivated of people an opportunity to demonstrate their gentleness. It must be indissoluble; it brings so much luck that individual misfortunes cannot be weighed against it. And why speak of misfortune? Misfortune is really impatience that comes over people from time to time, and then they like to see themselves as unlucky. If you let the moment pass, you will think yourself fortunate that something that has stood the test of time still exists. There is no sufficient reason for separation. The human condition is so highly charged with joy and sorrow that one cannot calculate what two spouses owe each other. It is an infinite debt that can be paid only in eternity. It may be unpleasant at times—I can well believe it—but that is right and proper. Are we not also married to our conscience, which we would often like to get rid of, since it is more disagreeable than any man or woman could ever be?"⁶

Here, even those who did not notice the cloven foot of that strict moralist would have to reflect that it did not occur even to Goethe, who often proved to have few enough scruples when it came to rebuking dubious persons, to resort to glossing Mittler's words. On the contrary, it is highly significant that the man who expounds a philosophy of marriage is himself unmarried and appears as the lowest-ranking of all the men of his circle. Whenever, on important occasions, Mittler gives his tongue free rein, his words are out of place, whether at the baptism of the newborn or in the last moments that Otilie spends with her friends. And even if the tastelessness of his words is here perceptible enough in their effects, Goethe still concluded after Mittler's famous apology for marriage: "He would have gone on speaking in this forceful way for a long time." [R138]. Such talk can indeed be indefinitely pursued—talk which, in Kant's words, is a "disgusting mishmash," "patched together" out of baseless humanitarian maxims and muddy, delusive juridical instincts. The uncleanness of it—that indifference to truth in the life of husband and wife—should escape no one. Everything comes down to the claims of the statute. Yet in truth, marriage is never justified in law (that is, as an institution) but is justified solely as an expression of continuance in love, which by nature seeks this expression sooner in death than in life. For the writer, however, an imprint of the juridical norm in this work was indispensable. After all, he did not want, like Mittler, to establish a foundation for marriage but wished, rather, to show the forces that arise from its decay. Yet these are surely the mythic powers of the law, and in them marriage is only the execution of a decline that it does not decree. For its dissolution is pernicious only because it is not the highest powers that produce it. And solely in this disaster-vexed-into-life lies the ineluctable horror of the proceedings. With this, however, Goethe in fact touched on the material content of marriage. For even if he was not so minded to show this in an undistorted way, his insight into the declining relationship remains powerful enough. In its decline it becomes, for the first time, the juridical

one that Mittler holds it up to be. Yet it never occurred to Goethe, even if he never really did obtain pure insight into the moral constitution of this bond, to want to justify marriage by matrimonial law. For him, the morality of marriage was least free of doubt at its deepest and most secret level. Its opposite, which he wishes to portray through the conduct of the count and the baroness, is not so much immorality as nullity. This is shown precisely by the fact that they are conscious neither of the moral character of their present relationship nor of the juridical character of the ones they have abandoned.—The subject of *Elective Affinities* is not marriage. Nowhere in this work are its ethical powers to be found. From the outset, they are in the process of disappearing, like the beach under water at floodtide. Marriage here is not an ethical problem, yet neither is it a social problem. It is not a form of bourgeois conduct. In its dissolution, everything human turns into appearance, and the mythic alone remains as essence.

This is, of course, contradicted by a routine glance. According to it, no loftier spirituality is imaginable in a marriage than in one where even its disintegration is unable to detract from the customary behavior of those affected. But in the domain of civility, what is noble is bound to the relation of the person to his expression. Nobility is in question wherever the noble expression does not conform to the person. And this law—whose validity may not, of course, without gross error be described as unrestricted—extends beyond the domain of civility. If there are unquestionably areas of expression whose contents are valid regardless of who gives them a distinct stamp—if, indeed, these are the highest—the former binding condition nonetheless remains inviolable for the domain of freedom in the widest sense. To this domain belongs the individual imprint of propriety, the individual imprint of the spirit—everything that is called cultivation [*Bildung*]. This is manifested above all by persons who are on intimate terms. Does that manifestation truly conform to their situation? Less hesitation might produce freedom, less silence clarity, less leniency the decision. Thus, cultivation keeps its value only where it is free to manifest itself. This is clearly shown by the novel's plot, as well.

The principals, as cultivated human beings, are almost free of superstition. If now and again it comes out in Eduard, then it is at the outset merely in the more likeable form of his clinging to happy portents; only the more banal character of Mittler, despite his complacent behavior, shows traces of that truly superstitious fear of evil omens. He alone is reluctant to walk on cemetery ground as he would on any other ground—held back not by a pious reluctance but by a superstitious one—while to the friends it does not appear either scandalous to stroll there or forbidden to do as they please. Without scruple, indeed without consideration, they line up the gravestones along the church wall and leave the leveled ground, wound through by a footpath, for the minister to sow clover in. One cannot imagine a more conclusive liberation from tradition than that liberation from the graves of

the ancestors, which, in the sense not only of myth but of religion, provide a foundation for the ground under the feet of the living. Where does their freedom lead those who act thus? Far from opening up new perspectives for them, it blinds them to the reality that inhabits what they fear. And this because these perspectives are unsuited to them. Nothing but strict attachment to ritual—which may be called superstition only when, torn from its context, it survives in rudimentary fashion—can promise these human beings a stay against the nature in which they live. Charged, as only mythic nature is, with superhuman powers, it comes menacingly into play. Whose might, if not that of mythic nature, calls down the minister who cultivates his clover on the land of the dead? Who, if not it, sets the embellished scene in a pallid light? For such a light, in the more literal or more circumscribed sense, pervades the entire landscape, which nowhere appears in sunlight. And never, even when so much is said about the estate, is there a discussion of its crops or of any rural business that serves not ornament but sustenance. The sole allusion of this sort—the prospect of the vintage—leads away from the scene of the action to the estate of the baroness. All the more clearly does the magnetic power of the interior of the earth speak. Goethe said of it in his *Theory of Color* [*Die Farbenlehre*—possibly around the same time—that to the attentive spectator nature is "never dead or mute. It has even provided a confidant for the rigid body of earth, a metal whose least fragment tells us about what is taking place in the entire mass." Goethe's characters are in league with this power, and they are as pleased with themselves in playing with what lies below ground as in playing with what lies above. Yet what else, finally, are their inexhaustible provisions for its embellishment except a new backdrop for a tragic scene? Thus, a hidden power manifests itself ironically in the existence of the landed gentry.

Its expression is borne, as by the tellurian element, by watery expanses. Nowhere does the lake deny its unholy nature under the dead plane of the mirroring surface. An older work of criticism speaks revealingly of the "daemonically terrible fate that holds sway over the summer lake." Water as the chaotic element of life does not threaten here in desolate waves that sink a man; rather, it threatens in the enigmatic calm that lets him go to his ruin. To the extent that fate governs, the lovers go to their ruin. Where they spurn the blessing of firm ground, they succumb to the unfathomable, which in stagnant water appears as something primeval. One sees the old might of it literally conjure them. For at the end, that union of the waters, as they gradually destroy the firm land, results in the restoration of the mountain lake that used to be located in the region. In all this it is nature itself which, in the hands of human beings, grows superhumanly active. Indeed, even the wind, "which drives the canoe toward the plane trees," "rises up" (as the reporter of the *Church News* scornfully surmises) "probably by order of the stars."

Human beings must themselves manifest the violence of nature, for at no

point have they outgrown it. With respect to these characters, this fact constitutes the particular foundation of that more general understanding according to which the characters in a fiction can never be subject to ethical judgment. And, to be sure, not because such judgment, like that passed on human beings, would surpass all human discernment. Rather, the grounds of such judgment already forbid, incontrovertibly, its application to fictional characters. It remains for moral philosophy to prove in rigorous fashion that the fictional character is always too poor and too rich to come under ethical judgment. Such a judgment can be executed only upon real human beings. Characters in a novel are distinguished from them by being entirely rooted in nature. And what is crucial in the case of fictional characters is not to make ethical findings but rather to understand morally what happens. The enterprise of a Solger, and later, too, of a Bielschowsky, remains foolish: to produce a confused moral judgment of taste—which should never have dared to make an appearance—at the first place it can snatch applause. When the figure of Eduard does this, it is not out of gratitude to anyone. How much more profound than theirs, however, is the insight of Cohen, who—according to the exposition in his *Aesthetics*—believes it is absurd to isolate the figure of Eduard from the totality of the novel. Eduard's unreliability, indeed coarseness, is the expression of fleeting despair in a lost life. "In the entire disposition of this relationship," he appears "exactly the way he characterizes himself" to Charlotte: "For in reality I depend on you alone." [R117]. To be sure, he is the plaything not of whims, which Charlotte in no way has, but of the final goal of elective affinities, toward which her central nature, with its undeviating center of gravity, strives, out and away from all vacillations." From the start, the characters are under the spell of elective affinities. But in Goethe's profound and prescient view, their wondrous movements form the ground not for an intensely inward spiritual harmony of beings but only for the particular harmony of the deeper natural strata. For it is these strata that are intended by what is slightly amiss in every one of their conjunctures. Certainly, Ottilie adapts herself to Eduard's flute playing, but his playing is false. Certainly, when he reads with Ottilie, Eduard puts up with something he forbids to Charlotte—but this is a bad habit. Certainly, he feels wonderfully entertained by her, but she keeps silent. Certainly, the two of them even suffer in common, but their affliction is only a headache. These characters are not natural, for children of nature—in a fabulous or real state of nature—are human beings. At the height of their cultivation, however, they are subject to the forces that cultivation claims to have mastered, even if it may forever prove impotent to curb them. These forces have given them a feeling for what is seemly; they have lost the sense for what is ethical. This is meant as a judgment not on their actions but rather on their language. Feeling, but deaf, seeing, but mute, they go their way. Deaf to God and mute before the world. Rendering account

eludes them, not because of their actions but because of their being. They fall silent.

Nothing links the human being more closely to language than does his name. Scarcely any literature, however, is likely to offer a narrative of the length of *Elective Affinities* in which there are so few names. This parsimony of name giving can be interpreted otherwise than as a reference to Goethe's penchant for typical characters—the customary view. It belongs, rather, most intimately to the essence of an order whose members live out their lives under a nameless law, a fatality that fills their world with the pallid light of a solar eclipse. All names, with the exception of Mittler's, are simply Christian names. In the name Mittler ["mediator"] one should see not playfulness—that is, an allusion on the part of the author—but rather a locution that designates with incomparable certainty the essence of the bearer. He must be considered as a man whose self-love allows no abstraction from the allusions that appear to be given to him by his name, which in this way degrades him. Besides his, there are six names in the narrative: Eduard, Otto, Ottilie, Charlotte, Luciane, and Nanny. But the first of these is, as it were, fake. It is arbitrary, chosen for its sound, a trait that can surely be perceived as analogous to the displacement of the tombstones. Furthermore, an omen attaches to the doubling of his name, because it is his initials, E.O., which determine that one of the drinking-glasses from the count's youth shall be a token of his good fortune in love.⁷

The abundance of premonitory and parallel features in the novel has never escaped the critics. They have long considered these features to have been amply appreciated as the most obvious expression of the novel's character. Nevertheless, quite apart from its interpretation, the depth to which this expression penetrates the entire work does not appear ever to have been fully grasped. Only when it is viewed in the right light does one clearly see that what is at stake is neither a bizarre predilection of the author nor a simple increase in tension. Only then does the chief content of these features come more precisely into the light of day. It is a symbolism of death. "One can see right at the outset that one must go forth to evil houses," reads a strange turn of phrase in Goethe. (Possibly, it is of astrological origin; it is not in Grimm's *Dictionary*.) On another occasion the author referred to the feeling of "dread" that, with the moral decay in *Elective Affinities*, is supposed to arise in the reader. It is also reported that Goethe laid weight on "how swiftly and irresistibly he brought about the catastrophe." In its most hidden features, the entire work is woven through by that symbolism. Yet only a sensibility that is intimately familiar with this symbolism can effortlessly take in its language, where only exquisite beauties are proffered to the naive understanding of the reader. In a few passages Goethe gave clues even to this latter kind of understanding, and by and large these have remained the only ones to be noticed. They are all connected with the

episode of the crystal glass, which, destined to shatter, is caught in mid-flight and preserved. It is a sacrifice to the building—a sacrifice that is rejected at the consecration of the house in which Otilie will die. But here, too, Goethe adheres to his secret procedure by tracing back to joyous exuberance the gesture that completes this ceremony. In a clearer way, a sepulchral admonition is contained in the words with a Masonic ring at the laying of the foundation stone: "It is a serious matter, and our invitation to you is a serious one, for this ceremony takes place in the depths of the earth. Here in this narrow, hollowed-out space you do us the honor of appearing as witnesses to our secret task." [R133]. From the preservation of the glass, greeted with joy, arises the great theme of delusion. Eduard seeks by every means to safeguard precisely this sign of the rejected sacrifice. After the feast, he acquires it at a high price. With good reason an old review says: "How strange and frightening! As the unheeded omens all prove true, so this, the only one that is heeded, is found to be deceptive." And indeed, there is no lack of omens that go unheeded. The first three chapters of the second part are entirely filled with preparations and conversations about the grave. In the course of the latter ones, the frivolous, indeed banal interpretation of the dictum "Say nothing but good of the dead" is remarkable. "I once heard someone ask why one speaks well of the dead unreservedly, but of the living always with a certain degree of hesitation. The answer was that we have nothing to fear from the dead, whereas the living could cross us at some future point" [R178]. Here, too, how a fate appears ironically to betray itself! Through this fate the speaker, Charlotte, learns how sternly two deceased persons block her way. The three days that prefigure death fall on the birthday celebration of the three friends. Like the laying of the foundation stone on Charlotte's birthday, the ceremony of the raising of the roof beams must take place, under inauspicious signs, on Otilie's. No blessing is promised to the residence. Eduard's friend, however, peacefully consecrates the completed tomb on his birthday. In a quite distinctive way, Otilie's relation to the emerging chapel, whose purpose is of course as yet unspoken, is set against Luciane's relation to the tombstone of Mausolos. Otilie's nature profoundly touches the builder; Luciane's effort on a related occasion to rouse his interest remains ineffectual. Here, the play is overt and the seriousness secret. Such hidden likeness—which, when discovered, is all the more striking for having been hidden—is also found in the theme of the little casket. This gift to Otilie, which contains the fabric of her shroud, corresponds to the receptacle in which the architect keeps his finds from prehistoric graves. The first is acquired from "tradespeople and fashion dealers"; of the other, we are told that its contents, through the way in which they were arranged, took on "a somewhat prettified air," that it "could be looked at with the same enjoyment as the display cases of a fashion dealer" [R179].

Things that correspond to one another in this manner—in the instances above, they are all symbols of death—are likewise not simply explained, as R. M. Meyer tries to do, by the typology of Goethe's compositions. Rather, reflection hits the mark only when it recognizes that typicality as having the character of fate. For the "Eternal Return of the Same," as it stonily prevails over the most intimately varied feelings, is the sign of fate, whether it is self-identical in the life of many or repeats itself in the individual. Twice Eduard offers his sacrifice to destiny: first in the drinking-glass, and thereafter—even if no longer willingly—in his own life. He recognizes this connection himself. "A glass with our initials on it was tossed into the air at the foundation-stone laying, but it did not break; someone caught it, and now I have it back. 'In just the same way,' I said to myself after so many doubtful hours in this lonesome spot, 'I will take the place of that glass and make myself a token whether we may be united or not. I will go and seek death, not as one who has taken leave of his senses but as one who hopes to survive" [R233]. Likewise, in the depiction of the war into which he throws himself, that tendency toward the typical as an aesthetic principle has been rediscovered. But even here the question arises whether Goethe did not also treat the war in so general a manner because he had in mind the hated war against Napoleon. Be that as it may: what is to be grasped, above all, in that typicality is not only a principle of art but a theme of fateful being. Throughout the work the author has exfoliated this fateful kind of existence, which encompasses living natures in a single nexus of guilt and expiation. It is not, however, as Gundolf thinks, to be compared with the existence of plants. One cannot imagine a more precise contradiction to this. No—not "by analogy with the relation of seed, blossom, and fruit is Goethe's conception of law, his notion of fate and character, in *Elective Affinities* to be conceived." Neither those of Goethe nor those of anyone else whose notions would be valid. For fate (character is something else) does not affect the life of innocent plants. Nothing is more foreign to it. On the contrary, fate unfolds inexorably in the culpable life. Fate is the nexus of guilt among the living. This is the impression Zelter⁸ got from this work when, comparing it with *Die Mitschuldigen* [The Accomplices], he remarks of the comedy: "Yet precisely for this reason it fails to evoke pleasure, because it knocks at everyone's door, because it also takes aim at the good; and so I compared it with *Elective Affinities*, where even the best have something to hide and must blame themselves for not keeping to the right path." The fateful cannot be more accurately characterized. And thus it appears in *Elective Affinities*: as the guilt which is bequeathed through life.

Charlotte is delivered of a son. The child is born from a lie. As a sign thereof it bears the features of the captain and Otilie. As the offspring of a lie, it is condemned to death. For only truth is essential. The guilt for his death must

fall to those who, by failing to master themselves, have not atoned for the guilt of the child's inwardly untrue existence. These are Ottilie and Eduard.—This is how the natural-philosophical ethical schema that Goethe sketched for the final chapters would probably have run.

This much is incontrovertible in [Albert] Bielschowsky's conjecture: it corresponds wholly to the order of fate that the child, who enters it as a newborn, does not expiate the ancient rift but, in inheriting its guilt, must pass away. It is a question here not of ethical guilt (how could the child acquire it?) but rather of the natural kind, which befalls human beings not by decision and action but by negligence and celebration. When they turn their attention away from the human and succumb to the power of nature, then natural life, which in man preserves its innocence only so long as natural life binds itself to something higher, drags the human down. With the disappearance of supernatural life in man, his natural life turns into guilt, even without his committing an act contrary to ethics. For now it is in league with mere life, which manifests itself in man as guilt. He does not escape the misfortune that guilt conjures upon him. In the way that every one of his velleities brings fresh guilt upon him, every one of his deeds will bring disaster upon him. The writer takes this up in the ancient fable of the man who endlessly importunes: the man who is fortunate, who gives too abundantly, binds a *fatum* indissolubly to himself. This, too, is the behavior of the deluded.

When once man has sunk to this level, even the life of seemingly dead things acquires power. Gundolf quite correctly pointed out the significance of the thing-like in the events of the novel. The incorporation of the totality of material things into life is indeed a criterion of the mythic world. Among them, the first has always been the house. Thus, to the extent that the house approaches completion, fate closes in. The laying of the foundation stone, the celebration of the raising of the roof beams, and moving in mark just so many stages of decline. The house lies isolated, without a view of other dwellings, and it is occupied almost unfurnished. Charlotte, in a white dress, appears on its balcony, while she is away, to her woman friend. Consider, too, the mill at the shady bottom of the woods, where for the first time the friends have gathered together in the open air. The mill is an ancient symbol of the underworld. It may be that this derives from the pulverizing and metamorphosing nature of the act of milling.

In this circle, the powers that emerge from the disintegration of the marriage must necessarily win out. For they are precisely those of fate. Marriage seems a destiny more powerful than the choice to which the lovers give themselves up. "One must persevere there, where destiny more than choice places us. Among a people, in a city, with a prince, a friend, a wife to hold fast, relate everything to it; therefore to do everything, renounce

everything, and endure everything: that is valuable." This is how Goethe, in his essay on Winckelmann, formulates the contrast in question. Judged from the standpoint of destiny, every choice is "blind" and leads headlong into disaster. The violated law stands opposed to such choice, powerful enough to exact sacrifice for the expiation of the shattered marriage. In the mythic archetype of sacrifice, therefore, the symbolism of death fulfills itself through this destiny. Ottilie is predestined for it. As a reconciler, "Ottilie stands there in the splendid tableau vivant; she is the being rich in pain, the sad and grieving one, whose soul is pierced by the sword," says [B. R.] Abeken in the review that the poet Goethe so much admired. Similarly, [Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand] Solger's equally leisurely essay, equally respected by Goethe: "She is indeed the true child of nature and at the same time its sacrifice." Yet the content of the course of events must have completely escaped both reviewers, because they started out not from the whole of the depiction but only from the nature of the heroine. Only in the first case does Ottilie's passing away emerge unmistakably as a sacrificial action. That her death is a mythic sacrifice—if not in the author's intention, then surely in the more decisive one of his work—is made evident by two things. First of all, it is contrary not only to the meaning of the novel's form to shroud in darkness the decision in which Ottilie's deepest being speaks as nowhere else; no, the immediate, almost brutal way its work takes effect seems foreign even to the tone of the novel. Furthermore, what that darkness conceals does emerge clearly from everything else: the possibility, indeed the necessity, of the sacrifice according to the deepest intentions of this novel. Thus, not only is it as a "victim of destiny" that Ottilie falls—much less that she actually "sacrifices herself"—but rather more implacably, more precisely, it is as the sacrifice for the expiation of the guilty ones. For atonement, in the sense of the mythic world that the author conjures, has always meant the death of the innocent. That is why, despite her suicide, Ottilie dies as a martyr, leaving behind her miraculous remains.

Nowhere, certainly, is the mythic the highest material content, but it is everywhere a strict indication of it. As such, Goethe made it the basis of his novel. The mythic is the real material content of this book; its content appears as a mythic shadowplay staged in the costumes of the Age of Goethe. It is tempting to set such a surprising conception against Goethe's own thoughts on his work. Not as though the path of critique should be staked out in advance by the author's statements; yet the more critique removes itself from them, the less will it want to evade the task of understanding them, too, on the basis of the same hidden jurisdictions as the work. The sole principle of such an understanding, of course, cannot lie in these spheres. Biographical considerations, which do not enter at all into commentary and critique, have their place here. Goethe's remarks about this

work are also motivated by his effort to meet contemporary judgments. Hence, a glance at these would be appropriate, even if a much more immediate interest than that indicated by this reference did not direct attention to them. Among contemporary voices, the ones that have little weight (mostly the voices of anonymous judges) are those which greet the work with the conventional respect that even at that time was owed to everything of Goethe's. The important judgments are those of a distinctive stamp that are preserved under the name of prominent individual commentators. They are not for this reason atypical. Rather, foremost among such writers were precisely those who dared to say outright what lesser ones, solely out of respect for the author, refused to admit. Nevertheless, Goethe sensed the attitude of his audience, and from bitter, unaltered recollection reminds Zelter in 1827 that, as he probably will remember, readers had "reacted" to his *Elective Affinities* "as if to the robe of Nessus."⁹ Dumbfounded, dazed, as if stunned, readers stood before a work in which they believed they were obliged only to look for help in escaping the confusions of their own lives, without selflessly wanting to become immersed in the essence of another's life. The judgment in Madame de Stael's *On Germany* is representative of this: "One cannot deny that there is in this book a profound understanding of the human heart, but it is a discouraging one. Life is presented as a thing of indifferent value, however one regards it—sad when one gets to the bottom of it, pleasant enough when one evades it, prone to moral ills, which one must cure if one can and of which one must die if one cannot." Something similar seems to be indicated more expressly in Wieland's laconic turn of phrase (taken from a letter, whose addressee, a woman, is unknown): "I confess to you, my friend, that I have read this truly terrifying work not without feeling sincere concern."¹⁰ The concrete motives behind a rejection, which might hardly have become conscious in readers who were mildly put off, come glaringly to light in the verdict of the Church. The obviously pagan tendencies of the work could not escape its more gifted fanatics. For although the author sacrificed all the happiness of the lovers to those dark powers, an unerring instinct would feel the lack of a divine, transcendental aspect in the consummation. The lovers' decline in this life, after all, could not be enough. What was to guarantee that they would not triumph in a higher one? Indeed, wasn't this precisely what Goethe seemed to wish to suggest in his concluding words? For this reason, F. H. Jacobi calls the novel a "heavenly ascension of wicked desires." In his Protestant church newspaper, just a year before Goethe's death, Hengstenberg delivered what is surely the broadest criticism of all. His irritated sensibility, to whose rescue came no wit of any sort, offered a model of malicious polemic.¹¹ All this, however, trails far behind Werner.¹² Zacharias Werner, who at the moment of his conversion was least likely to lack a flair for the somber ritualistic tendencies in this sequence of events, sent to

Goethe, simultaneously with the news of his conversion, his sonnet "Elective Affinities"—a piece of prose, which, in letter and poem, Expressionism would be unable to match—even a hundred years later—with anything more fully achieved. Goethe perceived rather late what confronted him and let this noteworthy document conclude their correspondence. The enclosed sonnet reads:

Elective Affinities

Past graves and tombstones,
Which, beautifully disguised, await that certain prey,
Winds the path to Eden's garden
Where the Jordan and the Acheron unite.

Erected on quicksand, Jerusalem wants to appear
Towering; only the hideous tender
Sea-nixies,¹³ who have already waited six thousand years,
Long to purify themselves in the lake, through sacrifice.

There comes a divinely insolent child,
The angel of salvation bears him, son of sins.
The lake swallows everything! Woe is us!—It was a jest!

Does Helios then mean to set the earth on fire?
No! He only burns lovingly to embrace it! You
may love the demigod, trembling heart!

Precisely from such mad, undignified praise and blame, one thing seems to come to light: that Goethe's contemporaries were aware—not through insight but by feeling—of the mythic content of the work. The situation has changed today, since the hundred-year tradition has done its work and almost buried the possibility of original understanding. Today, if a work of Goethe's strikes its reader as strange or hostile, benumbed silence will soon enough take possession of him and smother the true impression.—With undisguised joy, Goethe welcomed the two who raised their voices, however faintly, against the common judgment. Solger was one, Abeken the other. As far as the well-meaning words of the latter are concerned, Goethe did not rest until they were put in the form of a critique, which was published in a visible place. For in them he found emphasized the human element that the work so deliberately puts on display. No one more than Wilhelm von Humboldt seemed to have his vision of the basic content so dimmed by this. He made the strange judgment: "Above all I feel the lack of fate and inner necessity in it."

Goethe had two reasons for not following the conflict of opinion in silence. He had his work to defend—that was one. He had its secret to keep—that was the other. Together they serve to give his explanation a

character quite different from that of interpretation. It has an apologetic strain and a mystifying strain, which unite splendidly in its main brief. One could call it the fable of renunciation. In it Goethe found the support he needed to deny knowledge a deeper access. At the same time, it could also serve as the reply to many a philistine attack. Goethe made a series of statements in a conversation reported by Riemer,¹⁴ and these henceforth determined the traditional image of the novel. There he says,

[The struggle of morality with affection is] displaced behind the scenes, and one sees that it must have gone on before. The persons conduct themselves like persons of distinction, who for all their inner division still maintain external decorum.—Moral struggles never lend themselves to aesthetic representation. For either morality triumphs or it is defeated. In the first instance, one does not know what was represented or why; in the second, it is ignominious to be its spectator. For in the end, one moment or another must indeed give the sensual the preponderance over the moral, and precisely to this moment the spectator does not accede but demands an even more striking one, which some other, a third person, keeps eluding, the more moral he himself is.—In such representations the sensual must always gain the upper hand, but punished by fate—that is, by moral nature, which salvages its freedom through death.—Thus, Werther must shoot himself after he has allowed sensuality to gain the upper hand over him. Thus, Ottilie must suffer, and Eduard, too, once they have given free reign to their inclination. Only now does morality celebrate its triumph.

Goethe was fond of insisting on these ambiguous sentences, as well as on every sort of draconianism, something he loved to emphasize in conversation on this matter, since atonement for the juridical trespass in the violation of marriage—the mythical inculcation—was so abundantly provided through the downfall of the hero. Except that, in truth, this was not atonement arising from the violation but rather redemption arising from the entrapment of marriage. Except that despite these remarks, no struggle between duty and affection takes place either visibly or secretly. Except that here the ethical never lives triumphantly but lives only in defeat. Thus, the moral content of this work lies at much deeper levels than Goethe's words lead one to suspect. Their evasions are neither possible nor necessary. For his reflections are not only inadequate in their opposition between the sensual and the moral but obviously untenable in their exclusion of the inner ethical struggle as an object of poetic construction. Indeed, what else would remain of the drama, of the novel itself? But in whatever way the content of this poetic work might be grasped morally, it does not contain a *fabula docet*;¹⁵ and it is not touched on, even from afar, with the feeble exhortation to renounce, with which from the beginning learned criticism leveled off its abysses and peaks. Moreover, [Alfred] Mezieres has already correctly noted the epicurean tendency that Goethe lends to this attitude. Therefore, the

confession from the *Correspondence with a Child* strikes much deeper, and one allows oneself only reluctantly to be persuaded that Bettina, for whom in many respects the novel was alien, may possibly have made it up.¹⁶ Bettina says that "here Goethe gave himself the task of gathering, in this invented destiny, as in a funerary urn, the tears for many a lost opportunity [*Versaumtes*]." One does not, however, call what one has renounced something one has missed or lost. Hence, it was probably not renunciation that was of the first importance to Goethe in so many relations in his life but rather his having neglected to do things [*Versaumnis*]. And when he recognized the irretrievability of what he had thus let slip, the irretrievability of what he had neglected, only then did renunciation offer itself to him, if only as a last attempt still to embrace in feeling what was lost. That may also have pertained to Minna Herzlieb.¹⁷

To wish to gain an understanding of *Elective Affinities* from the author's own words on the subject is wasted effort. For it is precisely their aim to forbid access to critique. The ultimate reason for this is not the inclination to ward off foolishness but the effort to keep unperceived everything that denies the author's own explanation. With respect to the technique of the novel, on the one hand, and the circle of motifs, on the other, their secret was to be kept. The domain of poetic technique forms the boundary between an exposed upper layer and a deeper, hidden layer of the works. What the author was conscious of as his technique, what contemporary criticism had also already recognized in principle, certainly touches on the concrete realities in the material content; yet it forms the boundary opposite its truth content, of which neither the author nor the critics of his time could be entirely conscious. These are necessarily noticeable in the technique, which, in contrast to the form, is decisively determined not through the truth content but rather through the material contents alone. Because for the author the representation of the material contents is the enigma whose solution is to be sought in the technique. Thus, through technique, Goethe could assure himself of stressing the mythic powers in his work. Their ultimate significance had to escape him, as it did the *Zeitgeist*. The author sought, however, to keep this technique as his artistic secret. He appears to allude to this when he says that the novel was worked out according to an idea. The latter may be understood as an idea about technique. Otherwise the postscript that calls into question the value of such a procedure would hardly be intelligible. It is, however, perfectly understandable that the infinite subtlety which the richness of relation in the book concealed could at one time appear doubtful to the author. "I hope that you shall find in it my old manner. I have put many things in it, and hidden much in it. May this open secret give pleasure to you, too." Thus writes Goethe to Zelter. In the same sense, he insists on the thesis that there was more in the work "than anyone would be capable of assimilating at a single reading." The

destruction of the drafts, however, speaks more clearly than anything else. For it could hardly be a coincidence that not even a fragment of these was preserved. Rather, the author had evidently quite deliberately destroyed everything that would have revealed the purely constructive technique of the work.—If the existence of the material contents is in this way concealed, then the essence of those contents conceals itself. All mythic meaning strives for secrecy. Therefore, Goethe, sure of himself, could say precisely of this work that the poetized [*das Gedichtete*], like the event [*das Geschehene*], asserts its rights. Such rights are here indeed owed, in the sarcastic sense of the word, not to the poetic work but rather to the poetized—to the mythic material layer of the work. In awareness of this, Goethe was able to abide unapproachably, not above, to be sure, but in his work, according to the words that conclude Humboldt's critical remarks: "But that is not the sort of thing one can actually say to him. He has no freedom with respect to his own things and grows silent at the slightest reproach." This is how Goethe in old age stands vis-a-vis all criticism: as olympian. Not in the sense of the empty *epitheton ornans*, or handsome-looking figure, that the moderns give him. This expression—it is ascribed to Jean Paul—characterizes the dark, deeply self-absorbed, mythic nature that, in speechless rigidity, indwells Goethean artistry. As olympian, he laid the foundation of the work and with scant words rounded out the dome.

In the twilight of his artistry, the eye meets that which is most hidden in Goethe. Features and connections that do not emerge in the light of everyday reflection become clear. And once again it is thanks to them alone that the paradoxical appearance of the preceding interpretation increasingly disappears. Thus, a fundamental motive for Goethean research into nature emerges only here. This study rests upon an ambiguity—sometimes naive, sometimes doubtless more meditated—in the concept of nature. For it designates in Goethe at once the sphere of perceptible phenomena and that of intuitable archetypes. At no time, however, was Goethe able to give an account of this synthesis. Instead of resorting to philosophical investigation, his studies seek in vain through experiments to furnish empirical evidence for the identity of both spheres. Since he did not define "true" nature conceptually, he never penetrated to the fruitful center of an intuition that bade him seek the presence of "true" nature as Mr-phenomenon in its appearances—something he presupposed in works of art. Solger notes that this particular connection exists precisely between *Elective Affinities* and Goethean research in the natural sciences—a connection also emphasized in the author's advertisement. Solger writes: "The *Theory of Color* . . . has to a certain extent surprised me. God knows, I had formed beforehand no definite expectation at all; for the most part, I believed I would find mere experiments in it. Now, there is a book in which nature has become alive, human, and companionable. I think it also sheds light on *Elective Affini-*

ties." The genesis of the *Theory of Color* is also chronologically close to that of the novel. Goethe's studies in magnetism everywhere intrude quite distinctly into the work itself. This insight into nature, with which the author believed he could always accomplish the verification of his works, completed his indifference toward criticism. There was no need of it. The nature of the Mr-phenomena was the standard; the relation of every work to it was something one could read off it. But on the basis of the double meaning in the concept of nature, the Mr-phenomena as archetype [*Urbild*] too often turned into nature as model [*Vorbild*]. This view would never have grown powerful if, in the resolution of the posited equivocation, Goethe had grasped that only in the domain of art do the Mr-phenomena—as ideals—present themselves adequately to perception, whereas in science they are replaced by the idea, which is capable of illuminating the object of perception but never of transforming it in intuition. The Mr-phenomena do not exist before art; they subsist within it. By rights, they can never provide standards of measurement. If, in this contamination of the pure domain and the empirical domain, sensuous nature already appears to claim the highest place, its mythic face triumphs in the comprehensive totality of its appearances. It is, for Goethe, only the chaos of symbols. For it is as such that the Mr-phenomena appear in his work jointly with the others, as the poems in the collection *God and the World* [*Gott und Welt*] so clearly illustrate. Nowhere did the author ever attempt to found a hierarchy of the Mr-phenomena. The abundance of their forms presents itself to his spirit no differently than the confused universe of sounds presents itself to the ear. One might properly insert into this analogy a description that he gives of it [in *Scientific Studies*], because it, like little else, reveals so clearly the spirit in which he regards nature. "Let us shut our eyes, let us open our ears and sharpen our sense of hearing. From the softest breath to the most savage noise, from the simplest tone to the most sublime harmony, from the fiercest cry of passion to the gentlest word of reason, it is nature alone that speaks, revealing its existence, energy, life, and circumstances, so that a blind man to whom the vast world of the visible is denied may seize hold of an infinite living realm through what he can hear." If, then, in this most extreme sense, even the "word of reason" can be reckoned to the credit of nature, it is no wonder that, for Goethe, the empire of the Mr-phenomena could never be entirely clarified by thought. With this tenet, however, he deprived himself of the possibility of drawing up limits. Without distinctions, existence becomes subject to the concept of nature, which grows into monstrosity, as the Fragment of 1780 teaches us. And even in advanced old age, Goethe declared his allegiance to the theses of this fragment—"Nature" [in *Scientific Studies*]—whose concluding passage reads: "She has brought me here; she will lead me away. I trust myself to her. She may do as she wants with me. She will not hate her work. It is not I who has spoken of her. No, what is

true and what is false—all this she has spoken. Hers is the blame, hers the glory." In this world view lies chaos. To that pass at last leads the life of the myth, which, without master or boundaries, imposes itself as the sole power in the domain of existence.

The rejection of all criticism and the idolatry of nature are the mythic forms of life in the existence of the artist. That in Goethe they acquire utmost suggestiveness may be gathered from the sobriquet "the Olympian." It designates at the same time the luminous element in the essence of the mythic. But corresponding to it is something dark that, in the gravest way, has cast a shadow on the existence of man. Traces of this can be seen in *Poetry and Truth* [*Wahrheit und Dichtung*]. Yet the least of it came through Goethe's confessions. Only the concept of the "daemonic" stands, like an unpolished monolith, on their plane. With this concept, Goethe introduced the last section of his autobiographical work.

In the course of this biographical recital, we have seen in detail how the child, the boy, the youth tried to approach the metaphysical by various paths—first affectionately looking to natural religion, then attaching himself lovingly to the positive one, next testing his own abilities by withdrawing into himself, and at last joyously yielding to the universal faith. While meandering in the spaces between these areas, seeking and looking about, he encountered some things that seemed to fit into none of these categories, and he became increasingly convinced that it was better to divert his thoughts from vast and incomprehensible subjects.—He believed that he perceived something in nature (whether living or lifeless, animate or inanimate) that manifested itself only in contradictions and therefore could not be expressed in any concept, much less in any word. It was not divine, for it seemed irrational; not human, for it had no intelligence; not diabolical, for it was beneficent; and not angelic, for it often betrayed malice. It was like chance, for it lacked continuity, and like Providence, for it suggested context. Everything that limits us seemed penetrable by it, and it appeared to do as it pleased with the elements necessary to our existence, to contract time and expand space. It seemed only to accept the impossible and scornfully to reject the possible.—This essence, which appeared to infiltrate all the others, separating and combining them, I called "daemonic," after the example of the ancients and others who had perceived something similar. I tried to save myself from this fearful thing.¹⁸

One need hardly point out that these words, more than thirty-five years later, express the same experience of the incomprehensible ambivalence in nature that was expressed in the famous fragment. The idea of the daemonic, which is again found as a conclusion in the *Egmont* quotation from *Poetry and Truth* and at the beginning of the first stanza of "Primal Words, Orphic" ["Urworte, Orphisch"], accompanies Goethe's vision all his life. It is this which emerges in the idea of fate in *Elective Affinities*; and if mediation between the two were needed, then that, too, which for millennia has been closing the circle, is not lacking in Goethe. The primal words refer plainly—

the memoirs of his life, allusively—to astrology as the canon of mythic thinking. *Poetry and Truth* concludes with the reference to the daemonic and begins with a reference to the astrological. And his life does not appear to have entirely escaped astrological reflection. Goethe's horoscope, as it was drawn up half-playfully and half in earnest in [Franz] Boll's *Sterngläube und Sterndeutung* [*Belief in and Interpretation of the Stars*; Leipzig and Berlin, 1918], refers for its part to the clouding of this existence. "And the fact that the ascendant closely follows Saturn and thereby lies in the wicked Scorpio casts some shadows onto this life; the zodiacal sign considered 'enigmatic,' in conjunction with the hidden nature of Saturn, will cause at least a certain reserve in old age; but also"—and this anticipates what follows—"as a zodiacal creature that crawls on the ground, in which the 'telluric planet' Saturn stands, that strong worldliness, which clings 'in grossly loving zest, / With clinging tendrils' to the earth."

"I sought to save myself from this terrible being." Mythic humanity pays with fear for intercourse with daemonic forces. In Goethe, such fear often spoke out unmistakably. Its manifestations are to be taken out of the anecdotal isolation in which they are recollected, almost reluctantly, by the biographers and are to be put into the light of a reflection that of course shows terribly clearly the power of primeval forces in the life of this man—who, however, could not have become the greatest writer of his nation without them. The fear of death, which includes all other fears, is the most blatant. For death most threatens the formless panarchy of natural life that constitutes the spell of myth. The author's aversion to death and to everything that signifies it bears all the features of the most extreme superstition. It is well known that no one was ever allowed to speak in his presence of anyone's death, but less well known that he never came near the deathbed of his wife. His letters reveal the same sentiment toward the death of his own son. Nothing is more characteristic than the letter in which he reports the loss to Zelter—and the truly daemonic close: "And so, onward over graves!" In this sense, the truth of the words attributed to the dying Goethe gains credence. In them, mythic vitality finally opposes its impotent desire for light to the near darkness. The unprecedented cult of the self that marked the last decades of his life was also rooted in this attitude. *Poetry and Truth*, the *Daybooks and Yearbooks* [*Tag- und Jahreshefte*], the edition of his correspondence with Schiller, the care he devoted to the correspondence with Zelter are so many efforts to frustrate death. More clearly still, everything he says of the survival of the soul speaks of that heathen concern which, instead of keeping immortality as a hope, demands it as a pledge. Just as the idea of immortality belonging to myth was shown to be an "incapacity to die," so, too, in Goethe's thought, immortality is not the journey of the soul to its homeland but rather a flight from one boundlessness into another. Above all, the conversation after the death of Wieland—a conversation reported by [J. D.] Falk—wants to understand immortality in

accordance with nature, and also, as if to emphasize the inhuman in it, wants to concede it only and most truly to great spirits.

No feeling is richer in variations than fear. Anxiety in the face of death is accompanied by anxiety in the face of life, as is a fundamental tone by its countless overtones. Tradition moreover neglects, passes over in silence, the baroque play of fear in the face of life. Its concern is to set up a norm in Goethe; with this it is far removed from noting the struggle between forms of life that he carried out in himself, a struggle he concealed too deeply within himself. Whence the loneliness in his life and, now painful and now defiant, his falling silent. Gervinus' description of the early Weimar period, in his study *Über den Gothischen Briefwechsel* [On Goethe's Correspondence], shows how soon this sets in.¹⁹ Gervinus was the first among all the others to call attention to these phenomena in Goethe's life, and he did so in the surest manner: he was perhaps the only one to intuit their importance, no matter how erroneously he judged their value. Hence, neither Goethe's taciturn withdrawal into himself during the later period, nor his concern, exaggerated into paradox, for the material contents of his own life, escapes him. Out of them both, however, speaks the fear of life: from reflection speaks the fear of its power and breadth—the fear of its flight from the embrace that would contain it. In his text, Gervinus establishes the turning point separating the work of the old Goethe from that of the earlier periods: he situates it in the year 1797, the time of the projected journey to Italy. In a letter to Schiller written at the same time, Goethe deals with objects that without being "wholly poetic" had awakened in him a certain poetic mood. He says: "I have therefore precisely observed the objects that produce such an effect and noted to my surprise that they are actually symbolic." The symbolic, however, is that in which the indissoluble and necessary bonding of truth content to material content appears. The same letter continues:

If with the further progress of the journey, one were henceforth to direct one's attention not so much to what is strange as to what is significant, then one would ultimately have to reap a fine harvest for oneself and others. While still here, I want to try to note what I can of the symbolic, but especially [to] practice in foreign places that I am seeing for the first time. If that should succeed, then one would necessarily—without wanting to pursue the experience on a vast scale, yet by going into depth at every place, at every moment, to the extent it was granted to one—still carry away enough booty from familiar lands and regions.

"One really might say," Gervinus continues, "that this is almost universally the case in his later poetic products and that in them he measures experiences that he had formerly presented in sensuous breadth, as art requires, according to a certain spiritual depth, whereby he often loses himself in the abyss. Schiller very acutely sees through this new experience, which is so mysteri-

ously veiled . . . ; a poetic demand without a poetic mood and without a poetic object would seem to be his case. Indeed what matters here, if the object is to signify something to him, is much less the object itself than the soul [*Gemut*]." (And nothing is more characteristic of Classicism than this striving, in the same phrase, both to grasp and to relativize the symbol.)

It would be the spirit that here draws the boundary; and here, too, as everywhere, he can find the commonplace and the brilliant only in the treatment and not in the choice of material. What those two places meant for him, he thinks, every street, bridge, and so on would have meant to him in an excited mood. If Schiller had been able to divine the practical consequences of this new mode of vision in Goethe, he would hardly have encouraged him to devote himself entirely to it, because through such a view of objects an entire universe would be introduced into the singular. . . . And so the immediate consequence is that Goethe begins to accumulate bundles of files, into which he puts all official papers, newspapers, weeklies, clippings from sermons, theater programs, decrees, price lists, and so forth, adds his comments, confronts them with the voice of society, adjusts his opinion accordingly, once again files away the new lesson, and in so doing hopes to preserve materials for future use! This already fully anticipates the later solemnity—developed to an utterly ridiculous point—with which he holds diaries and notes in the highest esteem, and considers the most miserable thing with the pathetic mien of the wisdom seeker. From then on, every medal bestowed on him, every piece of granite bestowed by him, is for him an object of the highest importance; and when he drills rock salt—which Frederick the Great, despite all his orders had not succeeded in finding—he sees in this I know not what miracle and sends a symbolic knife-pointful of it to his friend Zelter in Berlin. There is nothing more characteristic of this later mental disposition, which develops steadily as he grows older, than the fact that he makes it his principle to contradict with zeal the old *nil admirari* and, instead, to admire everything, to find everything "significant, marvelous, incalculable."

In this attitude, which Gervinus portrays so unsurpassingly and without exaggeration, admiration certainly has its portion, but so does fear. The human being petrifies in the chaos of symbols and loses the freedom unknown to the ancients. In taking action, he lands among signs and oracles. They were not lacking in Goethe's life. Such a sign showed him the way to Weimar: indeed, in *Poetry and Truth*, he recounted how, while on a walk, torn between his calling to poetry and his calling to painting, he set up an oracle. Fear of responsibility is the most spiritual of all those kinds of fear to which Goethe's nature subjected him. It is a foundation of the conservative position that he brought to the political, the social, and in his old age probably the literary, too. It is the root of the missed opportunities in his erotic life. That it also determined his interpretation of *Elective Affinities* is certain. For it is this work of art that sheds light on the foundations of his own life—foundations which, because his confession does not betray them,

also remain concealed from a tradition that has not yet freed itself from the spell of that life. This mythic consciousness may not, however, be addressed with the trivial flourish under which one was often pleased to perceive a tragic dimension in the life of the Olympian. The tragic exists only in the being of the dramatic persona—that is to say, the person enacting or representing himself—never in the existence of a human being. And least of all in the quietist being of a Goethe, in whom such self-dramatizing moments are scarcely to be found. And so what counts for this life, as for every human life, is not the freedom of the tragic hero in death but rather redemption in eternal life.

II

Therefore, since all around
the summits of Time are heaped,
Around clearness,
And the most loved live near, growing faint
On most separate mountains,
Give us innocent water, then,
Oh, give us pinions, most faithful in mind,
To cross over and to return.

—Holderlin

If every work is able, like *Elective Affinities*, to shed light on the life and essence of the author, then the usual sort of reflection falls all the more short of this the more it believes it adheres to it. For if an edition of a classic author only rarely fails to stress in its introduction that its content, more than that of almost any other book, is understandable solely in terms of the author's life, then this judgment already basically contains the *proton pseudos*²⁰ of the method that seeks to represent the development of the work in the author by the cliché of an essential image and an empty or incomprehensible "lived experience." This *proton pseudos* in almost all modern philology—that is, in the kind that is not yet determined by the study of word and subject matter [*Sache*]
—is calculated, in proceeding from the essence and from the life, if not quite to derive the poetic work as a product of them, nevertheless to make it more accessible to the lazy understanding. To the extent, however, that it is unquestionably appropriate to erect knowledge on the basis of what is certain and demonstrable, then wherever insight addresses itself to content and essence, the work must by all means stand in the foreground. For nowhere are these more lastingly, more distinctively, and more comprehensibly evident than in the work. That even there they appear quite difficult enough, and to many people forever inaccessible, may be a sufficient reason for these people to base the study of the history of art not on precise insight into the work but on the study of the author and his

relations; but it cannot induce the critic to give credence to them, let alone to follow them. Rather, he will keep in mind that the sole rational connection between creative artist and work of art consists in the testimony that the latter gives about the former. Not only does one gain knowledge of the essence of a human being through his outward manifestations (and in this sense the works, too, are a part of his essence); no, such knowledge is determined first and foremost by the works. Works, like deeds, are non-derivable, and every reflection that acknowledges this principle in general so as to contradict it in particular has given up all pretention to content.

What in this way escapes banal representation is not only insight into the value and mode of works but, equally, insight into the essence and life of their author. All knowledge of the essence of the author, according to his totality, his "nature," is from the outset rendered vain through neglect of the interpretation of the work. For if this, too, is unable to render a complete and final intuition of the essence, which for various reasons is indeed always unthinkable, then, when the work is disregarded, the essence remains utterly unfathomable. But even insight into the life of the creative artist is inaccessible to the traditional biographical method. Clarity about the theoretical relation of essence and work is the basic condition of every view of the artist's life. Until now so little has been accomplished in this respect that psychological categories are generally considered the best means of insight, even though nowhere so much as here is one obliged to renounce every inkling of the true material content so long as such terms remain in vogue. For this much can be asserted: the primacy of the biographical in the picture one forms of the life of a creative artist—that is, the depiction of his life as that of a human being, with that double emphasis on what is decisive and what is undecidable in the ethical sphere—would have a place only where knowledge of the fathomlessness of the origin excludes each of his works, delimited according to their value and their content, from the ultimate meaning of his life. For if the great work does not take shape in ordinary existence, if, indeed, it is even a guarantee of the purity of ordinary existence, ultimately it is still only one among its various elements. And thus the work can clarify the life of the artist only in a wholly fragmentary way, more in its development than its content. The complete uncertainty as to the significance that works can have in the life of a human being has led to this: peculiar types of content are attributed to the life of creative artists, reserved for it and justified in it alone. Such a life is not only supposed to be emancipated from all moral maxims; no, it is supposed to partake of a higher legitimation and be more distinctly accessible to insight. No wonder that for such a view every genuine life-content, which always comes forth in the works as well, carries very little weight. Perhaps this view has never been more clearly displayed than with regard to Goethe.

In this conception, according to which the life of creative artists would

rule over autonomous contents, the trivial habit of thought accords so precisely with a much deeper thought that one might presume the first to be merely a deformation of the latter and original sort, which only recently came to light again. If, in fact, in the traditional view, work, essence, and life are mingled equally without definition, then the former, original view explicitly attributes unity to these three. In this way it constructs the appearance of the mythic hero. For in the domain of myth, essence, work, and life in fact form the unity that is otherwise assigned to them only in the mind of the *lax literatus*. There the essence is daemon; life, fate; and the work, which gives a distinct stamp only to the two of them, living form. There the work simultaneously contains the ground of essence and the content of life. The canonical form of mythic life is precisely that of the hero. In it the pragmatic is at the same time symbolic; in it alone, in other words, the symbolic form and with it the symbolic content of human life are rendered intelligible in the same manner. But this human life is actually superhuman and hence different from the truly human, not only in the existence of its form but, more decisively, in the essence of its content. For while the hidden symbolism of the latter is based in binding fashion just as much on the individual dimension as on the human dimension of what is alive, the manifest symbolism of the heroic life attains neither to the sphere of individual particularity nor to that of moral uniqueness. The type, the norm, even if superhuman, distinguishes the hero from the individual; his role as representative separates him from the moral uniqueness of responsibility. For he is not alone before his god; rather, he is the representative of mankind before its gods. In the moral domain, all representation is of a mythic nature, from the patriotic "one for all" to the sacrificial death of the Redeemer.

In the heroic life, typology and representation culminate in the concept of the task. The presence of this task and of its evident symbolism distinguishes the superhuman from the human life. It characterizes Orpheus, who descends into Hades, no less than the Hercules of the Twelve Tasks; the mythic bard as much as the mythic hero. One of the most powerful sources of this symbolism flows from the astral myth: in the superhuman type of the Redeemer, the hero represents mankind through his work on the starry sky. The primal words of the Orphic poem apply to him: it is his daemon—the sunlike one; his *tyche*, the one that is as changeable as the moon; his fate, ineluctable like the astral *ananke*. Even Eros does not point beyond them—only Elpis does.²¹ And so it is no accident that the author came across Elpis when he sought something close to the human in the other primal words; no accident that, among them all, Elpis alone was found to need no explanation; yet no accident, too, that not Elpis but rather the rigid canon of the other four furnished the scheme for Gundolf's *Goethe*. Accordingly, the question of method that is posed to biographical study is less doctrinaire

than this mode of deduction would allow one to surmise. For in Gundolf's book, after all, the attempt has been made to portray Goethe's life as a mythic one. Not only does this conception demand consideration because mythic elements operate in the existence of this man, but it demands it all the more in the contemplation of a work [*Elective Affinities*] to which, because of its mythic moments, it could appeal. For if the conception succeeds in corroborating this claim, it would be impossible to isolate the layer in which the meaning of that novel autonomously reigns. Where the existence of no such special domain can be proved, we are dealing not with a literary work of art but solely with its precursor: magical writing. And so every close reading of a work by Goethe, but most especially of *Elective Affinities*, depends on the repudiation of this attempt. With that, insight is at once conducted into a luminous kernel of redemptive content, something which in *Elective Affinities*, as everywhere else, eludes that position.

The canon that corresponds to the life of the demigod appears in a peculiar displacement in the conception of the poet that is proclaimed by the George school. This school assigns to the poet, like the hero, his work as a task; hence, his mandate is considered divine. From God, however, man receives not tasks but only exactions, and therefore before God no privileged value can be ascribed to the poetic life. Moreover, the notion of the task is also inappropriate from the standpoint of the poet. The literary work of art in the true sense arises only where the word liberates itself from the spell of even the greatest task. Such poetry does not descend from God but ascends from what in the soul is unfathomable; it has a share in man's deepest self. Since the mission of poetry seems, for the George circle, to stem directly from God, not only does this mission grant to the poet an inviolable though merely relative rank among his people, but, on the contrary, it grants to him a thoroughly problematic supremacy simply as a human being and hence grants problematic supremacy to his life before God, to whom, as a superman, he appears to be equal. The poet, however, is a more provisional manifestation of human essence than the saint—not, as might be supposed, in the sense of degree but in the sense of type. For in the essence of the poet, the relation of the individual to the communal life of his people is determined; in the essence of the saint, the relation of the human being to God. From the abyss of thoughtless linguistic confusion a second, no less important error adheres confusingly and fatally to the heroizing attitude of the members of the George circle, as they supply the basis for Gundolf's book.²² Even if the title of "creator" certainly does not belong to the poet, it has already devolved upon him in that spirit which does not perceive the metaphorical note in it—namely, the reminder of the true Creator. And indeed the artist is less the primal ground or creator than the origin or form giver [*Bildner*], and certainly his work is not at any price his creature but

rather his form [*Gebilde*]. To be sure, the form, too, and not only the creature, has life. But the basis of the decisive difference between the two is this: only the life of the creature, never that of the formed structure [*des Gebildeten*], partakes, unreservedly, of the intention of redemption. In whatever way figurative language may speak of the creativity of the artist, therefore, creation is able to unfold the *virtus* that is most its own—namely, that of cause—not through his works but solely through creatures. Hence, that unreflective linguistic habit which draws edification from the word "creator" leads one automatically to consider not the works but rather the life as the product that most belongs to the artist. Yet whereas the fully articulated structure, whose form is struggle, represents itself in the life of the hero by virtue of his complete symbolic transparency, the life of the poet—like the life of any other man—scarcely displays an unambiguous task, any more than it displays an unambiguous and clearly demonstrable struggle. A form must still be conjured up, however, and the only one that offers itself, on the far side of the form that lives in battle, is the form that petrifies in literature. So triumphs the dogma which, having enchanted the work into life, now through a no less seductive error allows it, as life, to petrify back into work; and which purposes to grasp the much-vaunted "form" of the poet as a hybrid of hero and creator, in whom nothing further can be distinguished yet about whom, with a show of profundity, anything can be affirmed.

The most thoughtless dogma of the Goethe cult, the most jejune confession of the adepts, asserts that among all the works of Goethe the greatest is his life; Gundolf's *Goethe* took this up. Accordingly, Goethe's life is not rigorously distinguished from that of the works. Just as the poet, in an obviously paradoxical image, once termed colors the "deeds and sufferings of light," Gundolf, in an extremely murky perception, turns Goethe's life into this light, which would ultimately be no different in kind from his colors, his works. This position achieves two things for him: it eliminates every moral concept from the horizon, and, at the same time, by attributing to the hero-as-creator the form which goes to him as victor, it achieves the level of blasphemous profundity. Thus, he says that in *Elective Affinities* Goethe "brooded over the juridical procedures of God." But the life of a man, even that of a creative artist, is never that of the creator. It cannot be interpreted any more than the life of the hero, who gives form to himself. In such a perspective, Gundolf produces his commentary. For it is not with the faithful attitude of the biographer that the material content of this life is grasped—something which indeed must be done precisely for the sake of what has not been understood in it—nor is it grasped with the great modesty of authentic biographism, as the archive containing the documents (by themselves undecodable) of this existence. Instead, material content and truth content are supposed to stand in plain daylight and, as in the life of the hero, correspond to each other. Only the material content of the life lies

open, however, and its truth content is hidden. Certainly the particular trait and the particular relation can be illuminated, but not the totality—unless it, too, is grasped as a merely finite relation. For, in itself, it is infinite. Therefore, in the realm of biography, there is neither commentary nor critique. In violation of this principle, two books—which might, moreover, be termed the antipodes of the literature on Goethe—strangely encounter each other: the work by Gundolf and the presentation by Baumgartner. Whereas the latter undertakes to fathom the truth content directly (without, however, having the slightest inkling of the place where it is buried) and hence must pile one critical failure upon another to an inordinate extent, Gundolf plunges into the world of the material contents of Goethe's life, in which, to be sure, he can only allegedly present their truth content. For human life cannot be considered on the analogy of a work of art. Yet Gundolf's critical principle for dealing with sources bespeaks the fundamental determination to produce such disfigurement. If, in the hierarchy of sources, the works are always placed in first position, and the letter—not to mention the conversation—is subordinated to them, then this stance is solely explicable from the fact that the life itself is seen as a work. For only with respect to such an entity [the work] does the commentary based on sources of this kind possess a higher value than that based on any other. But this happens only because, through the concept of the work, a strictly circumscribed sphere of its own is established—one which the life of the poet is unable to penetrate. If that hierarchy was perhaps an attempt to distinguish materials that were originally written from those that were initially oral, then this, too, is the crucial question only for genuine history, while biography, even where it makes the highest claim to content, must keep to the breadth of a human life. To be sure, at the beginning of his book, the author emphatically rejects the interests of biography; yet the lack of dignity which often goes with present-day biographical writing should not allow one to forget that a canon of concepts underlies it—concepts without which every historical reflection on a human being ultimately falls into vacuousness. No wonder, then, that with the inner formlessness of this book a formless type of poet takes shape, one which calls to mind the monument sketched by Bettina in which the enormous forms of this venerated man dissolve into shapelessness, into hermaphroditism. This monumentality is a fabrication, and—to speak in Gundolf's own language—it turns out that the image which arises from the impotent Logos is not so unlike the one fashioned by immoderate Eros.

Only persistent interrogation of its method can make headway against the chimerical nature of this work. Without this weapon, it is wasted effort to try conclusions with the details, for they are armored in an almost impenetrable terminology. What emerges from this is the meaning, fundamental to all knowledge, of the relation between myth and truth. This

relation is one of mutual exclusion. There is no truth, for there is no unequivocalness—and hence not even error—in myth. Since, however, there can just as little be truth about it (for there is truth only in objective things [*Sachen*], just as objectivity [*Sachlichkeit*] lies in the truth), there is, as far as the spirit of myth is concerned, only a knowledge of it. And where the presence of truth should be possible, it can be possible solely under the condition of the recognition of myth—that is, the recognition of its crushing indifference to truth. Therefore, in Greece genuine art and genuine philosophy—as distinct from their inauthentic stage, the theurgic—begin with the departure of myth, because art is not based on truth to any lesser extent than is philosophy, and philosophy is not based on truth to any greater extent than is art. So unfathomable, however, is the confusion instituted by the conflation of truth and myth that, with its hidden efficacy, this initial distortion threatens to shield almost every single sentence of Gundolf's work from critical suspicion. Yet the whole craft of the critic here consists in nothing else but catching hold, like a second Gulliver, of a single one of these lilliputian sentencelets, despite its wriggling sophisms, and examining it in one's own time. "Only" in marriage "were united . . . all the attractions and repulsions that arise from the suspension of man between nature and culture, from this human duality: that with his blood he borders on the beast; with his soul, on divinity. . . . Only in marriage does the fateful and instinctual union or separation of two human beings . . . through the procreation of a legitimate child become, in pagan language, a mystery, and, in Christian language, a sacrament. Marriage is not only an animal act but also a magical one, an enchantment." A formulation that is distinguished from the mentality of a fortune-cookie motto only by the bloodthirsty mysticism of its wording. How securely, by contrast, stands the Kantian explanation, whose strict allusion to the natural component of marriage—sexuality—does not obstruct the path to the logos of its divine component—fidelity. For what is proper to the truly divine is the logos: the divine does not ground life without truth, nor does it ground the rite without theology. On the contrary, the common feature of all pagan vision is the primacy of cult over doctrine, which most surely shows itself as pagan in being exclusively esoteric. Gundolf's *Goethe*, this ungainly pedestal for his own statuette, reveals in every sense a person initiated in an esoteric doctrine, who only out of forbearance suffers philosophy's struggle over a mystery, the key to which he holds in his hands. Yet no mode of thinking is more disastrous than that which bewilderingly bends back into the myth the very thing that has begun to grow out of it, and which, of course, through this imposed immersion in monstrosity, would at once have sounded an alert in any mind for which a sojourn in a tropical wilderness²³ is unacceptable—a sojourn in a jungle where words swing themselves, like chattering monkeys, from branch to branch, from bombast to bombast,²⁴ in order not to have to touch

the ground which betrays the fact that they cannot stand: that is, the ground of logos, where they ought to stand and give an account of themselves. But they avoid this ground with so much show because in the face of every sort of mythic thinking, even one surreptitiously obtained, the question of truth comes to naught in it. According to this sort of thinking, in fact, it is of no importance if the blind earth-stratum of mere material content is taken for the truth content in Goethe's work; and if, instead of purifying (using an idea like that of fate) truthful content by means of knowledge, it is spoiled by sentimentality, with a "nose" that empathizes with that knowledge. Thus, along with the fake monumentality of the Goethean image appears the counterfeit legitimacy of the knowledge of that image; and the investigation of the logos of this knowledge, aided by insight into the infirmity of its method, encounters the verbal pretension of the knowledge and thus strikes its heart. Its concepts are names; its judgments, formulas. For in this knowledge, language—the radiance of whose *ratio* even the poorest wretch has not yet been able to extinguish entirely—is precisely the thing that has to spread a darkness which it alone could illuminate. With this, the last shred of belief in the superiority of this work to the Goethe literature of the older schools must vanish—this work which an intimidated philology approved as its legitimate and greater successor, not solely on account of its own bad conscience but also because it was unable to take the measure of the work with its stock concepts. Nevertheless, the almost unfathomable perversion of the mode of thinking of this work does not withdraw from philosophical meditation an endeavor which even then would pronounce sentence on itself, if it did not wear the depraved appearance of success.

Wherever an insight into Goethe's life and work is in question, the mythic world—however visibly it may come to light in them, too—cannot provide the basis of knowledge. A particular mythic moment may very well be an object of reflection; on the other hand, where it is a matter of the essence and the truth in the work and in the life, the insight into myth, even in its concrete relations, is not final. For neither Goethe's life nor any one of his works is fully represented in the domain of myth. If, insofar as it is a question of the life, this is warranted simply by his human nature, the works teach it in detail, to the extent that a struggle which was kept secret in life emerges in the last of them. And only in the works does one encounter mythic elements in the content and not just in the subject. They can indeed be regarded, in the context of this life, as valid testimony of its final course. They testify not only, and not at the deepest level, to the mythic world in Goethe's existence. For there is in him a struggle to free himself from its clutches, and this struggle, no less than the essence of that world, is attested to in Goethe's novel. In the tremendous ultimate experience of the mythic powers—in the knowledge that reconciliation with them cannot be obtained except through the constancy of sacrifice—Goethe revolted against them. If

he made a constantly renewed attempt during the years of his manhood—an attempt undertaken with inner despondency, yet with an iron will—to submit to those mythic orders wherever they still rule (indeed, for his part to consolidate their rule, in just the way this is done by one who serves the powerful), this attempt broke down after the final and most difficult submission of which he was capable, after his capitulation in the more than thirty-year struggle against marriage, which struck him as the threatening symbol of arrest by the mythic powers. And a year after his marriage, which had forced itself on him at a time of fateful pressure, he began *Elective Affinities*, with which he then registered his protest—a protest that unfolded ever more powerfully in his later work, against the world with which he had concluded the pact in the years of his manhood. *Elective Affinities* constitutes a turning point in this body of work. With it begins the last series of his productions, from no one of which he was able to detach himself completely, because until the end their heartbeat was alive in him. Whence one understands the gripping diary entry of 1820 stating that he "began to read *Elective Affinities*," and understands as well the wordless irony of a scene reported by Heinrich Laube: "A lady addressed Goethe on the subject of *Elective Affinities*: 'I do not approve of this book at all, Herr von Goethe; it is truly immoral and I do not recommend it to any woman.'—Thereupon Goethe kept a serious silence for a while, and finally, with a good deal of emotion, replied: 'I am sorry, for it is my best book.'" That last series of works attests to and accompanies his purification, which was no longer allowed to be a liberation. Perhaps because his youth had often taken all-too-swift flight from the exigencies of life into the domain of literature, age, by a terribly punishing irony, made poetry the tyrant of his life. Goethe bent his life to the hierarchies that made it the occasion of his poetry. This is the moral significance of his meditation in old age on the objective contents. *Truth and Poetry*, *West-Ostlicher Divan* [West-Easterly Divan], and the second part of *Faust* became the three great documents of such masked penance. The historicizing of his life, as it was entrusted first to *Truth and Poetry* and later to the daily and annual notebooks, had to prove—and invent—how much this life had been an Mr-phenomenon of a life full of poetic content, full of themes and opportunities for "the poet." The occasion of poetry, of which we are speaking here, is not only something different from the lived experience which modern convention puts at the basis of poetic invention, but is the exact opposite of it. The thesis that is continually handed down through histories of literature—the cliché that Goethe's poetry had been an "occasional poetry"—means that his poetry was a poetry of experience; with regard to the last and greatest works, therefore, the thesis speaks the opposite of the truth. For the occasion provides the content, and the lived experience leaves only a feeling behind. Related and similar to the connection between these two is the link between the words *Genius* and *Genie*. On the lips of the moderns, the latter ulti-

mately amounts to a title which, no matter how they position themselves, will never be suited to catching in its essential character the relation of a human being to art. The word *Genius* succeeds in this, and Holderlin's verses vouch for it:

Are not many of the living known to you?
Does not your foot stride upon what is true, as upon carpets?
Therefore, my genius, only step
Naked into life, and have no care!
Whatever happens, let it all be opportune for you!

This is precisely the ancient vocation of the poet, who from Pindar to Meleager, from the Isthmian Games to the hour of love, found only sundry high (but as such always worthy) occasions for his bardic song, which he therefore never thought to base on experience. And so the concept of lived experience is nothing but a paraphrase of that lack of consequence in poetry—a lack of consequence longed for also by that most sublime (because still just as cowardly) philistinism which, robbed of the relation to truth, is unable to rouse responsibility from its sleep. In his old age, Goethe had penetrated profoundly enough into the essence of poetry to feel with horror the absence of every occasion for poetry in the world that surrounded him, yet want to stride solely and forever upon that carpet of truth. It was late when he stood on the threshold of German Romanticism. He was not allowed—any more than Holderlin was—access to religion, no matter what the form of conversion, no matter what the turning toward community. Goethe abhorred religion in the Early Romantics. But the laws that they vainly sought to satisfy by converting, and thus by extinguishing their lives, kindled in Goethe—who also had to submit to these laws—the highest flame of his life. It burned away the dross of every passion; and thus in his correspondence, up to the end of his life, he was able to keep his love for Marianne²⁵ so painfully close that more than a decade after the time in which their affection for each other declared itself, he could compose what is perhaps the most powerful poem of the *Divan*: "No longer on a leaf of silk / I write symmetric rhymes." And the final phenomenon of this literature that governed his life, and indeed ultimately even the duration of his life, was the conclusion to *Faust*. If in the series of these works from his old age *Elective Affinities* is the first, then a purer promise, no matter how darkly the myth holds sway in it, must already be visible there. But in a treatment like Gundolf's, it will not come to light. As little as that of other authors does Gundolf's take account of the novella "Die wunderlichen Nachbarskinder" [The Curious Tale of the Childhood Sweethearts].

Elective Affinities itself was originally planned as a novella in the orbit of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, but its growth forced it out of that orbit. The traces of its original formal conception, however, are preserved, despite

everything that made the work become a novel. Only Goethe's consummate mastery, which is here at its height, was able to prevent the inherent tendency of the novella from bursting the novel form. The conflict appears to be subdued—and the unity attained—with violence, in that he ennobles (so to speak) the form of the novel through that of the novella. The compelling artistic device that made this possible, and which imposed itself equally imperiously from the side of the content, lies in the author's refusal to summon the reader's sympathy into the center of the action itself. The fact that the action remains in effect so thoroughly inaccessible to the immediate intention of the reader, as is most clearly illuminated by the unsuspected death of Ottilie, betrays the influence of the novella-form upon that of the novel; and it is precisely in the presentation of this death that a break, too, most vividly betrays itself, when, finally, that center of the action, which in the novella permanently closes itself off, makes itself felt with doubled force.²⁶ It may be part of the same formal tendency, as R. M. Meyer has already pointed out, that the story likes to arrange groups. And, to be sure, the story's pictorialness is fundamentally unpainterly; it may be called plastic, perhaps stereoscopic. This, too, appears novella-like. For if the novel, like a maelstrom, draws the reader irresistibly into its interior, the novella strives toward distance, pushing every living creature out of its magic circle. In this way, despite its breadth, *Elective Affinities* has remained novella-like.²⁷ In its effectiveness of expression, it is not superior to the actual novella contained in it. In it a boundary form has been created, and by virtue of this fact it stands further removed from other novels than those novels stand from one another. "[In *Wilhelm*] *Meister* and in *Elective Affinities*, the artistic style is thoroughly determined by the fact that we feel the storyteller everywhere. Absent here is the formal-artistic realism . . . which makes events and human beings depend entirely on themselves so that they produce their effect strictly as immediate presences, as if from the stage. Instead, they are really a 'story' sustained by the storyteller standing in the background, palpable. . . . Goethe's novels unfold inside the categories of the 'storyteller.'" "Recited" is the word Simmel uses elsewhere for this style.²⁸ But whatever the explanation for this phenomenon (which does not appear further analyzable to Simmel) in *Wilhelm Meister*, in *Elective Affinities* it stems from Goethe's preserving jealously for himself exclusive rule within the life-circle of his literary work. Such restrictions upon the reader are the hallmarks of the classic form of the novella: Boccaccio gives his own novellas a frame; Cervantes writes a prologue for his. Thus, however much in *Elective Affinities* the form of the novel calls attention to itself, it is precisely this emphasis and exaggeration of type and contour that betray it as novella-like.

Nothing could make more inconspicuous the remaining residue of ambiguity than the insertion of a novella, which, the more the main work stood out against it as a pure example of its kind, the more it had to be made to

appear similar to a true novel. On this is based the significance of the composition "The Curious Tale of the Childhood Sweethearts," which is meant to count as a model novella even where consideration is restricted to its form. Furthermore, Goethe wanted to establish this tale—not less than the novel, indeed to a certain extent even more—as exemplary. For although the event which it reports is conceived in the novel itself as a real one, the story is nonetheless characterized as a novella. It is meant to be considered "a Novella" just as rigorously as the main work is meant to be considered "a Novel." In the clearest way, the thus-conceived lawful character of its form (namely, the untouchability of the center—that is to say, the mystery as an essential characteristic) stands out in bold relief. For in it, the mystery is the catastrophe, which, as the animating principle of the story, is conducted into its center, while in the novel the significance of the catastrophe, the concluding event, remains phenomenal. The enlivening power of this catastrophe, although so much in the novel corresponds to it, is so difficult to fathom that to an unguided reader the novella appears no less independent yet also hardly less enigmatic than "Die pilgernde Torin" [The Foolish Pilgrim]. But in this novella a brilliant light holds sway. From the outset everything, sharply contoured, is at a peak. It is the day of decision shining into the dusk-filled Hades of the novel. Hence, the novella is more prosaic than the novel. It confronts the novel in prose of a higher degree. To this corresponds the genuine anonymity of its characters and the partial, undecided anonymity of those of the novel.

While in their life seclusion prevails, which completes the guaranteed freedom of their actions, the characters in the novella come forth closely surrounded on all sides by their human environment, their relatives. Although in the novel Ottilie relinquishes, at the urging of her beloved, not only the medallion of her father but even the memory of her home in order to consecrate herself wholly to love, in the novella even those who are united do not feel themselves independent of the paternal blessing. This small difference most deeply characterizes the couples. For it is certain that the lovers step out maturely from the ties with their parental home, and no less certain that they transform its inner power; for if just one of them were to remain by himself caught up within it, the other, with his love, would carry him on out past it. If, in another way, there is any such thing for lovers as a sign, then it is this: that for both of them not only the abyss of sex but even that of family has closed. In order for such a loving vision to be valid, it may not withdraw weak-spiritedly from the sight, let alone the knowledge, of one's parents, which is what Eduard imposes on Ottilie. The power of lovers triumphs by eclipsing even the full presence of the parents in the beloved. How much they are able in their radiance to release each other from all ties is shown in the novella by the image of the garments in which the children are scarcely recognized anymore by their parents. The lovers in

the novella enter into relations not only with them but also with the rest of their human environment. And whereas for the novel's characters independence only seals all the more rigorously the temporal and local circumstances of their subjection to fate, for the novella's characters it holds the most invaluable guarantee that, with the climax of their own distress, their companions in travel run the risk of foundering. What this says is that even the greatest extremity does not expel the two young lovers from the circle of their own people, whereas the lifestyle of the characters in the novel, perfect in its form, can do nothing against the fact that, until the sacrifice occurs, each and every moment excludes them more inexorably from the community of the peaceful. The lovers in the novella do not obtain their freedom through sacrifice. That the girl's fatal leap does not have that meaning is indicated by the author in the most delicate and precise manner. For this alone is her secret intention when she throws the garland wreath to the boy: to assert that she does not want to "die in beauty," be wreathed in death like a sacrifice. The boy, whose mind is only on steering, testifies for his part that, whether knowingly or not, he does not have a share, as if it were a sacrifice, in any such deed. Because these human beings do not risk everything for the sake of a falsely conceived freedom, no sacrifice falls among them; rather, the decision befalls within them. In fact, freedom is as clearly removed from the youth's saving decision as is fate. It is the chimerical striving for freedom that draws down fate upon the characters in the novel. The lovers in the novella stand beyond both freedom and fate, and their courageous decision suffices to tear to bits a fate that would gather to a head over them and to see through a freedom that would pull them down into the nothingness of choice. In the brief instants of their decision, this is the meaning of their action. Both dive down into the living current, whose beneficent power appears no less great in this event than the death-dealing power of the still waters in the other. Through an episode in the latter, the strange masquerade in the wedding clothes found by the two young people is fully illuminated. For there, Nanny refers to the shroud prepared for Ottilie as her "bridal gown." Hence, it is surely permitted to explicate accordingly that strange feature of the novella and—even without the mythic analogies that can probably be discovered—to recognize the wedding vestments of these lovers as transformed burial shrouds henceforth immune to death. The complete security of existence, which at the end opens itself to them, is also otherwise indicated. Not only because their garb conceals them from their friends, but above all through the great image of the boat landing at the place of their union, the feeling is aroused that they no longer have a fate and that they stand at the place where the others are meant to arrive some day.

With all this, it can certainly be considered incontrovertible that this novella is of decisive importance in the structure of *Elective Affinities*. Even

if it is only in the full light of the main story that all its details are revealed, the ones mentioned proclaim unmistakably that the mythic themes of the novel correspond to those of the novella as themes of redemption. Thus, if in the novel the mythic is considered the thesis, then the antithesis can be seen in the novella. Its title points to this. It is precisely to the characters in the novel that those neighbors' children must seem most "curious," and it is those characters, too, who then turn away from them with deeply hurt feelings. A hurt that, in accordance with the secret matter of the novella—one that was, perhaps, in many respects even hidden from Goethe—motivated him in an external way without thus robbing this matter of its inner significance. Whereas the characters of the novel linger more weakly and more mutely, though fully life-sized in the gaze of the reader, the united couple of the novella disappears under the arch of a final rhetorical question, in the perspective, so to speak, of infinite distance. In the readiness for withdrawal and disappearance, is it not bliss that is hinted at, bliss in small things, which Goethe later made the sole motif of "The New Melusine"?²⁹

III

Before you know the bodies on this star,
I shape you dreams among eternal stars.
—Stefan George

The umbrage taken at every critique of art that supposedly stands too close to the work, by those who do not find in that critique an afterimage of their own self-complacent reveries, testifies to so much ignorance of the essence of art that a period for which the rigorously determined origin of art is becoming ever more vivid does not owe this complaint a refutation. Yet an image that speaks home truths to sentimentality in the most straightforward way is perhaps allowed. Let us suppose that one makes the acquaintance of a person who is handsome and attractive but impenetrable, because he carries a secret with him. It would be reprehensible to want to pry. Still, it would surely be permissible to inquire whether he has any siblings and whether their nature could not perhaps explain somewhat the enigmatic character of the stranger. In just this way critique seeks to discover siblings of the work of art. And all genuine works have their siblings in the realm of philosophy. It is, after all, precisely these figures in which the ideal of philosophy's problem appears.—The totality of philosophy, its system, is of a higher magnitude of power than can be demanded by the quintessence of all its problems taken together, because the unity in the solution of them all cannot be obtained by questioning. If, that is to say, it were possible to obtain the very unity in the solution to all problems as the answer to a question, then with respect to the question seeking this unity, a new question

would immediately arise, on which the unity of its answer together with that of all the others would be founded. It follows that there is no question which, in the reach of its inquiry, encompasses the unity of philosophy. The concept of this nonexistent question seeking the unity of philosophy by inquiry functions in philosophy as the ideal of the problem. Even if, however, the system is in no sense attainable through inquiry, there are nevertheless constructions which, without being questions, have the deepest affinity with the ideal of the problem. These are works of art. The work of art does not compete with philosophy itself—it merely enters into the most precise relation to philosophy through its affinity with the ideal of the problem. And to be sure, according to a lawfulness grounded in the essence of the ideal as such, the ideal can represent itself solely in a multiplicity. The ideal of the problem, however, does not appear in a multiplicity of problems. Rather, it lies buried in a manifold of works, and its excavation is the business of critique. The latter allows the ideal of the problem to appear in the work of art in one of its manifestations. For critique ultimately shows in the work of art the virtual possibility of formulating the work's truth content as the highest philosophical problem. That before which it stops short, however—as if in awe of the work, but equally from respect for the truth—is precisely this formulation itself. That possibility of formulation could indeed be realized only if the system could be the object of inquiry and thereby transform itself from an appearance of the ideal into the existence of the ideal—an existence that is never given. As such, however, it says simply that the truth in a work would be known not as something obtained in answer to a question, to be sure, but as something obtained on demand. If, therefore, one may say that everything beautiful is connected in some way to the true, and that the virtual site of the true in philosophy can be determined, then this is to say that in every true work of art an appearance of the ideal of the problem can be discovered. Hence, one comes to see that, from the moment reflection raises itself up from the foundations of the novel to the vision of its perfection, philosophy not myth is called upon to guide it.

With this, the figure of Otilie steps forth. It is, after all, in this figure that the novel appears most visibly to grow away from the mythic world. For even though she falls victim to dark powers, it is still precisely her innocence which, in keeping with the ancient requirement that the sacrificial object be irreproachable, forces on her this terrible destiny. To be sure, chastity, to the extent that it may arise from intellectuality, is not manifested in the figure of this girl (indeed, such untouchability, in Luciane, practically constitutes a fault); nonetheless, her wholly natural behavior, despite the complete passivity that characterizes Otilie in the erotic as well as in every other sphere, makes her as unapproachable as someone in a trance. In its impermanent way, Werner's sonnet also announces that the chastity of this child

harbors no consciousness. But is not its merit only all the greater? In the scenes in which Goethe shows her with the baby Jesus and with Charlotte's dead child in her arms, he indicates just how deeply chastity is rooted in her nature. Otilie comes to both without a husband. The author, however, has said still more with this. For the "living" picture, which portrays the grace and, transcending all ethical rigor, the purity of the Mother of God, is precisely the artificial one. The one that nature offers only a little later shows the dead boy. And this is what unveils the true essence of that chastity, whose sacred infertility, in itself, in no way ranks higher than the impure turbulence of sexuality that draws the estranged spouses to each other, and whose privilege is valid only in delaying a union in which husband and wife would have to lose each other. In the figure of Otilie, however, this chastity lays claim to far more. It evokes the semblance of an innocence of natural life. The pagan if not indeed the mythic idea of this innocence owes to Christianity at least its formulation—a formulation most extreme and fraught with consequences—in the ideal of virginity. If the grounds of a mythic primal guilt are to be sought in the bare, vital drive of sexuality, then Christian thought finds its counterpart where that drive is furthest removed from drastic expression: in the life of the virgin. But this clear, if not clearly conscious, intention includes an error full of grave consequence. To be sure, like natural guilt, there is also a natural innocence of life. The latter, however, is tied not to sexuality—not even in the mode of denial—but rather solely to its antipode, the spirit (which is equally natural). Just as the sexual life of man can become the expression of natural guilt, his spiritual life, based on the variously constituted unity of his individuality, can become the expression of natural innocence. This unity of individual spiritual life is "character." Unequivocalness, as its essential constitutive moment, distinguishes it from the daemonism of all purely sexual phenomena. To attribute to a human being a complicated character can only mean, whether rightly or wrongly, to deny him character, whereas for every manifestation of bare sexual life the seal of its recognition remains the insight into the equivocalness of its nature. This is also confirmed in virginity. Above all, the ambiguity of its intactness is evident. For that which is considered the sign of inner purity is precisely what desire most welcomes. But even the innocence of unknowingness is ambiguous. For on its basis affection passes willy-nilly over into desire, which is felt as sinful. And precisely this ambiguity returns in an extremely characteristic manner in the Christian symbol of innocence, the lily. The severe lines of the plant, the whiteness of the calyx, are joined to numbingly sweet scents that are scarcely still vegetal. The author has also given Otilie this dangerous magic of innocence, which is most intimately related to the sacrifice celebrated by her death. For the very fact that she appears innocent in this manner prevents her from escaping the spell of that consummation. Not purity but its semblance spreads itself out with such

innocence over her form. And the untouchableness of that semblance places her out of reach of her lover. The same sort of semblance-like nature is also hinted at in Charlotte's being, which only appears to be completely pure and irreproachable, while in truth her infidelity to her friend disfigures it. Even in her appearance as mother and housewife, in which passivity befits her very little, she strikes one as phantom-like. Yet nobility presents itself in her only at the price of this indefiniteness. Hence, at the deepest level, she is not unlike Ottilie, who among the phantoms is the sole semblance. In general, then, one must—if one is to gain insight into this work—search for its key not in the contrast among the four partners but rather in the equally strong contrast that obtains between them and the lovers in the novella. The characters of the main story differ from one another less as individuals than as pairs.

Does Ottilie's essence have its share in that genuine natural innocence which has as little to do with equivocal intactness as with blessed guiltlessness? Does she have character? Is her nature, not so much thanks to her own openheartedness as by dint of her free and open expression, clear before our eyes? Rather, the opposite of all this characterizes her. She is reserved; more than this, nothing she says or does can deprive her of reserve. Plant-like muteness, which speaks so clearly from the Daphne-motif of pleadingly upraised hands, lies about her being and darkens it even in the most extreme moments of distress—moments that, in the case of anyone else, place the person's being in a bright light. Her decision to die remains a secret until the end, and not only to her friends; it seems to form itself, completely hidden, in a manner incomprehensible to her, too. And this hiddenness touches the root of the morality of her decision. For if the moral world shows itself anywhere illuminated by the spirit of language, it is in the decision. No moral decision can enter into life without verbal form and, strictly speaking, without thus becoming an object of communication. That is why, in Ottilie's complete silence, the morality of the will to die that animates her becomes questionable. In truth, what underlies it is not a decision but a drive. Therefore, her dying is not—as she seems ambiguously to express it—sacred. If she herself recognizes that she has strayed from her "path," then this phrase can in truth only be saying that death alone can save her from internal ruin. Death is thus very probably atonement, in the sense of fate but not holy absolution—which voluntary death can never be for human beings and which only the divine death imposed on them can become. Ottilie's death, like her virginity, is merely the last exit of the soul, which flees from ruin. In her death drive, there speaks the longing for rest. Goethe has not failed to indicate how completely it arises from what is natural in her. If Ottilie dies by depriving herself of food, then Goethe has also made it clear in the novel how often, even in happier times, food was repugnant to her. Ottilie's existence, which Gundolf calls sacred, is an

unhallowed one, not so much because she trespassed against a marriage in dissolution as because in her seeming and her becoming, subjected until her death to a fateful power, she vegetates without decision. This—her lingering, at once guilty and guiltless, in the precincts of fate—lends her, for the fleeting glance, a tragic quality. Thus, Gundolf can speak of "the pathos of this work, no less tragically sublime and shattering than that from which Sophocles' *Oedipus* arises." Before him [Andre] Francois-Poncet had already spoken in a similar vein in his shallow, bloated book on the "affinites electives." Yet this is the falsest of judgments. For in the tragic words of the hero, the crest of decision is ascended, beneath which the guilt and innocence of the myth engulf each other as an abyss. On the far side of Guilt and Innocence is grounded the here-and-now of Good and Evil, attainable by the hero alone—never by the hesitant girl. Therefore, it is empty talk to praise her "tragic purification." Nothing more untragic can be conceived than this mournful end.

But this is not the only place in which the speechless drive is revealed; Ottilie's life, too, seems to be without foundation when exposed to the luminous circle of moral orders. Yet only a complete lack of sympathy for this work appears to have opened the critic's eyes to it. Thus, it was reserved for the pedestrian common sense of a Julian Schmidt to raise the question that must have posed itself immediately to the unprejudiced reader of these events: "There would have been nothing to say against it if passion had been stronger than conscience, but how is this silencing of conscience to be understood?" "Ottilie commits a wrong; afterward she feels it very deeply, more deeply than necessary. But how does it come about that she does not feel it earlier? . . . How is it possible that someone as well constituted and well brought up as Ottilie is supposed to be does not feel that by her behavior toward Eduard she wrongs Charlotte, her benefactress?" No insight into the innermost relations of the novel can invalidate the plain justice of this question. Misrecognizing its obligatory character leaves the essence of the novel in darkness. For this silencing of the moral voice is not to be grasped, like the muted language of the affects, as a feature of individuality. It is not a determination within the boundaries of human being. With this silence, the semblance has installed itself consumingly in the heart of the noblest being. And this curiously calls to mind the taciturnity of Minna Herzlieb, who died insane in old age. All speechless clarity of action is semblance-like, and in truth the inner life of those who in this way preserve themselves is no less obscure to them than to others. Only in Ottilie's diary, ultimately, does her human life appear still to stir. The whole of her linguistically gifted existence is finally to be sought increasingly in these mute notations. Yet they, too, merely erect a monument for someone who has slowly died away. Their revelation of secrets that only death might unseal inures one to the thought of her passing away; and by announcing the

taciturnity of the living person, they also foretell the fact that she will become entirely mute. The semblance-like dimension, which governs the life of the girl who writes, penetrates even her spiritual, detached mood. For if it is the danger of the diary as such to lay bare prematurely the germs of memory in the soul and prevent the ripening of its fruits, the danger must necessarily become fatal when the spiritual life expresses itself only in the diary. Yet all the power of internalized existence stems finally from memory. It alone guarantees love a soul. It breathes in that Goethean recollection: "Oh, you were in times lived through/My sister or my wife." And as in such association even beauty survives itself as memory, so in its blossoming, too, beauty is inessential without memory. The words of Plato's "Phaedrus" testify to this: "But when one who is fresh from the mystery and who saw much of the vision beholds a godlike face or bodily form that truly expresses beauty, he is at first seized with shuddering and a measure of that awe which the vision inspired, then with reverence as if at the sight of a god; and but for fear of being deemed a madman, he would offer sacrifice to his beloved, as to the holy image of a deity. . . . At this sight, his memory returns to that form of beauty, and he sees her once again enthroned by the side of temperance upon her holy seat."

Ottolie's existence does not awaken such memory: in it beauty really remains what is foremost and essential. All her favorable "impression comes exclusively from her appearance; despite the numerous diary pages, her inner essence remains closed off. She is more reserved than any female figure of Heinrich von Kleist." With this insight, Julian Schmidt echoes an old critique that says with odd exactitude: "This Otilie is not an authentic child of the poet's spirit but is conceived in sinful fashion, in a doubled memory of Mignon³⁰ and an old picture by Masaccio or Giotto." Indeed, with Otilie's figure the limits of epic vis-a-vis painting are overstepped. For the appearance of the beautiful as the essential content in a living being lies outside the sphere of epic material. Yet the appearance of the beautiful does stand at the center of the novel. For one does not overstate the case if one says that the belief in Otilie's beauty is the fundamental condition for engagement with the novel. This beauty, as long as the novel's world endures, may not disappear: the coffin in which the girl rests is not closed. In this work, Goethe has left far behind the famous Homeric example of the epic depiction of beauty. For not only does Helen herself in her mockery of Paris appear in a more decisive manner than Otilie ever does in her words; but above all, in the representation of Otilie's beauty, Goethe has not followed the famous rule drawn from the admiring speeches of the old men gathered on the wall. Those distinctive epithets, which are bestowed on Otilie even against the laws of novelistic form, serve only to remove her from the epic plane in which the writer reigns, and to transmit a strange vitality to her for which he is not responsible. Thus, the farther away she

stands from Homer's Helen, the closer she stands to Goethe's Helena. In ambiguous innocence and semblance-like beauty, like her, she stands, like her, in expectation of her expiatory death. And conjuration is also in play in her appearance.

Confronting the episodic figure of the Greek woman, Goethe maintained perfect mastery, since he illuminated in the form of dramatic representation even the conjuration; and in this sense it seems hardly a matter of chance that the scene in which Faust was supposed to implore Persephone to give him Helena was never written. In *Elective Affinities*, however, the daemonic principles of conjuration irrupt into the very center of the poetic composition. For what is conjured is always only a semblance—in Otilie, a semblance of living beauty—which strongly, mysteriously, and impurely imposed itself in the most powerful sense as "material." Thus, the aura of Hades in what the author lends to the action is confirmed: he stands before the deep ground of his poetic gift like Odysseus with his naked sword before the ditch full of blood, and like him fends off the thirsty shades, in order to suffer only those whose brief report he seeks. This taciturnity is a sign of Otilie's ghostly origin. It is this origin that produces the peculiar diaphanousness, at times preciousness, in layout and execution. That formulaic quality, found primarily in the composition of the novel's second part (which in the end was significantly expanded, after the completion of the basic conception), comes out well marked in the style—in its countless parallelisms, comparisons, and qualifications, with their suggestive proximity to the late-Goethean manner. In this sense, Gorres³¹ declared to Arnim that a lot in *Elective Affinities* seemed to him "as if highly polished rather than chiseled." An expression that might especially be applied to the *Maximen und Reflexionen* [Maxims and Reflections]. Still more problematic are the features which can in no way be disclosed to the purely receptive intention—those correspondences which reveal themselves only to philological research that completely eschews aesthetics. In such correspondences the presentation encroaches, quite undeniably, upon the domain of incantatory formulas. That is why it so often lacks the ultimate immediacy and finality of artistic vivification—why it lacks form. In the novel this form does not so much construct figures, which often enough on their own authority insert themselves formlessly as mythic figures. Rather, it plays about them hesitantly—in the manner of an arabesque, so to speak; it completes and with full justification dissolves them. One may view the effect of the novel as the expression of an inherent problematic. The latter distinguishes this novel from others that find the greatest part if not always the highest stage of their effect in the unselfconscious feelings of the reader, in exercising the most disconcerting influence upon those feelings. A turbid power, which in kindred spirits may rise to rapturous enthusiasm and in more remote spirits to sullen consternation, was always peculiar to this novel; only an incorruptible

rationality, under whose protection the heart might abandon itself to the prodigious, magical beauty of this work, is able to cope with it.

Conjuration intends to be the negative counterpart of creation. It, too, claims to bring forth a world from nothingness. With neither of them does the work of art have anything in common. It emerges not from nothingness but from chaos. However, the work of art will not escape from chaos, as does the created world according to the idealism of the doctrine of emanations. Artistic creation neither "makes" anything out of chaos nor permeates it; and one would be just as unable to engender semblance, as conjuration truly does, from elements of that chaos. This is what the formula produces. Form, however, enchants chaos momentarily into world. Therefore, no work of art may seem wholly alive, in a manner free of spell-like enchantment, without becoming mere semblance and ceasing to be a work of art. The life undulating in it must appear petrified and as if spellbound in a single moment. That which in it has being is mere beauty, mere harmony, which floods through the chaos (and, in truth, through this only and not the world) but, in this flooding-through, seems only to enliven it. What arrests this semblance, spellbinds the movement, and interrupts the harmony is the expressionless [*das Ausdruckslose*]. This life grounds the mystery; this petrification grounds the content in the work. Just as interruption by the commanding word is able to bring out the truth from the evasions of a woman precisely at the point where it interrupts, the expressionless compels the trembling harmony to stop and through its objection [*Einspruch*] immortalizes its quivering. In this immortalization the beautiful must vindicate itself, but now it appears to be interrupted precisely in its vindication, and thus it has the eternity of its content precisely by the grace of that objection. The expressionless is the critical violence which, while unable to separate semblance from essence in art, prevents them from mingling. It possesses this violence as a moral dictum. In the expressionless, the sublime violence of the true appears as that which determines the language of the real world according to the laws of the moral world. For it shatters whatever still survives as the legacy of chaos in all beautiful semblance: the false, errant totality—the absolute totality. Only the expressionless completes the work, by shattering it into a thing of shards, into a fragment of the true world, into the torso of a symbol. As a category of language and art and not of the work or of the genres, the expressionless can be no more rigorously defined than through a passage in Holderlin's *Anmerkungen zum Oedipus* [Annotations to Oedipus], whose fundamental significance for the theory of art in general, beyond serving as the basis for a theory of tragedy, seems not yet to have been recognized. The passage reads: "For the tragic transport is actually empty, and the least restrained.—Thereby, in the rhythmic sequence of the representations wherein the transport presents itself, there becomes necessary what in poetic meter is called caesura, the pure word, the counter-

rhythmic rupture—namely, in order to meet the onrushing change of representations at its highest point, in such a manner that not the change of representation but the representation itself very soon appears." The "occidental Junoian sobriety"—which Holderlin, several years before he wrote this, conceived as the almost unattainable goal of all German artistic practice—is only another name for that caesura, in which, along with harmony, every expression simultaneously comes to a standstill, in order to give free reign to an expressionless power inside all artistic media. Such power has rarely become clearer than in Greek tragedy, on the one hand, and in Holderlin's hymnic poetry, on the other. Perceptible in tragedy as the falling silent of the hero, and in the rhythm of the hymn as objection. Indeed, one could not characterize this rhythm any more aptly than by asserting that something beyond the poet interrupts the language of the poetry. Here lies "the reason a hymn will seldom (and with complete justification perhaps never) be called 'beautiful.'" If in that lyric it is the expressionless, in Goethe's it is the beautiful that comes forth to the limit of what can be grasped in the work of art. What stirs beyond this limit is, in one direction, the offspring of madness, and, in the other, the conjured appearance. In the latter direction, German poetry may not venture one step beyond Goethe without mercilessly falling prey to a world of semblance, whose most alluring images were evoked by Rudolf Borchardt.³² Indeed, there is no lack of evidence that even the work of Borchardt's master did not always escape the temptation closest to the master's genius: that of conjuring the semblance.

Thus, Goethe recalls the work on the novel with the words: "One is happy enough when in these agitated times one can take refuge in the depth of tranquil passions." If here the contrast of choppy surface and tranquil depth can only remind one fleetingly of a body of water, such a simile is found much more expressly in Zelter. In a letter dealing with the novel, he writes to Goethe: "What ultimately remains suited to it is a writing style like the clear element, whose fleet inhabitants swim pell-mell among one another and, twinkling or casting shadow, dart up and down without going astray or getting lost." What is thus expressed in Zelter's manner—a manner never sufficiently valued—clarifies how the formulaically spellbound style of the author is related to the spellbinding reflection in water. And beyond stylistics it points to the signification of that "pleasure lake," and finally to the meaning of the entire work. Just as the semblance-like soul shows itself ambiguously in it, luring with innocent clarity and leading down below into the deepest darkness, water, too, partakes of this strange magic. For on the one hand, it is black, dark, unfathomable; but on the other hand, it is reflecting, clear, and clarifying. The power of this ambiguity, which had already been a theme of "The Fisherman" ["*Der Fischer*"],³³ has become dominant in the essence of the passion in *Elective Affinities*. If the ambiguity thus leads into the novel's center, still it points back again to the mythic

origin of the novel's image of the beautiful life and allows that image to be recognized with complete clarity.

In the element from which the goddess [Aphrodite] arose, beauty appears truly to be at home. She is praised at flowing rivers and fountains; one of the Oceanides is named *Schonfliefi* [Beautiful Flow];³⁴ among the Nereids the beautiful form of Galatea stands out; and numerous beautiful-heeled daughters arise from the gods of the sea. The mobile element, as it first of all washes round the foot of the walker, moistens the feet of the goddesses, dispensing beauty; and silver-footed Thetis always remains the model for the poetic imagination of the Greeks when they depict this part of the body in their creations. . . . Hesiod does not attribute beauty to any man or to any god conceived as masculine; here, too, beauty does not yet denote any sort of inner worth. It appears quite predominantly in the external form of the woman, connected to Aphrodite and the Oceanian forms of life.

If, as Julius Walter says in his *Asthetik im Altertum* [Aesthetics in Antiquity], the origin of a merely beautiful life (according to the indications of myth) thus lies in the world of harmonic-chaotic wave motion, a deeper sensibility sought the origin of Otilie there. Where Hengstenberg thinks in a malicious way of Otilie's "nymphish meal" and Werner gropingly imagines his "hideous tender sea-nixies," there with incomparable sureness of touch Bettina [von Arnim] struck the inmost link: "You're in love with her, Goethe—I've suspected it for a long time already. That Venus surged out of the foaming sea of your passion, and after sowing a harvest of pearly tears, she vanishes back into it with supernatural radiance."

With the semblance-like character that determines Otilie's beauty, insubstantiality also threatens the salvation that the friends gain from their struggles. For if beauty is semblance-like, so, too, is the reconciliation that it promises mythically in life and death. Its sacrifice, like its blossoming, would be in vain, its reconciling a semblance of reconciliation. In fact, true reconciliation exists only with God. Whereas in true reconciliation the individual reconciles himself with God and only in this way conciliates other human beings, it is peculiar to semblance-like reconciliation that the individual wants others to make their peace with one another and only in this way become reconciled with God. This relation of semblance-like reconciliation to true reconciliation again evokes the opposition between novel and novella. For it is to this point that the bizarre quarrel which perplexes the lovers in their youth finally intends to reach: the point at which their love, because it risks life for the sake of true reconciliation, achieves this reconciliation and with it the peace in which their bond of love endures. Because true reconciliation with God is achieved by no one who does not thereby destroy everything—or as much as he possesses—in order only then, before God's reconciled countenance, to find it resurrected. It follows that a death-

defying leap marks that moment when—each one wholly alone for himself before God—they make every effort for the sake of reconciliation. And only in such readiness for reconciliation, having made their peace, do they gain each other. For reconciliation, which is entirely supermundane and hardly an object for concrete depiction in a novel, has its worldly reflection in the conciliation of one's fellow men. How much noble consideration falls short of that tolerance and gentleness which, ultimately, only increases the distance in which the figures of the novel know themselves to stand. Since they always avoid quarreling openly, though Goethe did not balk at depicting excessiveness even in the violent deed of a young woman, conciliation must remain inaccessible to them. So much suffering, so little struggle. Hence the silencing of all affects. They never appear externally as enmity, revenge, envy, yet neither do they live internally as lament, shame, or despair. For how could the desperate actions of the unrequited compare with the sacrifice of Otilie—a sacrifice that puts in God's hand not the most precious good but the most difficult burden, and anticipates his decree. Thus, her semblance is thoroughly lacking in all the annihilating character of true reconciliation, just as, insofar as possible, everything painful and violent remains remote from the manner of her death. And not with this alone does an impious providence inflict on those all-too-peaceable folk the threatening time of trouble. For what the author shrouds in silence a hundred times can be seen quite simply enough from the course of things as a whole: that, according to ethical laws, passion loses all its rights and happiness when it seeks a pact with the bourgeois, affluent, secure life. This is the chasm across which the author intends, in vain, to have his figures stride with somnambulistic sureness upon the narrow path of pure human civility. That noble curbing and controlling is unable to replace the clarity that the author certainly knew just how to remove from himself, as well as from them. (In this, Stifter is his perfect epigone.) In the mute constraint that encloses these human beings in the circle of human custom, indeed of bourgeois custom, hoping there to salvage for them the life of passion, lies the dark transgression which demands its dark expiation. Basically they flee from the verdict of the law that still has power over them. If, to judge from appearances, they are exempted from it through their noble being, in reality only sacrifice can rescue them. Therefore, the peace that harmony ought to lend them does not fall to their lot; their art of life in the Goethean manner only makes the sultriness closer. For what reigns here is the quiet before a storm; in the novella, however, thunderstorm and peace prevail. While love guides the reconciled, only beauty, as a semblance of reconciliation, remains behind with the others.

For those who truly love, the beauty of the beloved is not decisive. If it was beauty that first attracted them to each other, they will forget it again and again for greater splendors, in order, of course, to become conscious of

it again and again, in memory, until the end. It is otherwise with passion. Every waning of beauty, even the slightest decline, makes it despair. Only for love is the beautiful woman the most precious boon; for passion, the *most* beautiful woman is the most precious. Passionate, then, is also the disapproval with which the friends turn away from the novella. For them the surrender of beauty is indeed unbearable. That wildness which disfigures the young woman [in the novella] is not Luciane's empty, destructive kind either, but rather the urgent, healing wildness of a more noble creature: however much grace is paired with it, it is enough to lend her something off-putting to rob her of the canonical expression of beauty. This young woman is not essentially beautiful. Ottilie is. In his own way, even Eduard is: not for nothing is the beauty of this couple praised. Goethe himself not only expended—beyond the limits of art—all the conceivable power of his gifts to conjure this beauty, but with the lightest touch gives sufficient evidence for the reader to intuit that the world of this gentle veiled beauty is the center of the poetic work. In the name "Ottilie" he alludes to the saint who was the patron of those suffering from eye disease and to whom a convent on the Odilienberg in the Black Forest was dedicated. Goethe calls her a "consolation for the eyes" of the men who see her; indeed, in her name one may also catch a hint of the mild light which is the blessing of sick eyes and in itself the hearth of all semblance. To this light he contrasted the radiance that shines painfully in the name and appearance of Luciane, and to her wide sunny circle he contrasted the secret lunar environment of Ottilie. Yet just as he places alongside Ottilie's gentleness not only Luciane's false wildness but also the true wildness of the child lovers, so the gentle shimmer of her being is placed in the middle between hostile brilliance and sober light. The furious attack described in the novella was directed against the eyesight of the beloved; the character of this love, which is averse to all semblance, could not be more rigorously intimidated. Passion remains caught in its spell, and in itself it is unable to lend support, even in fidelity, to those who are inflamed. Subjected as it is to the beauty beneath every semblance, its chaotic side must break out devastatingly, unless a more spiritual element, which would be able to pacify the semblance, were to find its way to it. This is affection.

In affection the human being is detached from passion. It is the law of essence that determines this, just as it determines every detachment from the sphere of semblance and every passage to the realm of essence; it determines that gradually, indeed even under a final and most extreme intensification of the semblance, the change comes about. Thus, passion appears, even in the emergence of affection, to turn completely—and ever more than before—into love. Passion and affection are the elements of all semblance-like love, which reveals itself as distinct from true love not in the failure of feeling but rather uniquely in its helplessness. And so one must emphasize that it is not true love which reigns in Ottilie and Eduard. Love becomes perfect

only where, elevated above its nature, it is saved through God's intervention. Thus, the dark conclusion of love, whose daemon is Eros, is not a naked foundering but rather the true ransoming of the deepest imperfection which belongs to the nature of man himself. For it is this imperfection which denies to him the fulfillment of love. Therefore, into all loving that human nature alone determines, affection enters as the real work of Eros *thanatos*—the admission that man cannot love. Whereas in all redeemed true love, passion, like affection, remains secondary, the history of affection and the transition of the one into the other makes up the essence of Eros. Of course, blaming the lovers, as Bielschowsky ventures to do, does not lead to this result. Nonetheless, even his banal tone does not allow the truth to be misunderstood. Having intimated the misbehavior—indeed the unbridled selfishness—of Eduard, he says further of Ottilie's unswerving love: "Now and again, we may encounter in life so abnormal a phenomenon. But then we shrug our shoulders and say we don't understand it. To offer such an explanation with regard to a poetic work is its gravest condemnation. In literature we want to and must understand. For the poet is a creator. He creates souls." To what extent this may be conceded will certainly remain extremely problematic. Yet it is unmistakable that those Goethean figures can appear to be not created [*geschaffen*] or purely constructed [*gebildet*], but conjured [*gebannt*]. Precisely from this stems the kind of obscurity that is foreign to works of art and that can be fathomed only by someone who recognizes its essence in the semblance. For semblance in this poetic work is not so much represented as it is in the poetic representation itself. It is only for this reason that the semblance can signify so much; and only for this reason that the representation signifies so much. The collapse of that love is revealed more cogently this way: every love grown within itself must become master of this world—in its natural exitus, the common (that is, strictly simultaneous) death, or in its supernatural duration, marriage. Goethe said this expressly in the novella, since the moment of shared readiness for death through God's will gives new life to the lovers, following which old rights lose their claim. Here he shows the life of the two lovers saved in precisely the sense in which marriage preserves it for the pious ones; in this pair he depicted the power of true love, which he prohibited himself from expressing in religious form. Opposed to this, in the novel, within this domain of life, is the double failure. While the one couple, in isolation, dies away, marriage is denied to the survivors. The conclusion leaves the captain and Charlotte like shades in Limbo. Since the author could not let true love reign in either of the couples (it would have exploded this world), in the characters of the novella he supplied his work inconspicuously but unmistakably with its emblem.

The norm of law makes itself master of a vacillating love. The marriage between Eduard and Charlotte, even in its dissolution, brings death to such

love, because in it lies embedded—albeit in mythic disfigurement—the greatness of the decision to which choice is never equal. And thus the title of the novel pronounces judgment on them—a judgment of which Goethe was half-unconscious, it seems. For in the advertisement that he wrote for the book, he seeks to rescue the concept of choice for moral thought: "It seems that this strange title was suggested to the author by the experiments he conducted in the physical sciences. He may well have noticed that, in the natural sciences, ethical analogies are very often used to bring closer to the circle of human knowledge things far remote from it; and therefore he was very likely all the more inclined, in an ethical instance, to refer a chemical discourse of likenesses back to its spiritual origin, since, indeed, everywhere there is but One Nature, and the traces of disturbing passionate necessity run incessantly through the serene empire of rational freedom—traces that can be entirely extinguished only by a higher hand, and perhaps not in this life." But more clearly than these sentences—which appear to seek in vain God's empire, where the lovers dwell—in that domain of serene freedom of reason, the bare word speaks. "Affinity" [*Verwandtschaft*] is already, in and of itself, conceivably the purest word to characterize the closest human connection, as much on the basis of value as on that of motives. And in marriage it becomes strong enough to make literal what is metaphorical in it. This cannot be strengthened through choice; nor, in particular, would the spiritual dimension of such affinity be founded on choice. This rebellious presumption, however, is proved most incontrovertibly by the double meaning of the word "choice" [*Wahl*], which does not cease to signify both what is seized in the act and the very act of choosing. As always, that affinity becomes the object of a resolution; it strides over the stage of choice to decision. This annihilates choice in order to establish loyalty: only the decision, not the choice, is inscribed in the book of life. For choice is natural and can even belong to the elements; decision is transcendent.—Only because the highest legitimacy is not reserved for that love, it follows that the greater power inheres in this marriage. Yet the author never in the least wanted to attribute to the foundering marriage a right of its own. Marriage can in no sense be the center of the novel. On this point Hebbel,³⁵ too, like countless others, was completely in error when he wrote: "In Goethe's *Elective Affinities* one aspect still remains abstract: the immense importance of marriage for the state and for humanity is, to be sure, indicated argumentatively but has not been made visible in the frame of representation, which would have been equally possible and would have greatly reinforced the impression of the entire work." And even earlier, in the preface to *Maria Magdalene*: "I could not explain to myself how Goethe, who was an artist through and through, a great artist, could have committed in *Elective Affinities* such an offense against inner form: not unlike an absent-minded dissector who brings to the anatomical theater an automaton instead of a

real body, he placed at the center of his representation a marriage a priori empty, indeed immoral, like that between Eduard and Charlotte, and treated and used this relation as if it were quite the opposite, a perfectly legitimate one." Apart from the fact that the marriage is not the center of the action but rather the means, Goethe did not make it appear, and did not want to have it appear, in the form in which Hebbel conceives it. For he would have sensed too deeply that "a priori" nothing at all could be said about them; their morality could prove to be only fidelity, their immorality only infidelity. Let alone that passion, for instance, could form its basis. Tritely but not incorrectly, Baumgartner, a Jesuit, says: "They love each other but without that passion which, for sickly and sentimental souls, constitutes the sole charm of existence." But for this reason, conjugal fidelity is not less conditioned. Conditioned in both senses: by a necessary condition, as well as by a sufficient condition. The former lies in the foundation of decision. It is certainly not more arbitrary, because passion is not its criterion. Rather, this criterion resides—all the more unambiguous and rigorous—in the character of the experience preceding the decision. For only this experience is able to sustain the decision that, beyond all later occurrences and comparisons, reveals itself to the experiencing agent as essentially singular and unique, whereas every attempt by upright human beings to found decision on lived experience sooner or later fails. If this necessary condition of conjugal fidelity is given, then fulfillment of duty amounts to its sufficient condition. Only when one of the two can remain free of doubt as to whether it was there can the cause of the rupture in the marriage be stated. Only then is it clear whether the rupture is necessary "a priori": whether, through reversal, salvation is still to be hoped for. And with this, that prehistory which Goethe devised for the novel comes forth as evidence of the most unerring feeling. Earlier, Eduard and Charlotte already loved one another, yet despite this they entered into an empty marriage bond before uniting with each other. Only in this one way, perhaps, could the question remain in the balance: the question of where, in the life of both spouses, the blunder lies—whether in their earlier irresoluteness or in their present infidelity. For Goethe had to sustain the hope that a bonding which had already once been victorious was destined to last now, too. Yet the fact that this marriage could not, either as a juridical form or as a bourgeois one, confront the semblance that seduces it can hardly have escaped the author. Only in the sense of religion, in which marriages "worse" than this one have their inviolable subsistence, would this facility be given to it. Accordingly, the failure of all attempts at union is motivated particularly deeply by the fact that these attempts issue from a man who, with the authority of priestly consecration, has himself renounced the power and the law that alone could justify such things. Yet since union is no longer granted to the couple, at the end the question prevails, which, doing the work of exculpation, accompanies everything:

Wasn't that merely liberation from an undertaking which was misguided from the start? However that may be, these human beings are torn out of the path of marriage in order to find their essence under other laws.

Sounder than passion yet not more helpful, affection likewise only brings about the ruin of those who renounce passion. But it does not drive the lonely ones to ruin like them. It tenaciously escorts the lovers in their descent: they reach the end conciliated. On this final path they turn to a beauty that is no longer arrested by semblance, and they stand in the domain of music. Goethe called the third poem of the trilogy, in which passion comes to rest, "Conciliation." It is the "double happiness of sounds and of love" which here—not at all as a fulfillment but rather as a first weak premonition, as the almost hopeless shimmer of dawn—gleams to the tormented ones. Music, of course, knows conciliation in love, and for this reason the last poem of the trilogy alone bears a dedication, whereas the "leave me alone" of passion slips out from "The Elegy," both in its motto and in its conclusion.³⁶ Reconciliation, however, which remained in the domain of the worldly, had already thereby to unveil itself as semblance, and presumably to the passionate ones for whom it finally grew dim. "The higher world—how it fades away before the senses!" "There music hovers on angelic wings," and now the semblance promises for the first time to retreat entirely, now for the first time longs to grow dim and become perfect. "The eye grows moist, feels in loftier longing / The divine value of [musical] sounds as of tears." These tears, which fill one's eyes when one listens to music, deprive those eyes of the visible world. And thus is indicated that deep set of connections, which appears according to a fleeting remark to have guided Hermann Cohen, who in a manner akin to that of the aged Goethe was perhaps more sensitive than all the interpreters. "Only the lyric poet, who comes to perfection in Goethe, only the man who sows tears, the tears of infinite love, could endow this novel with such unity." Of course, that is nothing more than a presentiment: from here, too, no path leads interpretation further. For this direction can be provided only by the knowledge that that "infinite" love is much less than the simple one (which people say lasts beyond death), that it is affection which leads to death. But in this its essence has an effect, and the unity of the novel, if you will, is announced here: affection, like the veiling of the image through tears in music, thus summons forth in conciliation the ruin of the semblance through emotion. For emotion is precisely that transition in which the semblance—the semblance of beauty as the semblance of reconciliation—once again dawns sweetest before its vanishing. Neither humor nor tragedy can verbally grasp beauty; beauty cannot appear in an aura of transparent clarity. Its most exact opposite is emotion. Neither guilt nor innocence, neither nature nor the beyond, can be strictly differentiated for beauty. In this sphere Ottilie appears; this veil must lie over her beauty. For the tears of emotion, in which the gaze grows

veiled, are at the same time the most authentic veil of beauty itself. But emotion is only the semblance of reconciliation. And that deceptive harmony in the lovers' flute playing—how unsteady and moving it is! Their world is wholly deserted by music. Thus it is that the semblance, which is linked to emotion, can become so powerful only in those who, like Goethe, are not from the beginning moved in their innermost being by music and are proof against the power of living beauty. To rescue what is essential in it is Goethe's struggle. In this struggle the semblance of this beauty grows more and more turbid, like the transparency of a fluid in the concussion by which it forms crystals. For it is not the little emotion, which delights in itself, but only the great emotion of shattering in which the semblance of reconciliation overcomes the beautiful semblance and with it, finally, itself. The lament full of tears: that is emotion. And to it as well as to the tearless cry of woe, the space of Dionysian shock lends resonance. "The mourning and pain of the Dionysian, as the tears that are shed for the continual decline of all life, form gentle ecstasy; it is 'the life of the cicada, which, without food or drink, sings until it dies.'" Thus Bernoulli on the one hundred forty-first chapter of *Matriarchy*, in which Bachofen discusses the cicada, the creature which, originally indigenous to the dark earth, was elevated by the mythic profundity of the Greeks into the association of Uranic symbols.³⁷ What else was the meaning of Goethe's meditations on Ottilie's departure from life?

The more deeply emotion understands itself, the more it is transition; for the true poet, it never signifies an end. This is the precise implication when shock emerges as the best part of emotion, and Goethe means the same thing (albeit in a strange context) when he writes in "On Interpreting Aristotle's *Poetics*" ["Nachlese zu Aristoteles *Poetik*"]: "Whoever, now, advances on the path of a truly moral inner development will feel and admit that tragedies and tragic novels in no way assuage the spirit but rather put the soul and what we call the heart in commotion and lead them toward a vague and indeterminate state. Youth loves this state and is therefore passionately inclined to such works." Emotion, however, will be a transition from the confused intuition "on the path of a truly moral. .. development" only to the uniquely objective correlative of shock, to the sublime. It is precisely this transition, this going over, that is accomplished in the going under of the semblance. That semblance which presents itself in Ottilie's beauty is the one that goes under. It is not to be understood, however, as if external need and force bring about Ottilie's destruction; rather, her type of semblance itself is the basis for the imperative that the semblance be extinguished, and extinguished soon. This semblance is quite different from the triumphant one of dazzling beauty, which is that of Luciane or of Lucifer. And whereas the figure of Goethe's Helena and the more famous one of the Mona Lisa owe the enigma of their splendor to the conflict between these two kinds of semblance, the figure of Ottilie is governed throughout by only

the one semblance, which is extinguished. The writer has inscribed this into every one of her movements and gestures, so that ultimately she will—in her diary, in the most melancholy as well as tender fashion—increasingly lead the life of one who is dwindling away. Hence, what has revealed itself in Ottilie is not the semblance of beauty as such, which doubly manifests itself, but solely that one—the vanishing one which is her own. Yet this semblance, of course, opens up insight into the beautiful semblance as such and makes itself known for the first time in it. Therefore, to every view that takes in the figure of Ottilie, the old question arises whether beauty is semblance.

Everything essentially beautiful is always and in its essence bound up, though in infinitely different degrees, with semblance. This union attains its highest intensity in that which is manifestly alive and precisely here, in a clear polarity between the triumphant semblance and the semblance that extinguishes itself. For everything living (the higher the quality of its life, the more this is so) is lifted up beyond the domain of the essentially beautiful; accordingly, the essentially beautiful manifests itself, in its form, most of all as semblance. Beautiful life, the essentially beautiful, and semblance-like beauty—these three are identical. In this sense, the Platonic theory of the beautiful is connected with the still older problem of semblance, since, according to the *Symposium*, it first of all addresses physically living beauty. If this problem still remains latent in the Platonic speculation, it is because to Plato, a Greek, beauty is at least as essentially represented in the young man as in the young woman—but the fullness of life is greater in the female than in the male. Nonetheless, a moment of semblance remains preserved in that which is least alive, if it is essentially beautiful. And this is the case with all works of art, but least among them music. Accordingly, there dwells in all beauty of art that semblance—that is to say, that verging and bordering on life—without which beauty is not possible. The semblance, however, does not comprise the essence of beauty. Rather, the latter points down more deeply to what in the work of art in contrast to the semblance may be characterized as the expressionless; but outside this contrast, it neither appears in art nor can be unambiguously named. Although the expressionless contrasts with the semblance, it stands in such a fashion of necessary relationship to the semblance that precisely the beautiful, even if it is itself not semblance, ceases to be essentially beautiful when the semblance disappears from it. For semblance belongs to the essentially beautiful as the veil and as the essential law of beauty, shows itself thus, that beauty appears as such only in what is veiled. Beauty, therefore, is not itself semblance, as banal philosophemes assert. On the contrary, the famous formula, in the extreme shallowness of Solger's final development of it—beauty is truth become visible—contains the most fundamental distortion of this great theme. Simmel likewise should not have taken this theorem so

the philosopher by virtue of everything except their literal wording. This formula—which, since truth is not in itself visible and its becoming visible could rest only on traits not its own, makes beauty into a semblance—amounts in the end, quite apart from its lack of method and reason, to philosophical barbarism. For nothing else is signified when the thought is nourished in it that the truth of the beautiful can be unveiled. Beauty is not a semblance, not a veil covering something else. It itself is not appearance but purely essence—one which, of course, remains essentially identical to itself only when veiled. Therefore, even if everywhere else semblance is deception, the beautiful semblance is the veil thrown over that which is necessarily most veiled. For the beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil. Unveiled, however, it would prove to be infinitely inconspicuous [*unscheinbar*]. Here is the basis of the age-old view that that which is veiled is transformed in the unveiling, that it will remain "like unto itself" only underneath the veiling. Thus, in the face of everything beautiful, the idea of unveiling becomes that of the impossibility of unveiling. It is the idea of art criticism. The task of art criticism is not to lift the veil but rather, through the most precise knowledge of it as a veil, to raise itself for the first time to the true view of the beautiful. To the view that will never open itself to so-called empathy and will only imperfectly open itself to a purer contemplation of the naive: to the view of the beautiful as that which is secret. Never yet has a true work of art been grasped other than where it ineluctably represented itself as a secret. For that object, to which in the last instance the veil is essential, is not to be characterized otherwise. Since only the beautiful and outside it nothing—veiling or being veiled—can be essential, the divine ground of the being of beauty lies in the secret. So then the semblance in it is just this: not the superfluous veiling of things in themselves but rather the necessary veiling of things for us. Such veiling is divinely necessary at times, just as it is also divinely determined that, unveiled at the wrong time, what is inconspicuous evaporates into nothing, whereupon revelation takes over from secrets. Kant's doctrine, that the foundation of beauty is a relational character, accordingly carries through victoriously, in a much higher sphere than the psychological, its methodical tendencies. Like revelation, all beauty holds in itself the orders of the history of philosophy. For beauty makes visible not the idea but rather the latter's secret.

For the sake of that unity, which veil and veiled compose in it, beauty can essentially be valid only where the duality of nakedness and veiling does not yet obtain: in art and in the appearances of mere nature. On the other hand, the more distinctly this duality expresses itself in order finally to confirm itself at the highest in man, the more this becomes clear: in veilless nakedness the essentially beautiful has withdrawn, and in the naked body of the human being are attained a being beyond all beauty—the sublime—and a work beyond all creations—that of the creator. The last of those savins

correspondences thereby opens itself up—one in which, with incomparably rigorous precision, the delicately formed novella corresponds to the novel. When, in the novella, the youth unclothes the beloved, he does so not out of lust but for life's sake. He does not look [*betrachtet*] at her naked body, and just for that reason he perceives its majesty. The author does not choose his words idly when he says: "The desire to save a life was all that mattered" [*Hier uberwand die Begierde zu retten jede andere Betrachtung*; R228]. For, in love, looking is unable to dominate. It is not from the will to happiness—which only fleetingly lingers unbroken in the rarest acts of contemplation, in the "halcyon" stillness of the soul—that love has arisen. Its origin is the presentiment of a life of bliss. But where love as the bitterest passion frustrates itself, where in it the *vita contemplativa* is still the mightiest and where the view of the most splendid is more longed for than union with the beloved—this *Elective Affinities* presents in the fate of Eduard and Otilie. Accordingly, no feature of the novella is in vain. With regard to the freedom and necessity that it reveals vis-a-vis the novel, the novella is comparable to an image in the darkness of a cathedral—an image which portrays the cathedral itself and so in the midst of the interior communicates a view of the place that is not otherwise available. In this way it brings inside at the same time a reflection of the bright, indeed sober day. And if this sobriety seems sacred, shines sacredly, the most peculiar thing is that it is not so, perhaps, only for Goethe. For his literary composition remains turned toward the interior in the veiled light refracted through multicolored panes. Shortly after its completion, he writes to Zelter: "Wherever my new novel finds you, accept it in a friendly manner. I am convinced that the transparent and opaque veil will not prevent you from seeing inside to the form truly intended." This mention of "veil" was more to him than an image—it is the veil that again and again had to affect him where he was struggling for insight into beauty. Three figures from his lifework have grown out of this struggle, which shook him like no other; the figures are Mignon, Otilie, and Helena.

So let me seem till I become: Take not
this garment white from me! I hasten
from the joys of earth Down to that
house so fast and firm.

There will I rest in peace a while, Till
opens wide my freshened glance Then I
will cast my dress aside. Leaving both
wreath and girdle there.³⁸

And Helena, too, abandons it: "Dress and veil remain in his arms." Goethe knows what was tabulated about the deception of this semblance. He has Faust warned in these words:

Hold fast what of it remains to you.
The robe, do not let go of it.
Demons are already tugging at the corners, would like
To snatch it down into the underworld. Hold fast!
It is no longer the goddess whom you lost,
Yet it is divine.³⁹

In contrast to these, however, the veil of Otilie remains as her living body. Only in her case does the law, which manifests itself with the others more haltingly, express itself clearly: the more life disappears, the more disappears all beauty having the character of semblance—that beauty which is able to adhere uniquely to the living, until with the complete end of the one, the other, too, must vanish. Thus, nothing mortal is incapable of being unveiled. When, therefore, the *Maxims and Reflections* duly characterize the most extreme degree of such incapacity to unveil with the profound words, "Beauty can never become lucid about itself," God still remains, in whose presence there is no secret and everything is life. The human being appears to us as a corpse and his life as love, when they are in the presence of God. Thus, death has the power to lay bare like love. Only nature cannot be unveiled, for it preserves a mystery so long as God lets it exist. Truth is discovered in the essence of language. The human body lays itself bare, a sign that the human being itself stands before God.

Beauty that does not surrender itself in love must fall prey to death. Otilie knows her path to death. Because she recognizes it, prefigured, in the innermost region of her young life, she is—not in action but in essence—the most youthful of all the figures whom Goethe created. No doubt age lends a readiness to die; youth, however, is readiness for death. How hidden was the way in which Goethe said that Charlotte "was very fond of living"! Never in any other work did he give to youth what he granted it in Otilie: the whole of life, in the way that, from its own duration, it has its own death. Indeed, one may say that if he was in truth blind to anything, it was precisely to this. If Otilie's existence, in the pathos which distinguishes it from all others, nevertheless refers to the life of youth, then only through the destiny of her beauty could Goethe become conciliated with this view, to which his own being refused assent. For this there is a peculiar reference, to a certain extent constituting a source. In May 1809 Bettina sent Goethe a letter touching on the rebellion of the Tiroleans—a letter in which she says: "Yes, Goethe, during this time things took quite a different turn in me . . . Somber halls, which contain prophetic monuments of mighty heroes in death, are the center of my dark imaginings . . . Oh, do join with me in remembering [the Tiroleans] . . . It is the poet's glory that he secure immortality for the heroes!" In August of the same year, Goethe wrote the final version of Part II, Chapter 3, of *Elective Affinities*, where one reads in Otilie's diary: "There is one grim notion held by ancient civilizations that

might seem terrifying to us. They imagined their forebears to be sitting in silent conversation on thrones arranged in a circle in large caves. If the newcomer entering were sufficiently worthy, they stood and bowed in welcome. Yesterday, while I was sitting in the chapel, I noticed that several carved seats had been placed in a circle opposite my own, and the thought seemed pleasant and agreeable to me. 'Why can you not sit still?' I thought to myself. 'Sit silent and withdrawn for a long, long time, until at last the friends would come for whom you would stand and whom you would show to their places with a friendly bow'" [R185]. It is easy to understand this allusion to Valhalla as an unconscious or knowing reminiscence of the passage in the letter from Bettina. For the affinity of mood of those short sentences is striking, striking in Goethe the thought of Valhalla, striking, finally, how abruptly it is introduced into Otilie's note. Would it not be a sign of the fact that, in those gentler words of Otilie, Goethe had drawn closer to Bettina's heroic demeanor?

Let one judge, after all this, whether it is truth or idle mystification when Gundolf maintains with sham frankness, "The figure of Otilie is neither the main character nor the real problem of *Elective Affinities*"; and whether it makes any sense when he adds, "But without the moment when Goethe saw that which in the work appears as Otilie, it is very unlikely that the content would have been 'thickened' or the problem formulated in these terms." For what is clear in all of this, if not one thing: that it is the figure—indeed the name—of Otilie which spellbound Goethe to this world, so that he could truly rescue someone perishing, could redeem in her a loved one? He confessed as much to Sulpiz Boisseree, who has recorded it with the wonderful words in which, thanks to his most intimate perception of the author, he at the same time alludes more deeply to the secret of Goethe's work than he might ever have been aware of. "During the journey, we came to speak of *Elective Affinities*. He emphasized how rapidly and irresistibly he had brought on the catastrophe. The stars had risen; he spoke of his relation to Otilie, of how he had loved her and how she had made him unhappy. At the end, his speeches became almost mysteriously full of foreboding.—In between, he would recite light-hearted verse. Thus, weary, stimulated, half-full of foreboding, half-asleep, we arrived in Heidelberg in the most beautiful starlight." If it did not escape this reporter how, with the rising of the stars, Goethe's thoughts steered themselves toward his work, Goethe himself was quite probably hardly aware—a fact to which his language attests—how sublime beyond measure the moment was and how clear the warning of the stars. In such admonition, what had long ago faded away as lived experience [*Erlebnis*] persisted as traditional experience [*Er-fahrung*]. For in the symbol of the star, the hope that Goethe had to conceive for the lovers had once appeared to him. That sentence, which to speak with Holderlin contains the caesura of the work and in which, while the embracing lovers seal their fate, everything pauses, reads: "Hope shot across the

sky above their heads like a falling star" [R239]. They are unaware of it, of course, and it could not be said any more clearly that the last hope is never such to him who cherishes it but is the last only to those for whom it is cherished. With this comes to light the innermost basis for the "narrator's stance." It is he alone who, in the feeling of hope, can fulfill the meaning of the event—quite as Dante assumes in himself the hopelessness of the lovers, when, after the words of Francesca da Rimini, he falls "as if a corpse fell." That most paradoxical, most fleeting hope finally emerges from the semblance of reconciliation, just as, at twilight, as the sun is extinguished, rises the evening star which outlasts the night. Its glimmer, of course, is imparted by Venus. And upon the slightest such glimmer all hope rests; even the richest hope comes only from it. Thus, at the end, hope justifies the semblance of reconciliation, and Plato's tenet that it is absurd to desire the semblance of the good suffers its one exception. For one is permitted to desire the semblance of reconciliation—indeed, it must be desired: it alone is the house of the most extreme hope. Thus, hope finally wrests itself from it; and like a trembling question, there echoes at the end of the book that "How beautiful" in the ears of the dead, who, we hope, awaken, if ever, not to a beautiful world but to a blessed one. "Elpis" remains the last of the primal words: the certainty of blessing that, in the novella, the lovers take home with them corresponds to the hope of redemption that we nourish for all the dead. This hope is the sole justification of the faith in immortality, which must never be kindled from one's own existence. But precisely because of this hope, those Christian-mystical moments at the end are out of place, arising as they do—in a manner unlike the way they arose in the Romantics—from the striving to ennoble everything mythic at ground level. Hence, not this Nazarene essence but rather the symbol of the star falling over the heads of the lovers is the form of expression appropriate to whatever of mystery in the exact sense of the term indwells the work. The mystery is, on the dramatic level, that moment in which it juts out of the domain of language proper to it into a higher one unattainable for it. Therefore, this moment can never be expressed in words but is expressible solely in representation: it is the "dramatic" in the strictest sense. An analogous moment of representation in *Elective Affinities* is the falling star. The novel's epic basis in the mythic, its lyrical breadth in passion and affection, is joined by its dramatic crowning in the mystery of hope. If music encloses genuine mysteries, this world of course remains a mute world, from which music will never ring out. Yet to what is it dedicated if not redemption, to which it promises more than conciliation? This is inscribed in the "tablet" that Stefan George has placed over the house in Bonn in which Beethoven was born:

Before you wage the battle of your star, I
sing of strife and gains on higher stars.

Before you know the bodies on this star,
I shape you dreams among eternal stars.

The phrase "Before you know the bodies" appears destined for a sublime irony. Those lovers never seize the body. What does it matter if they never gathered strength for battle? Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope.

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Notes

I have profited from consulting prior, partial translations of this essay, including those of Harry Zohn, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, John McCole, J. Hillis Miller, Rainer Nagele, and James Rolleston. Ian Balfour graciously referred me to most of these translations and allowed me to consult his own incisive versions. I have also profited from consulting the complete translations of J. J. Slawney and James MacFarland. Excerpts from the following translations have been used here: *The Works of Stefan George*, trans. Olga Marx and Ernst Morwitz (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974); Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, trans. Judith Ryan (New York: Suhrkamp, 1988); idem, *From My Life: Poetry and Truth, Part IV*, trans. Robert R. Heitner (New York: Suhrkamp, 1987); idem, *Scientific Studies*, trans. Douglas Miller (New York: Suhrkamp, 1983); idem, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, trans. Eric A. Blackall (New York: Suhrkamp, 1988); Friedrich Holderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); idem, *Selected Verse*, trans. Michael Hamburger (Baltimore: Penguin, 1961); Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Plato, "Phaedrus," in *Collected Dialogues*, trans. Lane Cooper et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).—*Trans.*

1. *Schein* connotes both something negative, mere appearance or illusion, and something positive; it is the luster that marks the point, in German idealism and Romanticism, at which the numinous shines through the material symbol.—*Trans.*
2. Johann Bernhard Basedow (1723-1790) was the preeminent theorist of education in Germany in the eighteenth century. His *Elementarwerk* [Elementary Work] of 1774 was widely read and its ideas were long applied to education.—*Trans.*
3. Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) was, along with Vico, one of the first thinkers to develop a historicist position. The dramatist Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) and especially Goethe and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767—1835)—the statesman, linguist, and philosopher who founded the university in Berlin, which served as the model for the modern Western university—were intensely interested in the historical development of national cultures.—*Trans.*

4. Hermann Cohen (1842-1918) did important work combining philosophy—he was the cofounder of the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism and published books on ethics, epistemology, and aesthetics—and Jewish theology. In this essay, Benjamin draws extensively (though without explicit citation) on Cohen's *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* [Religion of Reason from the Sources of Judaism; 1919]. Cohen there distinguishes sharply between a rational monotheism and a myth-ridden polytheism.—*Trans.*
5. Goethe's novel appeared in 1809. In Part I, the aristocrat Eduard has finally been able to marry his first love, Charlotte, after both had been forced into socially advantageous marriages. Living at Eduard's country estate, they are joined by his friend, the Captain, and then by Charlotte's niece, Ottilie. The foolish Mittler—his name connotes that he will mediate between or even introduce previously separated individuals—plays a smaller role in the novel than in Benjamin's reading. While Charlotte and the Captain struggle against their growing attraction, first Eduard and then finally the innocent Ottilie acknowledge their love for each other. In a night of passion, Eduard and Charlotte embrace, while each longs intensely for a different partner. The next day, they openly declare their love, respectively, for Ottilie and the Captain. Charlotte, however, insists that they renounce these affinities and remain together. The Captain leaves the estate just as Eduard learns that Charlotte will bear the child conceived on that fateful night. Eduard, seeing himself deprived of Ottilie, throws himself into war, longing for death.

The novel's second part is suffused with symbols of death. The action stagnates, as the narrator focuses on Ottilie's psychological processes, which are conveyed primarily by lengthy excerpts from her diary. The child is an ever-present reminder of infidelity: it resembles not its parents but Ottilie and the Captain. As Eduard returns from battle, he visits the Captain and proposes that each marry the person he truly loves; at the estate, he explains the child's origins to Ottilie and asks for her hand. Ottilie accepts, on the condition that Charlotte also accept the Captain. It is at this point that the passage so important to Benjamin's reading occurs: "Hope shot across the sky above their heads like a falling star." Yet the emotional turmoil produced in Ottilie by her love for Eduard brings on the catastrophe: as she returns across the lake, the child falls from the rocking boat and drowns. Eduard greets the loss as an act of providence that has removed the final obstacle to his desire; even Charlotte agrees to the new arrangement, acknowledging the extent to which her rigorous moralism precipitated the disaster. But Ottilie, now recognizing her complicity in the events, renounces Eduard and seeks shelter in a convent. Eduard's passionate intervention robs her of even this recourse, and she chooses total passivity, refusing to speak or eat, believing that this will help her achieve not merely absolute holiness but a form of holiness. Shortly after her death—effectively a suicide—Eduard dies also, and they are buried together in the estate's funeral chapel.—*Trans.*

5. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, trans. Judith Ryan, in Goethe, *Collected Works* (New York: Suhrkamp, 1988), vol. 11, p. 138. Further references to this work will appear in the text as "R" followed by the page number.—*Trans.*

7. Here Benjamin mistakenly ennobles Eduard, who is actually a baron.—*Trans.*
8. Carl Friedrich Zelter (1758-1832), composer, critic, and Goethe's principal informant on music.—*Trans.*
9. Robe of Nessus: a mythological allusion that has a chiasmic parallel to the events in the novel. Hercules had shot the centaur Nessus with a poisoned arrow for having attempted to rape his wife, Deianeira. As he died, the centaur dipped his robe in his blood and gave it to Deianeira. When Hercules abandoned her for Iole, Deianeira sent him the robe as revenge: when he put it on, he was wracked with pain and died, throwing himself onto a burning pyre in order to escape from the torment.—*Trans.*
10. Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813), late-Enlightenment author and benevolent literary godfather of Goethe's generation. His most important works are the novel *Geschichte des Agathon* [Agathon's Story] (1766-1777) and the narrative poem *Musarion* (1768).—*Trans.*
11. Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg (1862-1869), professor of theology in Berlin and prominent exponent of religious orthodoxy.—*Trans.*
12. Friedrich Ludwig Zacharias Werner (1768-1823) was the best-known author of the "fate drama," a rough German dramatic parallel to the Gothic novel.—*Trans.*
13. A water sprite of Germanic folklore.—*Trans.*
14. Friedrich Wilhelm Riemer (1744-1845), classicist and poet. Riemer enjoyed exceptionally close ties to Goethe, as the tutor of his son, August, as his principal informant on classical literature, and as the coauthor of a text ("Elpenor").—*Trans.*
15. *Fabula docet*: Latin for "the story teaches."—*Trans.*
16. Bettina von Arnim (1785-1859), prominent Romantic writer and much younger friend of Goethe's, published *Briefwechsel mit einem Kind* [Correspondence with a Child] in 1835. It is a highly subjective—and highly influential—recollection of exchanges with Goethe.—*Trans.*
17. Wilhelmine Herzlieb (1789-1865), object of Goethe's passionate though unrequited love, served as the primary model for the character of Ottilie in the novel.—*Trans.*
18. At the end of the passage, Benjamin excised the words: "by taking refuge, as usual, behind an image."—*Trans.*
19. Georg Gervinus (1805-1871), whose great history of German literature demythologizes Goethe.—*Trans.*
20. *Proton pseudos*: Latin for "the first falsehood."—*Trans.*
21. In this passage, Benjamin inserts a tacit reading of Goethe's poem "Primal Words Orphic" ["Urworte, Orphisch"] as a commentary on the novel. Elpis is the personification of (perfidious) hope.—*Trans.*
22. Friedrich Gundolf, pseudonym of Friedrich Gundelfinger (1880-1931), disciple of Stefan George, prominent literary critic, and, after 1920, professor at Heidelberg. In 1917, when Benjamin wrote the first version of this portion of his essay, Gundolf was Germany's most powerful critical voice.—*Trans.*
23. The German word *der Trope* means "trope" or "figure of speech," but in the plural (*die Tropen*) it also means "tropics."—*Trans.*
24. Benjamin's word *Bombast* means "bombast" but contains the word *Ast*, meaning "branch." His rhetorical monkey business is untranslatable, unless these monkey-figures can be thought of as swinging from one tropical bombranch to another.—*Trans.*
25. Marianne von Willemer (1784-1860), the model for the figure of Suleika in Goethe's lyric cycle "West-Easterly Divan" (1819), to which she contributed several poems.—*Trans.*
26. Goethe inserts a novella, "Die Wunderlichen Nachbarskinder" [The Marvelous Young Neighbors], into the second half of *Elective Affinities*. Two children from important families are intended by their parents to wed; as they grow up, however, they become increasingly antagonistic. The young man enters military service and is widely loved and respected; the young woman pines away without knowing why. At home on leave, he finds the young woman with a fiancé; she in turn realizes that she has always loved her neighbor. As he prepares to return to service, she determines to kill herself, at once declaring her love and exacting a kind of revenge. The young man invites the girl, her fiancé, and the two families for a pleasure cruise on a large boat. The young man, at the wheel to relieve the sleeping master of the boat, sees a treacherous passage approach; just then the girl leaps overboard. The boat runs aground, and he leaps in after her, only to find her almost lifeless body. He takes her ashore, to the cottage of a recently married young couple, where he revives her. To cover the naked bodies of the unexpected visitors, the couple offer the only dry clothes they have: their wedding outfits. When the boat finally lands on the nearby shore, the young people emerge from the bushes with the words, "Give us your blessing!"—*Trans.*
27. Here and throughout, Benjamin treats "Elective Affinities" as a plural noun and speaks literally of "their" breadth. Benjamin appears always to think directly to its content, to the affinities themselves.—*Trans.*
28. Georg Simmel (1858-1918), social philosopher and sociologist, developed a theory of modernity starting with his *Philosophy of Money* [*Philosophie des Geldes*] (1900) and continuing in such classic essays as "The Metropolis and Mental Life" ["Die Großstadt und das Geistesleben"]. His work exerted enormous influence on the following generation of social philosophers, some of whom were his students: Benjamin, Ernst Cassirer, Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukacs, and Siegfried Kracauer.—*Trans.*
29. "The New Melusine" is a fairy tale by Goethe first published in 1817 and later included in the novel *Wilhelm Meister's Wanderings*. It is a tale of a simple barber and the lovely princess of the dwarves who grows to human size in order to win the barber's love and so allow her line to live on.—*Trans.*
30. Mignon is the mysteriously androgynous young girl adopted by Wilhelm in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*.—*Trans.*
31. Joseph von Gorres (1776-1848), journalist and historian, was the publisher of the important liberal newspaper *Der Rheinische Merkur*.—*Trans.*
32. Rudolf Borchardt (1877-1945), conservative author and essayist, who promoted the literary models of classical antiquity and the Middle Ages.—*Trans.*
33. In Goethe's ballad, the fisherman, "cool to the depths of his heart," is nonetheless lured out of his boat and into the depths by the seductive voice of a woman who emerges mysteriously, from the water.—*Trans.*

34. Schonflies is the maiden name of Benjamin's mother and his own middle name.—*Trans.*
- 35 Friedrich Hebbel (1813-1863), Austrian dramatist and master of the "bourgeois tragedy." His plays include *Maria Magdalena* (1843) and *Agnes Bernauer* (1851).—*Trans.*
36. A reference to Goethe's poems "Trilogy of the Passions" and "Elegy."—*Trans.*
- 37 Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815-1887), professor of law and historian, is best known for his book *Matriarchy (Das Mutterrecht)* (1861), a study of matriarchal societies. See Benjamin's review of Bernoulli's book on Bachofen, above.—
38. The voice is that of Mignon, from Goethe's poem of the same name in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. "My dress" is Eric Blackall's rendering of the phrase *die reine Hülle* ("the pure veil").—*Trans.*
39. *Faust*, Part II, lines 9945-9950.—*Trans.*

Bibliography reference: Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings: Volume 1 1913 – 1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002