Walter Benjamin’s Monadology

by

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Department of Philosophy
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Abstract

Walter Benjamin persistently refers to Leibniz’s monad, from his doctoral dissertation (1919), to his last written work, the theses ‘On the Concept of History’ (1940). This dissertation argues that the systematic intent of Benjamin’s early work (1916–1928) can be brought out most clearly by examining Benjamin’s appropriation of Leibnizian metaphysics.

The task of this dissertation is to interpret Benjamin’s Leibniz, and to follow the gestures of his text. Benjamin was not interested in presenting a scholarly interpretation of Leibniz’s philosophy. Leibniz’s monad had a unique significance for Benjamin’s own philosophical project. In his early work, this project was to determine a method for the philosophical interpretation of art.

The core of my dissertation distills what could be called Benjamin’s ‘aesthetic theory.’ According to Benjamin, works of art do not express their truth-content discursively; rather, they express an idea in a configuration of material detail. I argue that Benjamin draws on a Leibnizian concept of expression. One thing expresses another if it preserves the same logical relationships as that
which it represents. According to Benjamin, an idea is the most *adequate*
expression of a work: it preserves the configuration of a work’s material content,
and represents this configuration (or “constellation” in Benjamin’s terms) in the
nexus of predicates in a ‘complete individual concept,’ or idea.

The second aspect of this argument is more applied in its focus:
Benjamin’s *Habilitation* thesis describes an elective affinity between Leibniz’s
monadic metaphysics and the Baroque *Trauerspiel*. Benjamin’s analysis of the
Baroque dramas and his interpretation of Leibniz are mutually illuminating. The
point that legitimates this comparison is not only historical, as both are products
of the seventeenth century, but can also be presented as an *idea*. Both Leibniz’s
metaphysics and the Baroque *Trauerspiel* are engaged in the *secularization* of
history.

My argument proceeds in five chapters. In Chapter One, I trace the
historical sources of Benjamin’s interpretation of Leibniz. In Chapters Two,
Three, and Four, I discuss Benjamin’s monadic theory of ideas. Finally, in Chapter
Five, I address Benjamin’s response to Schmitt’s Political Theology. The Epilogue
to this dissertation is a reading of Hamlet, which was, in Benjamin’s view, the
Baroque *Trauerspiel, par excellence*. Hamlet’s world is a self-enclosed totality, or
monad.
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## Bibliography
Introduction: Monads, Aesthetic Ideas, and the Secularization of History

The task of philosophy is to name the idea, as Adam named nature... Leibniz’s entire way of thinking, his idea of the monad... seems to me to comprise the summa of a theory of ideas. The task of interpreting works of art is to concentrate creaturely life in ideas. To establish the presence of that life.¹

Walter Benjamin’s references to Leibniz’s monad are persistent and systematic. They are persistent because references to Leibniz’s monad span from Benjamin’s doctoral dissertation (1919) to his last written work, the theses ‘On the Concept of History’ (1940). They are systematic in that Benjamin’s mostly fragmentary and essayistic writings can be construed as answering a set of interconnected philosophical problems. The systematic intent of Benjamin’s early work (1916-1928) can be brought out most clearly by examining Benjamin’s appropriation of Leibnizian metaphysics. Given the persistence and importance of Benjamin’s Leibnizianism, it is surprising that the topic has been so little discussed.² This dissertation is the first full-length work devoted to the meaning of Benjamin’s monadology.


² In the last decades, a few studies on the topic have been published, mostly in German, including: Helmut Kaffengerber, Orte des Lesens, Alchimie, Monade: Studien zur Bildlichkeit im Werk Walter Benjamins (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2001) and Rainer Nägele, ”Das Beben des Barock in der Moderne: Walter Benjamins Monadologie,” MLN, 106 (1991): 501–27. Henning Teschke’s Proust und Benjamin: unwillkürliche Erinnerung und dialektisches Bild (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2000), includes an excellent chapter on Benjamin’s use of Leibniz (99–109). Recent sources in English include: Peter Fenves, Arresting Language: From Leibniz to Benjamin (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press,
Benjamin’s references to Leibniz raise some notable puzzles: in the first place, Benjamin’s early work invokes Leibniz’s monadology as the model for a theory of ideas, while his late work refers to the monad as a privileged object for historical materialism.\(^3\) Benjamin scholarship has typically divided his corpus into an early metaphysical-theological phase and a later materialist phase. But the fact that Benjamin invokes the monad throughout these putatively distinct phases challenges the assumption that his work can be so divided. Although this dissertation will only focus on Benjamin’s early work, there are grounds to suggest that Benjamin’s monadic theory of ideas anticipates his materialist philosophy of history.\(^4\)

Second, Benjamin’s references to Leibniz are often cryptic, and require a hermeneutic approach. Benjamin’s explicit references to the monad are never accompanied by a specific citation (as was the case, indeed, with most of Benjamin’s important intellectual debts). Benjamin only refers to actual texts of Leibniz on one occasion: in the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’ to The Origin of German Tragic Drama, Benjamin names Leibniz as “the author of the Monadology,” and alludes to the

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\(^3\) Benjamin’s early work invokes Leibniz as the epitome of an idealist. In the epigraph to this introduction, I quote Benjamin’s 1923 letter to Florens Christian Rang, in which he describes Leibniz’s monads as the *summa* of a theory of ideas. By the time that Benjamin wrote his theses ‘On the Concept of History,’ he viewed the monad as the privileged object of historical materialism: “the historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, IV, 396).

\(^4\) In Benjamin’s *Habilitation* thesis, he appeals to the monad to articulate the relationship between an individual work of art and its ‘virtual’ history. He returns to this theme in the theses ‘On the Concept of History,’ suggesting that the historical materialist confronts his object as a monad, which contains the entire course of history in its interior. Benjamin suggests that the ‘object’ of historical materialism cannot be taken up as immediate positivity, but that it is *constructed* by the total process of mediation, which is not construed in terms of a sequentially understood ‘progress,’ but can be grasped only by attending to the minutiae of an individual moment, ‘blasted out’ of the continuum of history. I will develop this topic in a later stage of this research.
'Discourse on Metaphysics,' albeit without referring to any specific passage. Even though Benjamin's references are spare, I will show that Leibniz’s philosophy constitutes the background for many of Benjamin’s formulations.

The task of this dissertation is to interpret Benjamin’s Leibniz, and to follow the gestures of his text, even where his reading of Leibniz would likely raise eyebrows amongst Leibniz scholars. Benjamin was not interested in presenting a scholarly interpretation of Leibniz’s philosophy. Leibniz’s monad had a unique significance for Benjamin’s own philosophical project. In his early work, this project was to determine a method for the philosophical interpretation of art.

Benjamin wrote two academic dissertations – ‘The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism’ (1919), and The Origin of German Tragic Drama (1928) – and both analyzed the way in which works of art express truths. Benjamin did not doubt that artworks have ‘truth-content,’ and that this is what renders works ‘criticizable.’ Yet, works of art do not express their truth-content discursively and are therefore not reducible to conceptualization. Rather, works of art represent an idea in a configuration of material detail. The task of art criticism is to translate the ‘material language’ of the work into the expression of an idea. I say ‘translate’ deliberately: according to Benjamin, the configuration of a work’s content is a form of expression, even though it is not a language of words. I will argue in Chapter Two that Benjamin draws on a Leibnizian concept of expression. For the purposes of this introduction, it is enough to explain expression in simple terms as an isomorphism, or structural analogy, between

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expression and expressed. One thing expresses another if it preserves the same logical relationships as that which it represents. According to Benjamin, an idea is the most adequate expression of a work: it preserves the configuration of a work’s material content, and represents this configuration (or “constellation” in Benjamin’s terms) in the nexus of predicates in a ‘complete individual concept,’ or idea. The core of my dissertation distils what could be called Benjamin’s ‘aesthetic theory,’ which revolves around his monadic theory of ideas.

The second aspect of this argument is more applied in its focus: Benjamin’s Habilitation thesis describes an elective affinity between Leibniz’s monadic metaphysics and the Baroque Trauerspiel. Although Benjamin never makes this argument explicitly, he suggests that artistic genres have ‘siblings’ in works of philosophy. I contend that Leibniz is the ‘sibling’ of the Baroque Trauerspiel, and that Benjamin’s analysis of the Baroque dramas and his interpretation of Leibniz are mutually illuminating. The point that legitimates this comparison is not only historical, as both are products of the seventeenth century, but can also be presented as an idea. Both Leibniz’s metaphysics and the Baroque Trauerspiel are engaged in the secularization of history.

The great authors of the Baroque Trauerspiel were Lutheran. According to Luther, fallen humanity is unable to understand the word of God, or revelation. Cut off from any form of direct access to heaven, the authors of the Trauerspiel turned their

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6 “Suppose you make the acquaintance of a young person who is handsome and attractive, but who seems to be harboring a secret. It would be tactless and reprehensible to try to penetrate this secret and wrest it from him. But it is doubtless permissible to inquire whether he has any siblings, to see whether their nature could not perhaps explain somewhat the enigmatic character of the stranger. This is exactly how the true critic inquires into the siblings of the work of art. And every great work has its sibling (brother or sister?) in the realm of philosophy” (Benjamin, “The Theory of Criticism,” in Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 219).
attention to profane creation. In God's creatures, some trace of the creative word of God might still be discovered. Artefacts and nature alike seemed to be ciphers in a sacred script, which could not be read directly but required decoding the 'natural characters' of creation. With melancholy intensity, the Baroque investigator turned to contingent things, attempting to read God’s plan in the order and configuration of these things.

Benjamin reads the monadology as the metaphysical crystallization of the melancholy intensification in things. Leibniz's monads are not souls, or subjects; it would be a mistake to see Leibniz’s 'metaphysical points' as a personalization of nature. Even bare monads, or inanimate things, are endowed with perceptions by which they express the whole universe. As I suggest in my argument, Leibnizian expression is linguistic in character; it is not (or at least not necessarily) an attribute of consciousness. Benjamin shows that, for Leibniz, all of nature was linguistic, because each thing was engraved at creation with an idea, or its eternal essence.

The remainder of this introduction contains two sections which will provide an overview of the two parts of my argument.

§1 Benjamin’s Monadic Theory of Aesthetic Ideas

Benjamin did not write one self-contained work on 'Aesthetic Theory,' as did, for example, his contemporaries, Lukacs and Adorno. But Benjamin's early work systematically addressed the question of the relationship between individual artworks and the 'idea,' or truth-content, expressed in art. In his doctoral thesis, Benjamin examined the 'idea of art' in Jena Romanticism. This work remained in the background
in the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’ to his *Habilitation* thesis, which revisits the topic of a theory of ideas.

Admittedly, Benjamin mentioned the monad only once in his doctoral dissertation, and it was to point out that the Romantics did *not* conceive of reality as an aggregate of ‘windowless’ monads.\(^7\) In *Chapter Three*, I will argue that Benjamin elaborated a monadic theory of ideas in his subsequent work in order to address the shortcomings that he perceived in early Romantic art criticism.

In the ‘Prologue,’ Benjamin acknowledged that the early Romantics were the first to recognize the value of a theory of ideas for art criticism. In effect, the early Romantics, primarily Friedrich Schlegel, developed the concept of immanent critique. They did not consider works of art as *objects* that the critic could judge; rather, the work contained its own ‘germ cell’ of reflection, which the critic raised to self-consciousness by ‘intensifying reflection’ in the work’s own form. The work could be said to judge itself, insofar as the idea was already *implicit* in it. The most important innovation of early Romanticism, as far as Benjamin’s methodology is concerned, was the idea of the ‘medium’ of art. Both work and idea are conceived of as medially interconnected forms, rather than as object and subject. An object, according to Romantic terminology, would be something incapable of interconnectability; on the contrary, all works of art, by virtue of the reflection congealed in them, are already potential subjects. This ‘hovering’ between object and subject allows Romantic criticism to proceed to the absolute.

Benjamin advances two criticisms of the Romantic idea of art. In the first place, he argues that the Romantics erred by considering the medium of art to be conscious in

\(^7\) Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I, 146.
character, rather than linguistic. He had worked out his own idea of the ‘linguistic medium’ in his 1916 essay ‘On Language as Such and the Language of Man,’ which I will have occasion to discuss in Chapter Four.

The second criticism that Benjamin lodges against the Romantic ‘idea of art’ is that the Romantics were ignorant of the ‘discontinuous finitude’ of ideas. Benjamin points out that the Romantic method of reflection on a form absolved individual works into the ‘absolute work of art.’ Benjamin argued, on the contrary, that each original work of art contains its own idea in the fragile nexus of detail that is configured within it. Each work translates the universal from its own point of view. It is capable of harmonizing with all the others, but cannot be absolved into a singular, overarching idea. By suggesting that each work converged on the absolute, the Romantics lost the very concretion that immanent critique had promised.

Romantic art criticism presupposes that individual works of art are only relative unities. This is essential to the Romantic method of art criticism, since it is only possible for criticism to consummate a work if it is deemed incomplete. Accordingly, the work becomes a mere moment in the serial unfolding of the idea of art, or the ‘absolute work.’ Benjamin argues, against the Romantics, that each work of art is a self-enclosed totality, or a windowless monad. Just as monads do not communicate with each other, but can only translate the whole universe into their own expressive medium, so too do works of art represent the truth only when they delve intensively into the minutiae of their own material. No work comprehends the truth or relates directly to the universal. Each original work, in representing the idea from its own point of view, conveys only the
promise of harmony. But this promise cannot be actualized in the completed standpoint of a thinking that grasps the absolute.

According to Benjamin’s argument in the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue,’ ideas salvage the material detail of works of art by representing them, rather than subsuming them under concepts or laws. Whereas the phenomena are reduced to mere particularity when subsumed under concepts, even the most minute detail has an essential place in the representation of an idea. In Chapter Two, I show that what Benjamin means by ‘representation’ should be understood in terms of Leibnizian ‘expression.’ Expression is not a relationship of resemblance. Rather than preserving an image of what is represented, Leibnizian expression preserves the same logical relationships as that which it expresses. This is the meaning of Benjamin’s often-cited comparison of ideas to ‘constellations.’ According to Benjamin, ideas are to phenomena as constellations are to stars. That is to say, ideas represent the phenomena by determining the nexus of their relations. This is wholly consistent with Leibnizian expression.

In Chapter Four, I explain what Benjamin means when he suggests that ideas are linguistic in character. As I mentioned above, Benjamin thought the early Romantics fell short in their attempt to renew a ‘theory of ideas,’ primarily because they regarded the medium of thought to be consciousness, rather than language. Benjamin’s argument unfolds against the background of an Adamic theory of language, which he elaborated in the essay ‘On Language As Such,’ and returned to in the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue.’ Benjamin argues that ideas are names, invoking the Genesis narrative, according to which Adam named all the creatures according to their essences. The connection that
Benjamin draws between ideas, names, and monads, confirms the importance of expressionism in his early work.

According to Leibniz, the complete expression of each individual subject is its idea. The idea is not a subjective notion of a thing but is rather its essence. Moreover, the idea is not abstract, but instead is the most exact, or adequate representation of all the ‘marks’ and determinations of an essence, in the way that they are interconnected in a ‘complete individual concept.’ According to Leibniz, only God is capable of representing things as individuals, because individuation goes to infinity. However, in God’s ideas, even the most fleeting of phenomena, or the most minute detail, is ‘saved.’ By articulating his theory of ideas within the framework of linguistic Adamicism, Benjamin argues, in full accordance with Leibniz, that ideas are not ineffable, or beyond language, but that they are its most adequate form of expression (i.e. names).

As I argue, Benjamin’s linguistic Adamicism supports the argument that works of art communicate their content in a material language, which is not reducible to concepts. Artworks ‘communicate’ an idea in the ‘community’ of their material detail (or perceptions). This means, first, that works of art are linguistic expressions, and that the interpretation of works of art should be understood as an act of translation from a material language into a verbal one. Second, the criticism of works of art should not judge works, but should name them, as Adam named the creatures. To name a work of art is to give voice to the mute form of expression congealed in the configuration of a work’s material content.

In a review essay entitled ‘Rigorous Study of Art’ (1933), Benjamin provides the clearest formulation of the significance of Leibniz’s monadology for the philosophical
interpretation of art. He does not mention Leibniz in the essay, but it is evident that his early work on Leibniz informs these remarks. Benjamin describes a dualism between the art-historical approach to works of art and a universalizing philosophical aesthetics. If art history simply inserts works into a chronology of events, as though works and events have the same relationship to temporality, philosophical aesthetics fails to take into account the concrete historical details of a work; that is, the ‘idea’ of art is divorced from its historical detail. Benjamin quotes Hans Sedlmayr, whose methodology agrees exactly with his own theoretical conclusions: “The currently evolving phase in the study of art will have to emphasize... the investigation of *individual works*. ...the artwork now appears as a self-contained *small world* of its own particular sort.”

To treat the work of art as a ‘self-contained small world’ is to treat it as a monad. Like the monad, it expresses the whole *world*, but only intensively, in the unique arrangement of its own detail. The corollary of this approach to the interpretation of art is a preoccupation with the minute and insignificant details of the *material*. If an artwork represents the universal in the arrangement of its material detail, then it becomes clear that the truth of art is inextricably bound up with its content. This also suggests the manner in which works of art are historically significant:

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9 “Here it becomes evident that the hallmark of the new type of researcher is not the eye for the ‘all encompassing whole’ or the eye for the ‘comprehensive context’ (which mediocrity has claimed for itself), but rather the capacity to be at home in marginal domains” (Idem, 670).
For if the most meaningful works prove to be precisely those whose life is most deeply embedded in their material contents... then over the course of their historical duration these material contents present themselves to the researcher all the more clearly the more they have disappeared from the world.”

Only once a work’s beautiful semblance has decayed can the idea be discovered in the configuration of knowledge that has settled in the ruins. This is what Benjamin refers to as the critical ‘mortification’ of works.

§2 Secularization of Metaphysics and the ‘Self-Enclosed’ World of the Baroque

The second thematic focus of my dissertation is devoted specifically to Benjamin’s interpretation of the German Trauerspiel. His understanding of the seventeenth-century drama shows an elective affinity between Leibniz and Baroque art. Benjamin argues that the Baroque Trauerspiel responded to the spiritual needs of the seventeenth century during a period that willed secularism, following the schism of the church and the intense upheaval caused by the religious wars. The idea that is expressed, both in Leibniz’s metaphysics and in the Baroque Trauerspiel, is the secularization of history in the ‘state of nature,’ or creation.

Nature, for the Baroque, was not yet understood in the natural-scientific terms of the Enlightenment, but remained tied to God as his creature. Under the pressures of secularization, however, God’s providence was not grasped directly in revelation, but had to be found in created nature itself. To wit, the telos of Leibniz’s philosophy is no longer set beyond creation in the world to come, but is inherent in monads, in the

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10 Idem, 669.
entelechy contained within each individual substance. An analysis that could capture all of the infinite complexity virtually contained within the confused perceptions in a monad would be able to predict the entire scope and sequence of the world’s unfolding. In other words, Leibniz’s monadology accomplishes the transition from a temporal conception of infinity (i.e. as something always on the horizon, or yet to be fulfilled) into the totality of knowledge, which is already implicit, or ‘virtual,’ in the full expression of an essence, even though for us this knowledge is irreducibly ‘confused.’

Leibniz’s monad provides the model for what Benjamin refers to as the ‘natural-history of creation’. Benjamin’s concept of ‘natural-history,’ as the absorption of the infinite succession of time within the finite space of the created world, forms the backdrop for his understanding of Leibniz’s adaptation of Christian providence within a theory of ‘pre-established harmony.’ Benjamin emphasizes the complete stabilization of history involved in Leibniz’s ‘pre-established harmony.’ By identifying the complete representation of an essence with the prediction of all of a monad’s past and future states, Leibniz deprives historical events of their contingent character, or their futurity.

In Chapter One, I will argue that Benjamin draws on Leibniz’s infinitesimal calculus to describe the transformation of the infinite from a recursive, or successive infinity, into a spatial concept. The forcible redirection of infinite succession within a finite space is the structural core of what Benjamin refers to as ‘natural history.’ The entire sequence of history can be grasped by exhaustively analyzing the infinity of detail contained within a monad. As Leibniz writes, the present is filled with the future and
laden with the past, and “eyes as piercing as those of God could read the whole sequence of the universe in the smallest of substances.”¹¹

I will interpret the significance of Leibniz’s allusion to reading the traces of divine providence in the details of nature. Leibniz’s philosophy retains the theological concept of linguistic Adamicism, while secularizing its meaning. The paradigm of the sacred text becomes entirely absorbed within the ‘Book of Nature,’ as the language inscribed in creatures. The divine understanding can be read in the contingent details of nature, so long as one attends sufficiently to the minutiae of experience.

In Chapter Five, I will show that Benjamin’s engagement with Leibniz is crucial for understanding his response to political theology, or the secularization of theological structures transposed to the political and legal structures of the sovereign nation state. Carl Schmitt’s profile of the sovereign as the one who decides on the exceptions to the law mirrors the theological structure of the miracle, which disrupts the natural order of things. Schmitt models this concept on Descartes’ voluntaristic God. Benjamin implicitly challenges Schmitt’s use of Descartes for the model of sovereignty by invoking Leibniz’s criticism of Cartesian voluntarism. According to Leibniz, voluntarism is the tyranny of the will over the understanding.

One: The Sources of Walter Benjamin’s Monadology

If the object of history is to be blasted out of the continuum of historical succession, that is because its monadological structure demands it. This structure first comes to light in the extracted object itself…. It is owing to this monadological structure that the historical object finds represented in its interior its own fore-history and after-history.¹

References to Leibniz’s monad appear at crucial points in Walter Benjamin’s writings, from his early ‘metaphysical’ work to his late ‘materialist’ theses on history. In each case, Benjamin appeals to the monad as the unique and total expression of his main philosophical point. He writes to Florens Christian Rang in 1923 that Leibniz’s monad “in its totality... seems to me to embrace the summa of a theory of ideas.”² Almost two decades later, in the theses ‘On the Concept of History,’ he emphasizes that “[t]he historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad.”³ The persistence and gravity of these references make it important to look deeper into the meaning and sources of the monad in Benjamin’s work. The topic warrants especially careful interpretation because Benjamin’s monad confronts us as a


cipher. It is invoked, with little argumentation, as the privileged expression for numerous philosophical ideas: it is at once the *summa* of a theory of ideas, the salvation of induction,¹ and the object of materialist historiography, to name just a few of the themes that Benjamin treats by appealing to the monad.

If it seems paradoxical that Benjamin invokes rationalist metaphysics in order to ‘redeem the phenomena,’ or that Leibniz – the thinker of pre-established harmony – is called upon as an ally in rupturing the continuum of universal history, this perplexity is scarcely abated when Benjamin’s interpretation is traced back to its supposed source in Leibniz. Indeed, Benjamin seems to have read little of Leibniz’s work. He refers to Leibniz as the philosopher of the ‘Monadology,’ and he appeals to the ‘Discourse on Metaphysics’ in the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’ of his *Origin of German Tragic Drama.*² This suggests at least basic familiarity with two major texts of Leibniz. In the *Verzeichnis der gelesenen Schriften*, however, not a single text by Leibniz is cited.³ A search through the reconstruction of Benjamin’s library, recently published by Antiquariat Herbert

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³ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (eds. Rolf Tiedemann, Hermann Schweppenhäuser, with Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem; 7 vols.; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), VII.1, 437–76. I am not suggesting that Benjamin’s own index of the texts that he read should be seen as comprehensive, or that the absence of Leibniz from this list is definitive proof that Benjamin had no acquaintance with Leibniz’s work. The index is nonetheless a useful resource, since it includes various twentieth-century interpretations of Leibniz, which influenced Benjamin’s reading, according to my argument.
Blank, also yields no results. Leibniz may have been in the atmosphere of German philosophy departments during Benjamin’s student years, but there is no record that he ever attended a course on Leibniz, or even on early modern philosophy.

The puzzle of Benjamin’s Leibniz could simply stop here, with the answer that this is just another indication of his magpie’s relationship to the history of philosophy. This is exactly what George Steiner says, for instance, in his introduction to the English translation of the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*:

Benjamin was not, in any technical sense, a philosopher. Like other lyric thinkers, he chose from philosophy those metaphors, dramas of argument and intimations of systematic totality – whether Platonic, Leibnizian or Crocean – which best served, or rather which most suggestively dignified and complicated his own purpose.

This understanding of Benjamin’s monad as a ‘metaphor’ and of Benjamin himself as a ‘lyric thinker’ tells more about the critical failure to respond to the difficulties of his thought than about Benjamin’s work itself. Benjamin does not assume the anaemic position that meaning must be immediately and universally intelligible. But he does not...
thereby withdraw from philosophy into the merely aesthetic or hybrid domain of the ‘lyric thinker.’ Indeed, Benjamin’s monadology demands philosophical interpretation. But in order to understand its place in his work, we cannot simply compare Leibniz’s philosophical arguments with Benjamin’s texts. Such interpretive idealism would ignore both the distortions of his reading, as well as the historical mediations through which he encountered Leibniz.

As I show in the first section of this chapter, Benjamin was engaged with two extremes of Leibniz reception in early twentieth-century Germany. On the one hand, he was immersed in the mathematical-theological orientation of Hermann Cohen, who interpreted Leibniz’s infinitesimal calculus as the generation of objective knowledge from intensive functions. On the other hand, Benjamin read a single secondary source on Leibniz by Heinz Heimsoeth. Heimsoeth saw Leibniz as the heir to a medieval German tradition of Christian mysticism, and he interpreted the monad as the microcosm of the infinite spirit within finite individuals. An investigation into these sources reveals a face of Leibniz that is inaccessible via a neutral reading of his texts. The questions that emerge from the synthesis of these extremes provides our point of entry into the meaning of Benjamin’s monad.

I argue (in section two) that Benjamin's interpretation of Leibniz accomplishes a dialectical synthesis of what Heimsoeth and Cohen set asunder in their readings of the monad. Leibniz’s monad overcomes the dualism between matter and spirit by presenting substance as a living force. Heimsoeth seizes on the concept of life as the absorption of all inert matter into infinite, transformative activity. According to Heimsoeth, the living God is immediately expressed in the natural world, because the
world is God’s creature. Cohen, by contrast, reads the active force in monads as a step toward Kant’s constitution of objects by principles of reason. He idealizes force as an expression of the law of continuity. Cohen’s functional generation of reality denies nature any independent being, while granting objects meaning only as knowledge. Cohen’s generation of objective reality from an infinitesimal method purges creation of any ontological or theological significance. Here, Cohen achieves the height of idealism: reality is totally constituted by concepts of pure reason. Another way of saying this is that the infinitesimal method deprives thinking, at least in its theoretical use, of any object outside of itself.

Although these two positions are antithetical in their philosophical orientation and intent, both Cohen and Heimsoeth locate Leibniz’s achievement in his reconciliation of the infinite and the finite within the monad. Heimsoeth reads the ‘infinite in the finite’ as the microcosm of the Absolute within the finite creature. Cohen, on the other hand, interprets the intensive infinity within the monad as the generation of objects from an infinitesimal method. Benjamin shows the inadequacy of both of these positions in light of the other, and he argues, on this basis, for a third interpretation of the infinity within the monad.

Benjamin reads the intensive infinity within monads as a confused totality of detail. According to Leibniz, if one possessed a perfect understanding, it would be possible to derive the totality of a monad’s history, or to resolve all of its contingent states into truths of identity. But monads contain infinitely more than a finite subject can apperceive. The excess within the monad is a far cry from Heimsoeth’s spiritualization of nature: the infinite analyzability of contingent nature emphasizes the
gulf between the finite intelligence of human beings and the perfect understanding of God. But neither does the infinite analyzability of contingent beings suggest an infinite task, as Cohen thinks. It indicates, rather, the non-identity of contingent nature. Instead of celebrating thought’s capacity to infinitely generate its objects from pure concepts, Benjamin understands the infinite analyzability of monads as evidence that reality cannot be resolved into a finite set of foundational truths.

§1 Benjamin’s Sources: Hermann Cohen and Heinz Heimsoeth

Benjamin’s reading of Leibniz was mediated by two antithetical sources. Throughout his university education, Benjamin was deeply engaged with Cohen’s work. Together with Gershom Scholem, he studied Cohen’s seminal text, Kant’s Theorie der Erfahrung.¹⁰ Their letters record a mutual project to investigate the ‘mathematical theory of messianism,’ which reflected Cohen’s core idea of the generation of reality from an infinitesimal method.¹¹ On the other hand, the Verzeichnis der gelesenen Schriften shows that

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¹⁰ Scholem describes how he spent many hours with Benjamin discussing and analyzing Kant’s Theorie der Erfahrung during their time together in Switzerland (1918–1919): “Nach einigem Hin und Her einigten wir uns, da er damals besonders an Kant interessiert war, auf das grundlegende Werk der Marburger Schule, Cohens Kants Theorie der Erfahrung, das wir dann in vielen Stunden analysiert und diskutiert haben.” (Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin – Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), 76. Scholem goes on to describe how disappointed they were by Cohen’s interpretation of Kant, and how they eventually gave up their study (78–9). While Benjamin complains about Cohen’s one-sidedly logical, and un-dialectical approach to philosophy in The Origin of the German Tragic Drama (46, 177), he frequently returns to Cohen’s ideas as a way of defining and differentiating his own thought. The definitive study on Benjamin’s engagement with Cohen is Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky, Der frühe Walter Benjamin und Hermann Cohen: jüdische Werte, kritische Philosophie, vergängliche Erfahrung (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2000).

¹¹ Between 1916 and 1918, Benjamin’s correspondence with Scholem focused on the relationship between mathematics and language, and the relationship of mathematics and language to ‘Zion’. Benjamin wrote to Scholem, describing his 1916 essay ‘On Language as such and on the Language of Man,’ that “[t]he consideration of mathematics from the point of view of a theory of language, which is ultimately, of course,
Benjamin consulted only one secondary source on Leibniz – an essay by Heimsoeth published in *Kantstudien* in 1917 – “Leibniz Weltanschauung als Ursprung seiner Gedankenwelt.” The position of these sources in relation to each other is quite revealing, and not only in the realm of ideas: Heimsoeth, who was a graduate student of Cohen’s at Marburg, became a member of the Nazi Party in 1933. From his position as the dean at the University of Köln (awarded that same year), he developed a series of ‘metaphysical’ interpretations of German philosophy, which helped to destroy the influence and reputation of the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism.

At issue here are not only two divergent interpretations of Leibniz, but also two ways of understanding the *national spirit* of German philosophy, and Leibniz’s place

most important to me, is of a completely fundamental significance for the theory of language as such.” In the same letter, he explains that his essay had tried to address these relationships, but that ultimately, “it was not possible... to go into mathematics and language, i.e. mathematics and thought, mathematics and Zion, because [his] thoughts on this infinitely difficult topic are still quite far from having taken final shape” (*Correspondence*, 81–82).


14 Heimsoeth’s growing impatience with Cohen’s critical idealism is evident in his correspondence with Nicolai Hartmann; see Nicolai Hartmann and Heinz Heimsoeth, *Nicolai Hartmann und Heinz Heimsoeth im Briefwechsel* (eds. Frida Hartmann and Renate Heimsoeth; Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1978). For instance, in the following letter, Heimsoeth reflects on Hartmann’s anxiety over his ‘betrayal’ of the ‘old’ Cohen: “In der Frage der Untreue gegen Cohen würde ich, wenn auch immer konziliant u. liebenswürdig, so doch weniger ängstlich sein. Sie haben doch schließlich keinen Glauben beschworen” (November 1912, 135). After the publication of Heimsoeth’s article on Leibniz (the same one which Benjamin read), he shares with Hartmann his incredulity and disappointment at the lack of response from the Marburg school, emphasizing particularly Cohen and Cassirer: “Da imponiert mir eigentlich doch Cohen mehr, der, ebenso wie Cassirer, nicht ein Wort als Erwiderung oder Empfangsbestätigung geschickt hat” (December 1916, 253).
within the canon. Cohen argued that a common idea strove for expression in Maimonides, Leibniz, and Kant. His emphasis on the commonality between German philosophy and Jewish thought cannot be understood apart from the circumstances which prompted this argument, namely, the rise of anti-Semitism amongst German intellectuals towards the end of the nineteenth century. Cohen articulated the theme of a common ethical monotheism, which he saw in Kant as much as in Maimonides, in response to Heinrich von Treitschke’s public call to Jews to give up their separatism and to assimilate into mainstream German culture. His response sought to change the

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16 See Walter Boehlich, Der Berliner Antisemitismusstreit (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1965).

17 The first time that Cohen pressed for a ‘common religion of reason’ came after the publication of an anti-Semitic article by the historian, Heinrich von Treitschke. The article, “Unsere Aussichten” (Preußische Jahrbücher, November 1879), called upon Jews to give up their separatism and to become Germans as soon as possible. The article provoked an extended controversy amongst the German-Jewish community. Cohen joined the debate, writing two private letters to Treitschke (in December 1879), in which he stressed the possibility for mutual understanding between the two religions. He invited Treitschke to publish the letters in the Preußische Jahrbücher. When Treitschke responded by publishing “Noch einige Bemerkungen zur Judenfrage” in the same Journal (January 1880), Cohen responded publically with his essay “Ein Bekenntnis in der Judenfrage” (1880), in which he emphasizes the common monotheism of Christians and Jews, isolating this theological point of agreement from a divisive identity politics and questions about race. Cohen’s letters to Treitschke have been published by Helmut Holzhey in the Bulletin des Leo Baeck Instituts (v. 12, 1969). Treitschke’s articles have been reprinted in Boehlich, ed., Der Berliner Antisemitismusstreit. Cohen’s public response is collected in his Jüdische Schriften (II, 73–94). For
terms of the debate from a discussion about ethnicity (or Jewish particularism) towards an appreciation of the common ethical values shared by Judaism and Christianity.

Cohen’s interpretation of Leibniz registers all of the complexity involved in his attempt to construct a synthesis of German philosophy and Jewish literary sources. On the one hand, he emphasized that Leibniz studied Maimonides, and developed some of his mature metaphysical concepts on the basis of this reading (a fact known to scholars since Foucher de Careil’s publication of Leibniz’s notes on Maimonides in 1861). On the other hand, Cohen’s Maimonidean reading of Leibniz does not simply affirm an ethnic conception of identity by introducing ‘Jewish’ sources into the German canon. In fact, Cohen argues that Leibniz was a better interpreter of Maimonides than Spinoza,

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18 A conservative Catholic thinker, Duke Louis-Alexandre Foucher de Careil published a book on Leibniz’s relationship to the Kabbalah, in an effort to ward off the threat of ‘Spinozistic atheism’; see Louis-Alexandre Foucher de Careil, Leibniz, la philosophie juive et la Cabale. Trois lectures à l’Académie des sciences morales et politiques avec les manuscrits inédits de Leibniz. Leibnitii observationes ad Rabbi Mosis Maimonidis libros qui inscribitur Doctor perplexorum (Paris: A. Durand, 1861). Foucher de Careil published Leibniz’s study notes on Maimonides in French and Latin. For an English translation and commentary, see Lenn E. Goodman, “Maimonides and Leibniz,” Journal of Jewish Studies 31/2 (1980): 214–36. According to Goodman’s argument, Leibniz’s study of Maimonides enabled him to resolve two problems that could not be solved by Spinoza’s conception of substance as absolute independence, or by Gassendi’s and Democritus’ conception of discrete material atoms. The first problem was how to reconcile individual substances with the continuum, without ascribing contradictory predicates to the same thing (which would violate the law of non-contradiction). The second problem was how to reconcile the contingency of creation with the necessity of natural law. By defining substance as absolute independence, Spinoza collapsed any real distinction between the created world and God, thereby subjecting God to the necessity of natural laws. From Maimonides’ interpretation of the kalam atomists, Leibniz adopted the principle of sufficient reason, or the hypothetical rather than the logical necessity of contingent beings. Leibniz’s own infinitesimal calculus allowed him to reconcile continuity with individuality. This is because Leibniz’s monad is not a body (or atom) at all, but a living force. The monad is active, and its activity is what constitutes its relative independence, or substantiality. Each monad reflects all the states of other monads within itself according to the unique ‘law of the series’ within it. This allows it to unfold, in complete harmony with all other monads in the world, without the need for constant renewal, or recreation. God’s free selection of the best possible world preserves contingency, and therefore the idea of creation, as opposed to the necessary existence of substance.
and he laments that if only Kant had become familiar with Jewish thought through Leibniz, he would not have condemned Judaism.\(^{19}\) Moreover, although Cohen's reading of Leibniz looks forward to Kant's transcendental idealism, he appeals to Maimonides' concept of the 'negation of privation' in order to purify the residual 'mythology' in Kant's distinction between 'things-in-themselves' and ideas of reason.

Heimsoeth, for his part, was repelled by the identification of German thought with rationalism. His work on the history of philosophy strove to refresh the streams of mysticism that once irrigated scholastic thought.\(^{20}\) According to his argument, the

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\(^{19}\) The issue turns on Spinoza's understanding of substance as logical 'independence,' rather than as activity. Cohen's critique of Spinoza is that this account of substance does not allow for God's freedom from necessary laws of nature. Moreover, this also renders all worldly becoming as the mere accident of the one independent substance, i.e. God. Cohen argues that Kant's mistaken understanding of the 'Jewish God' is based on his reading of Spinoza. He suggests that it could have been avoided if only Kant had read Leibniz's interpretation of Maimonides. As Cohen writes in the *Religion of Reason:* "... Spinoza's polemic has become the source of a fundamental misunderstanding of the Jewish religion. As such it has affected the most noble ages of German literature, and even today has not exhausted itself. Kant obtained from Spinoza his knowledge and his judgment of Judaism. While Leibniz, like the Middle Ages and modern times, still knew and valued Maimonides, Kant came to know Maimonides only through Spinoza. It seemed to Kant, through Spinoza, that in Maimonides Judaism is rightly condemned. It is therefore important to refute Spinoza on this point and to justify Maimonides. Just as he makes rationalism effective for his entire teaching of Judaism, so he perfects it at this crossroads"; see Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism* (trans. Simon Kaplan Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 331. Interestingly, Leibniz himself makes the argument that "Spinoza abused the Cabala of the Hebrews": “But perhaps the Hebrews themselves and other ancient authors, especially in the East understand the proper meaning. Indeed, Spinoza formulated his monstrous doctrine from a combination of the Cabala and Cartesianism, corrupted to the extreme. He did not understand the nature of true substance or monads...,” see G.W. Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften* (ed. Gerhardt C.1.; 7 vols.; Berlin, 1875–1890), III: 545; cited in Allison Coudert, *Leibniz and the Kabbalah* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), 77.

\(^{20}\) Heimsoeth's abhorrence of the rationalist reading of Leibniz is evident throughout his 1917 essay. Rather than reducing Leibniz's multifaceted thought to a series of logical propositions, or a dry dogmatic rationalism, he argues that Leibniz's philosophy has something deep and personal to say to a German readership, which lies buried in the standard readings: “Sind Leibniz' vielspältige Begriffe nur Schnittpunkte wissenschaftlicher Problemlinien in logischer Verlängerung? Kann man die grossen Gedankenmassen, die darüber weit hinausreichen, als Gedankenphantasie eines 'rationalistischen Dogmatismus' wegstreichen, bei Seite lassen, ohne dass der eigentlichste Sinn des Ganzen verloren ginge? Hat dies System kein Herz, hinter allen vor und trotz aller Sonderbedeutung? Gibt nicht ein persönlich überzeitliches Weltgefühl dem Ganzen den lebendigen Wert, dessen Wirkung nicht gebunden ist an Wissenschaft und Lehre – ein Welt und Daseinsgefühl, das auch den Denker inniger mit deutscher Vorzeit verbindet, als in Forschung und Problemlösung sich finden last? Hat also nicht Leibniz, über alles gelehrte Interesse hinaus, in viel tiefere, viel allgemeinerem viel persönlicherem Sinne uns Wichtigstes zu sagen,
Enlightenment marks the degeneration of a once flourishing tradition of German speculative metaphysics. Rather than depicting Leibniz as Germany’s late contribution to the development of scientific naturalism (after Descartes and Spinoza), Heimsoeth places him at the highpoint of the Christian mystical tradition. He bolsters his reading with an argument about where the origins of modernity should be located, both historically and geographically. As he describes it, mainstream intellectual history has typically distinguished modernity from the Middle Ages by the emergence of secular humanism from dogmatic theology. By these lights, modern thought originated in the Italian Renaissance, while Germany lagged behind, spiritually divided by religious wars. According to Heimsoeth’s reconstruction of the history of Western thought, the Italian Renaissance itself had its seeds in Germanic mysticism. The turn to natural science had its origins in Christian mystical intuitions about the living God, which gave rise to a hermeneutics of nature as explicatio Dei, or the unfolding of God’s Being in the details of the profane world. Heimsoeth’s emphasis on Leibniz’s inheritance from his mystical


21 According to Heimsoeth’s argument, the origins of German modernism are not in the Renaissance, but in the Middle Ages: “Die Einsicht, dass die grosse Lebenswendung und geistige Wandlung, die den Anfang der europäischen Neuzeit bedeutet, nicht im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert sich vollzog, sondern im 13. und 14., und in ganz anderen Bewegungen, als man es seit Humanismus und Aufklärung glaubte, gewinnt zusehends Raum und dringt allenthalben in die Forschung ein; nur die philosophische Geschichtsschreibung hat davon noch kaum Notiz genommen. Und doch würde das Gesamtbild vom Werden der deutschen Denker in den Zeiten bis auf Leibniz von unabsehbarer Bedeutung wäre” (Heimsoeth, “Leibniz’ Weltanschauung,” 368).

22 Thus, Heimsoeth describes the motive force behind the early development of scientific research: “to follow God’s footprints in the external world and its order, to grasp the divine idea in hidden laws of events and in the abundance of forms, and to read the world of the eternal one in this great book.” See Heinz Heimsoeth, The Six Great Themes of Western Metaphysics and the End of the Middle Ages (trans. Ramon Betanzos; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 53.
forbears seeks to demonstrate the continuity between Christian thought and enlightened modernity, as well as to point out the Germanic origins of this tradition.

Despite clear contrasts between their motives and philosophical orientations, Heimsoeth and Cohen both locate the historical significance of Leibniz in his reconciliation of the infinite and the finite within the monad. Whereas Heimsoeth reads the ‘infinite in the finite’ as the microcosm of the Absolute, or as the soul's capacity to receive revelation, Cohen interprets the ‘intensive infinity’ within the monad in terms of an ‘infinitesimal method,’ which generates objects from pure concepts of reason. In other words, these antithetical readings both show that Leibniz grounds finite objects, or extensive magnitude, in infinity. Infinity is not to be understood as an extension of finitude, but rather as its source. Likewise, finitude is not substantial and independent, but rather it is a limitation of the infinite. Heimsoeth explains this structure in terms of the immediate causal relationship between an infinite creator and his creatures, whose souls, although finite, have the capacity to receive the idea of the infinite. Cohen explains the same structure in terms of the relationship between an infinite method and its finite results, which are not mere extension, but have their reality (or the conditions of their validity) in principles of reason.

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Heimsoeth’s approach to Leibniz as a Christian metaphysician turns on a distinction that he draws between ‘Oriental’ thought (in which he includes Greek, medieval Arabic and Jewish thinkers), and what he determines to be a single tradition of German-Christian philosophy from Meister Eckhart to Hegel. The paradigmatic
distinction between the Oriental and the Christian, according to Heimsoeth, is that the former establishes a rigid dualism between matter and spirit, while the latter unites these opposing principles in the one Being of God and nature. Accordingly, the first decisive stage in the development of Christian metaphysics occurred with Duns Scotus' argument for the univocity of Being – the claim that the predicate of existence can be ascribed to both God and nature. This thought of the unity of Being was the driving force behind Eckhart’s mystical claim that God’s Being is the fullness of reality, rather than an abstract unity, conceived in opposition to the multiplicity of the natural world. Whereas an ‘Oriental’ dualism persists in the definition of Being as an abstract negation of becoming, the Christian conception of Being as full positivity takes up the very multiplicity of becoming within itself. The apparently contradictory attributes of the natural world are sublated and preserved in the Godhead. According to Heimsoeth’s historical re-construction, Leibniz’s turn to the infinitesimal has its origins in the quest to unify the disjointed fragments of the world in God’s Being. He delineates a path to Leibniz leading from Nicholas of Cusa’s doctrine of the ‘coincidentia oppositorum,’ which asserts that all contradictory properties of things are resolvable into a unity when analysis is extended infinitely: “It is only in the finite that members exclude each other; in perfect infinity everything falls together into one.... in this process the mind never
attains simply absolute or perfect harmony, but rather the search goes on forever.”

Accordingly, contingent matter is not brute and indeterminate, but must be read and interpreted: it is only by immersing ourselves in the details that we progress toward knowledge of the Absolute.

In showing the significance of the univocity of Being for Christian metaphysics, Heimsoeth establishes the difference between the ‘Oriental’ God as an abstract Being, or mere negativity, and the Christian living God as the fullest and most concrete reality, which unfolds or expresses itself in the multiplicity of creaturely life. His argument also reveals two distinct conceptions of the infinite, which he schematizes as an opposition between the Greek prioritization of body, and the Christian conception of the infinite as ontologically prior to the finite – as in fact creating the finite.

The Greek prioritization of the finite over the infinite is reflected in the idea of form as a limiting principle, which gives shape to indefinite matter. Consequently, the Greeks shunned the infinite as an endless regress in which form disintegrates. The Christian idea of the infinite, by contrast, is one of simultaneous presence or perfection. The privative conception of infinity as formless and indeterminate prevailed throughout

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26 Heimsoeth’s essay focuses on the significance of the shift from a concept of the infinite as the extension of the finite, to the concept of the infinite as founding the finite (and of the finite as a special form of the infinite, as mirroring the infinite). The Christian concept of the creature as the ‘image of God’ makes this conceptual shift possible: “Vollendete Unendlichkeit eignet der endlichen Kreatur; darin halt sie die Möglichkeit, Gott zu spiegeln. Unendliches und Endliches stehen im gleichen Gesetz, im gleichen Grundwesen; das Unendliche ist das Zunächstgegebene, das Vertraute, das Rational-verständliche, nicht das Endliche, das, wo es als selbstgenugsame Abgeschlossenheit, schlechthin Begrenztes, sich behaupten will, vielmehr als ‘blosser Schein’ leicht zu entlarven ist. Nicht das Unendliche eine Fortsetzung und Steigerung des Endlichen, sondern das Endliche eine spezielle Form und Spiegelung des Unendlichen: damit dringt die Kraft ursprünglichster religiöser Daseinsliebe vor bis zu den Sonderfragen der Wissenschaft –auf deren Boden dann neue Begriffsmitte und glückliche Bestätigungen für den grossen Gedanken sich finden” (Heimsoeth, “Leibniz’ Weltanschauung,” 378–79).
Scholasticism until Scotus’ discovery of the soul’s capacity to receive the infinite, which established an entirely new conception of the infinite within the finite: “God can descend to us only if our nature has the capacity to receive him.”

This interpretation of the actual infinite as a capacity of the soul entered early modern philosophy as a theory of knowledge in Descartes’ conception of the *innate idea* of God that is implanted within finite minds. According to Heimsoeth’s argument, Leibniz’s monad completes the development of the Christian concept of infinity, since it fully dissolves the opposition between finite body and infinite spirit with a new definition of substance as the actualization of the infinite in the individual soul, or monad. Each monad is a ‘little God,’ or bears the mark of the divine within itself as its own active principle.

Heimsoeth sees Leibniz as a turning point in Christian thought since his monad combines two ideas which show it to be decisively different from the Greek. The first is the valuation of the concrete *individual* over the abstract universal, and the second is the understanding of the individual itself as the locus for receiving the infinite, or as a microcosm of the Absolute. The monad is not a particle of matter (an atom), nor is it a

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27 Heimsoeth, *Six Great Themes*, 93.

28 Idem, 94.

29 Idem, 95.

30 In the “Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason,” Leibniz compares the rational soul to a microcosm of God: “As for the rational soul, or mind, there is something more in it than in monads, or even in simple souls. It is not only a mirror of the universe of created things, but also an image of the divinity. The mind not only has a perception of God’s works, but it is even capable of producing something that resembles them, although on a small scale….It imitates in its realm and in the small world in which it is allowed to work, what God does in the large world,” see G.W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays* (trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 211–12.

31 Heimsoeth, “Leibniz’ Weltanschauung,” 381.

32 Idem, 385.
universal form (like the Platonic *eidos*); each monad is unique, and reflects the whole world within itself from the standpoint of its individuality. According to Heimsoeth’s argument, the combination of these two ideas shows Leibniz’ concept of substance to be definitively rooted in the Judeo-Christian understanding of creation. It is only in the context of an immediate causal connection between creator and creature that individual monads can be both isolated from the outer world (‘windowless’ according to Leibniz’s expression), and also mirrors of God, reflecting his infinite activity within themselves.\(^{33}\)

The soul is a microcosm of God and the world because all of its perceptions are the *immediate* result of God’s continuous fulguration, rather than mere impressions of external objects.\(^{34}\)

It is worth dwelling on the concept of creation, and the idea of *life* that emerges as a result of Heimsoeth’s interpretation. According to Heimsoeth, the Judeo-Christian


\(^{34}\) Heimsoeth’s argument is based on an interpretation of Leibniz’s “Discourse on Metaphysics,” §28: “Now, in rigorous metaphysical truth, there is no external cause acting on us except God alone, and he alone communicates himself to us immediately in virtue of our continual dependence. From this it follows that there is no other external object that touches our soul and immediately excites our perception. Thus we have ideas of everything in our soul only by virtue of God’s continual action on us, that is to say, because every effect expresses its cause, and thus the essence of our soul is a certain expression, imitation or image of the divine essence, thought, and will, and of all the ideas comprised within it” (Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 59).
narrative of creation vivifies the lifeless, indeterminate matter of antiquity. It is the concept of creation, argues Heimsoeth, that allows Leibniz to overcome dualism and to explain how monads can mirror God’s infinite creative power. As creatures, monads are implanted with their own principle of life, which retains its simple unity, while exceeding any finite shape. Leibniz refers to a living force (vis viva) within monads. There is nothing inert in nature, and whatever appears to be dead, or static, is actually full of imperceptible activity. In contrast to the mechanistic account of nature, which describes the world in terms of parts in motion, Leibniz sees nature as full of living creatures. Monads are not dead (extensive) parts of a machine, but they are sources of activity in themselves. As such, they are both simple (they cannot be subdivided, as extensive magnitude can) and infinitely complex, since they are incessantly unfolding and transforming themselves.

Cohen’s reading of Leibniz is the antithesis of Heimsoeth’s. The meaning of the infinite within the finite is in no way the microcosm of the Absolute within the individual, nor is monadic ‘intensity’ interpreted in terms of living force. By contrast, Cohen accounts for the infinite within the finite in terms of the rational construction of objectivity, which generates finite results from an infinite method. In the second edition of Kants Theorie der Erfahrung (the very text which Benjamin had studied with Scholem), Cohen describes the significant contribution of Leibniz to the development of critical idealism. Whereas Descartes identifies substance with extension, Leibniz’s

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35 As Leibniz writes in §69 of the ‘Monadology,’ “…there is nothing fallow, sterile, or dead in the universe, no chaos and no confusion except in appearance, almost as it looks in a pond at a distance, where we might see the confused and, so to speak, teeming motion of the fish in the pond, without discerning the fish themselves” (Leibniz, Philosophical Essays, 222).
discovery of intensive magnitudes enables him to overcome Cartesian dualism, and to
ground all substance in the constitutive activity of thought. If extension is only the
appearance of inertia that results from an infinitesimal degree of activity, then any given
quantity can be generated, in a mathematically determinable continuum, from pure
intensive functions of thought. Cohen’s ‘infinitesimal method’ idealizes substance in two
ways: in the first place, the constitutive component of reality is intensive magnitude,
rather than material atoms. The infinitesimal has no extension, but it cannot be reduced
to nothing, since there is a continuum between any given magnitude and zero. In the
second place, Cohen shows how Leibniz (without knowing it himself) established the
priority of law over substance: it is only according to the grounding principle of
continuity that reality can be generated from an infinitesimal degree of sensation: “Thus
the transcendental center of gravity was shifted in favour of the principle.”

Cohen points to two sources for this advance in reasoning: the philosophical
source is Leibniz, and the source in Jewish thought is Maimonides. Leibniz opened the
path for critical idealism by distinguishing substance from absolute independence (i.e.
Spinoza) and extension (i.e. Descartes’ ‘res extensa’). By establishing substance as
activity, he took the first step towards Kant’s idea of the active contribution of reason in
constituting reality:

The fundamental concept of substance traverses all phases of philosophy and
science. And in conformity with the loftiness and maturity of thought that
Leibniz achieved with his principle of living force, Kant was able to break away

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from all scholasticism with regard to the concept of substance, and to make it a
*presupposition* for the concepts of relation. The position that Kant gave to
substance as a precondition for causality and reciprocity of action tore away, as it
were, the absolute independence of substance. It has absoluteness as a category
only as a 'precondition' of causality.\(^37\)

In the sphere of philosophy, Leibniz accomplished the distinction between substance as
independence and substance as activity. In the sphere of Jewish thought, however,
Maimonides originated a version of the transcendental argument with his distinction
between negative attributes and the privation of negation: "Among Jewish Philosophers
it is Maimonides especially who gives the problem an entirely different turn, a new point
and a new meaning."\(^38\) Maimonides’ distinction between negation and privation points
to another kind of reality than the positivity of existence – namely, the reality of original
principles.

Cohen’s insight into the generative ‘nothings’ of *Grundsätze* grows out of the
Maimonidean distinction between the negation of something positive and the negation
of privation. The negation of something positive is the negation of an existent being. The
negation of privation, on the other hand, negates only the apparent *independence* of
phenomena by grounding these in transcendental principles. The laws of reason that
constitute appearances are *nothing* for sensibility (they have no existence), but this does
not establish the lesser reality of the law. Rather, the negation of the privative being of
appearance leads reason to a higher affirmation of reality as constructed by laws of
reason. The innovation of Leibniz’s infinitesimal calculus lies here, according to Cohen:


\(^{38}\) Idem, 61.
the infinitesimal is not the infinitely small magnitude that would result from the endless division of a body, resolving it into a vanishing quantity. On the contrary, it is the generation of reality from a constructive method, just as the curve of a circle can be plotted through the continuous application of a function.

Cohen’s interpretation of Leibniz may have its prehistory in Maimonides, but it takes its orientation from Kant’s ‘anticipations of perception.’ This is Kant’s interpretation of the law of continuity as the rational ‘anticipation’ of perceptible qualities. Qualities like light, colour, and sound admit of a degree of intensity, and because there is an infinitely nuanced continuum between zero and any contingent degree of reality (i.e. there is no ‘leap in the manifold’), quality is not merely an impingement of matter on sensible intuition, but can be constructed from pure concepts of reason. It is the primacy of the law of continuity which enables Leibniz to generate reality from intensive magnitude. Cohen’s reading further idealizes Kant by interpreting the transcendental ‘Ding an sich’ as an original ‘hypothesis,’ or grounding norm of reason, rather than as a transcendent ‘thing’ given over and against reason. These original, transcendental ‘nothings’ lack the mythical implications of an all-powerful, creative Being, as well as the inert givenness of substantial ‘things,’ which would be inaccessible to critique.

Cohen’s infinitesimal method thus gives new meaning to the priority of the infinite over the finite: rather than pointing to the ontological priority of the infinitely powerful God over his creature, he shows the logical priority of rational principles over

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posed facts. The distinction between the account of creation as *emanation* from an infinitely powerful Being, and the logical understanding of the *generation* of reality from intensive functions clarifies what Cohen means by the infinitesimal purification of the residual mythology in German thought.

Cohen registers the difference between the ‘actual infinite’ and the recursive, or ‘bad infinite,’ by distinguishing between the infinity of a function and the infinite regress that results from dividing a body. A function is determinate or formed without being a finite body; this is because it generates a *series* of results in accordance with a principle, or law. As Cohen grasps in his essay on the infinitesimal method, the rule-governed infinity of Leibniz’s calculus gives us the tools to conceptualize creation as the generation of form from an infinite process. One implication of this reading is that ‘outer sense’ (space, geometrically understood) is entirely absorbed into ‘inner sense’ (temporality, or sequence). A second implication is that the object of knowledge is stripped of its exteriority, both in the sense of having a *causal* impact on sensibility, and in the sense of having independent being in itself. ‘Objectivity’ no longer means substantial *independence* from mind; it rather indicates the theoretically valid *result* of methodological generation. By grounding *extension* in an infinite *process*, Cohen provides a parallel account for what Heimsoeth had described in terms of ‘life.’ Unlike Heimsoeth, however, Cohen’s intensification of matter intends no spiritualization of the physical. On the contrary, the methodical construction of reality explicitly deprives it of soul, or independent animation. The living *force* within the monad is attributed to the constitutive act of reason.
As I will argue in the next section, Benjamin synthesizes what is presented antithetically in the un-dialectical thought of Cohen and Heimsoeth. According to Heimsoeth, Leibniz overcomes the dualism of spirit and matter in the creature. For Cohen, on the other hand, Leibniz anticipates the idealist construction of the object by reason. Benjamin draws out the implications of both of these positions in order to show their inadequacy in light of each other. In so doing, he arrives at a third interpretation of the intensive infinity within the monad. According to Benjamin’s interpretation of ‘Baroque’ metaphysics (of which he saw Leibniz as the chief representative), the dualism between spirit and matter was not resolved, so much as intensified. Absolute spirit confronted an alien world of mere things, which were revived as ciphers, infinitely analyzable because of their remoteness from the immediacy of life.

Benjamin situates his interpretation of the Baroque Trauerspiel in the historical context of the Thirty Years’ War and the Schism of the Church. His reading brings out the intense melancholy that resulted from the Protestant Reformation and the Lutheran denial of ‘good works.’ Longing for redemption was not muted, so much as re-directed toward the saeculum. Benjamin interprets Leibniz’s infinitesimal calculus as the expression, in mathematical terms, of the redirection of infinite succession into the restricted space of the natural world. Contingent being becomes the object of infinite analysis. But what should have its ultimate solution in the idea of God is denied theological fulfillment. Without its anchor in theology, theoretical knowledge is pursued into the abyssal depths of spiritless nature.

By situating the infinitesimal calculus in the context of secularization, Benjamin reveals another aspect of Cohen’s philosophical idealism: thought’s ‘critical’ power to
de-mythologize nature preserves the idea of the divine only in the total evacuation of spirit from the remains of life. As Benjamin reads it, Cohen’s infinitesimal method rigorously extirpates any spiritual fulfillment from the natural world. This disenchantment of the natural world is, at the same time, the purification of the unique transcendence, which is purged of any existential predicates. Cohen sharply distinguishes between practical and theoretical uses of reason, which enables him to secure the practical fulfillment of the idea of God as an exemplar for action; but he denies any possibility for the theoretical fulfillment of Being. All natural becoming is transience from the standpoint of the unique transcendence: "matter remains transitory dust. All natural poetry is shattered on the rock of the insight that allots sublimity to the unique God exclusively."40

Benjamin’s Trauerspiel book only acknowledges the aspect of Cohen’s philosophy that is oriented towards securing objective knowledge (and which, in subsequent developments of neo-Kantianism, led to logical positivism). He criticizes Cohen for placing philosophy too close to natural science, for reducing the historical category of ‘origin’ to a merely logical generation, and for misconstruing the relationship between ideas and phenomena as ‘hypothetical’ rather than ‘representational.’41 Nonetheless, Benjamin is indebted to Cohen for his account of secularization as the simultaneous intensification of ideas and their colonization by knowledge. The depth of Cohen’s influence is only hinted at when Benjamin describes the allegorical intuition of the

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40 Cohen, Religion of Reason, 49.

41 Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 32; 46; and 34.
Baroque in terms of “[a] deep-rooted intuition of the problematic character of art,” and notes that it was Cohen who grasped the ‘ferocity’ of the theological conflict with the image (i.e. that the idea of God must be evacuated of all sensible representation).\footnote{Idem, 176.} According to Benjamin, however, Cohen was unable to grasp the dialectical synthesis of allegorical form, which simultaneously empties the idea of God from any trace of worldly becoming, while drawing from it a wealth of worldly detail.\footnote{Idem, 177.} In the final turn of Benjamin’s dialectical argument, this arrangement of dead knowledge redeems the idea by preserving an image of what has been lost.

\section*{§2 Benjamin’s Leibniz: Between Medieval Mysticism and Enlightened Rationality}

And so the real world could well constitute a task, in the sense that it would be a question of penetrating so deeply into everything real as to reveal thereby an objective interpretation of the world. In the light of such a task of penetration it is not surprising that the philosopher of the ‘Monadology’ was also the founder of infinitesimal calculus. The idea is a monad – that means briefly: every idea contains the image of the world. The purpose of the representation of the idea is nothing less than an abbreviated outline of this image of the world.\footnote{Idem, 47–48.}

It is tempting to hear echoes of Heimsoeth in Benjamin’s interpretation of the monad. Benjamin emphasizes that the monad is an ‘abbreviation’ of the Absolute, which calls to mind Heimsoeth’s microcosm. Moreover, when Benjamin describes the task of penetrating the details of the world ‘so deeply’ as to reveal an image of the whole in each
monad, his description recalls Heimsoeth’s account of the theological interpretation of nature as the source of its infinite analysis. But where Heimsoeth depicts the fulfillment of the divine idea in the unfolding of its worldly becoming, Benjamin describes the emptying out of the Absolute, which drives thought back into the fragments of spiritless nature. Cohen’s functionalist reading of Leibniz helps us to understand Benjamin’s position. By intellectualizing appearances, Cohen strips nature of any semblance of organic totality, and redeems it only as objective knowledge. Things are revealed as the isolated and dependent results of the constructive activity of thought, rather than as vital centers in their own right.

There is a palpable melancholy in Benjamin’s interpretation of the infinite within the finite. He depicts Leibniz as a ‘secular theologian,’ whose metaphysics satisfies theological aspirations only within the restricted sphere of creaturely life. The longing for the infinite is driven deep into the details of the creaturely world, which are read as the inscrutable ‘signs’ of God’s providence. The restriction of the infinite within the space of the creaturely does not humanize the Absolute by bringing it within the scope of human knowledge. Rather, the Baroque mentality purges the Absolute from the scope of inquiry, and then turns with melancholic intensity onto the shards of the world. The

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wealth of worldly detail is inseparable from the *emptying-out* of the idea of the divine, rather than its *fulfillment* in beautiful semblance:

The hereafter is emptied of everything which contains the slightest breath of this world, and from it the Baroque extracts a profusion of things which customarily escaped the grasp of artistic formulation, and, at its high point, brings them violently into the light of day, in order to clear an ultimate heaven, enabling it, as a vacuum, one day to destroy the world with catastrophic violence.46

The mournful view of the creaturely world as infinitely unfulfilled is directly opposed to Heimsoeth’s idea of the finite as a microcosm of the Absolute. What is no doubt misleading is that both of these positions converge in a philology of detail, which interprets the natural world as though it were a (sacred) text.47 But if Heimsoeth’s invocation of *explicatio Dei* details God’s becoming in the ‘Book of Nature,’ the Baroque ‘fidelity to things’ simultaneously degrades the entire natural world as mere transience, while elevating those details that are fixed upon as *signs* by the melancholic disposition.48

There is nonetheless nothing arbitrary about the *structural* similarities between Heimsoeth’s microcosm and the Baroque ‘abbreviation’ of the infinite within the finite world. Heimsoeth only misconstrues the *content* when he reads Leibniz within the framework of medieval speculative metaphysics. Strict adherence to medieval form is, in


47 In a note in the *Passagenwerk*, Benjamin shows the theological basis for ‘commentary’ on nature, and its structural parallels to philology: “Bear in mind that commentary on a reality (for it is a question here of commentary, of interpretation in detail) calls for a method completely different from that required by commentary on a text. In the one case, the scientific mainstay is theology; in the other case, philology,” *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts: 1999), 460.

48 Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 175.
fact, the fixed point that allows for a total revolution of content under the conditions of secularization: “...all the energy of the age was concentrated on a complete revolution of the content of life, while orthodox ecclesiastical forms were preserved.”49 Along these lines, Benjamin shows that the Baroque Trauerspiel is formally based on the medieval Passion-play, with the difference that the Baroque age was denied any direct expression for its theological aspirations.50 There remained a profound yearning for redemption, but it was denied any direct access to transcendence, and remained concentrated within the profane realm. Thus, “…the German Trauerspiel is taken up entirely with the hopelessness of the earthly condition. Such redemption as it knows resides in the depths of this destiny itself rather than in the fulfillment of a divine plan of salvation.”51 It is exactly because the Baroque age was not liberated from the 'hierarchical strain' of medieval form that it was mirrored within the restricted domain of creaturely life.52 This mirroring is not an inwardly complete microcosm, but the repetition of a form that has become detached from its source.

In a 1916 fragment on ‘Trauerspiel and Tragedy,’ Benjamin describes the form of the mourning play as inherently non-unified; it does not achieve its resolution within itself, but has its meaning in relation to a withdrawn or emptied transcendence. This is expressed as an infinite (i.e. unfulfilled) yearning, which repeats itself in the profane world. Benjamin describes this repetitive mirroring in terms of functional mathematics.

49 Idem, 79.
50 Idem, 76.
51 Idem, 81.
52 Idem, 79.
Whereas the microcosm is fulfilled and complete in itself, the form of the *Trauerspiel* lacks such unity: “the idea of its resolution no longer dwells within the realm of drama itself.” This form is “mathematically comparable to one branch of a hyperbola whose other branch lies in infinity. The law governing a higher life prevails in the restricted space of an earthly existence, and all play until death puts an end to the game, so as to repeat the same game, albeit on a grander scale, in another world.”

Benjamin makes the connection to mathematics more precise in his *Habilitation* thesis, and he consequently gives a different image of the unfulfilled infinity expressed in the play of mourning. Rather than describing an unchecked repetition, in which each part derives its unity from a whole that is never fully realized, he characterizes the form of the *Trauerspiel* in terms of *intensive* infinity, or the absorption of succession within a spatial image. The infinitesimal calculus is the mathematical equivalent of the secularization of history at the core of the Baroque *Trauerspiel*:

If history is secularized in the setting, this is an expression of the same metaphysical tendency which simultaneously led, in the exact sciences, to the infinitesimal method. In both cases chronological movement is grasped and analyzed in a spatial image.

Benjamin’s description would seem to replicate Hegel’s distinction between the ‘bad’ infinite (the mechanical application of the formula ‘n + 1’) and the ‘good’ or ‘actual’ infinite, which has content and is fully realized. But the comparison is misleading for

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54 Ibid.
two reasons. First, Benjamin describes the attempt to *transfix* the infinite by grasping it within a spatial image, but this cannot be done without distortion. If the infinite is mirrored within the finite, it is a concave mirror.\(^{56}\) Second, the infinite is not *contained* in a spatial image; it rather reveals any finite representation to be a ‘confused’ perception, which closer inspection shows to be infinitely complex.\(^{57}\)

Let us consider this more closely: Benjamin describes secularization as the foreshortening of history within a ‘setting.’ History is abridged within the confines of secular life. Whereas the medieval chronicle depicts time as the *via recta* from creation to redemption, the Baroque drama (including the ‘play’ of history) contracts the entire course of history within the setting of courtly life: “Inasmuch as it became absorbed in the microscopic examination of details, it progressed no further than the painstaking analysis of the calculations of political intrigue.”\(^{58}\) This is not just an abridged history; it is the absorption of history *as such* into the seeming permanence of natural life. Succession is supplanted by *intensification*; plot is absorbed in the microscopic analysis of details. What Benjamin describes as the absorption of chronological progression in a

\(^{56}\) Benjamin uses the figure of a ‘concave mirror’ to suggest distortion, but also to suggest the ‘self-enclosed’ domain that is produced when the chronological infinite is grasped within a spatial totality. Idem, 91.

\(^{57}\) Benjamin describes how ‘confusion’ [*Verwirrung*] is a technical term in the dramaturgical theories of the Baroque (*Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 95). It is a technical term also in Leibniz’s philosophy, for the abbreviated representation of infinite complexity in our phenomenal representations of time and space. See for instance Leibniz’s “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas,” for his technical definition of confusion: Knowledge is “confused when I cannot enumerate one by one marks [nota] sufficient for differentiating a thing from others, even though the thing does indeed have such marks and requisites into which its notion can be resolved. And so we recognize colors, smells, tastes, and other particular objects of the senses clearly enough, and we distinguish them from one another, but only through the simple testimony of the senses, not by way of explicit marks,” Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 24.

\(^{58}\) Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 88.
'spatial image' is actually the transfixion of time in a 'pre-stabilized' essence. Benjamin accordingly emphasizes the stabilization in Leibniz's system of 'pre-established harmony,' rather than the harmonious coordination between individual monads.59

What appears to be a spatial image is actually a confused representation: it appears static, but closer investigation reveals teeming motion, and a welter of microscopic detail. According to Benjamin, the monad has absorbed all of its history within itself.60 But it is possible to unfold these implications to infinity. Leibniz writes that "[m]onads all go confusedly to infinity, to the whole."61 ‘Confusion’ thus provides yet another representation of the infinite within the finite: the monad contains infinitely more than the finite mind can grasp or comprehend, fused into an indistinct abbreviation. We become aware of this confused complexity by attending to what is already implicit in our representations. This is why both Leibniz and Benjamin refer to Platonic anamnesis to describe how ideas are given to thought.62 But, whereas Plato

59 Benjamin argues that exponents of the Counter-Reformation sought a political stabilization, bolstered by an essentialist understanding of nature. He interprets Leibniz's 'pre-established harmony' along these lines. According to Leibniz's system, the events of history could be derived from a perfect understanding of nature. Thus, history within the monad is ‘virtual’: "It is no longer pragmatically real, but... is to be inferred from the state of completion and rest, from the essence." Benjamin, Origin, 47. The monad is an essence, or an idea, in which the total course of history has been pre-stabilized: "The idea is a monad – the pre-stabilized representation of phenomena resides within it, as in their objective interpretation," ibid. ["Die Idee ist Monade – in ihr ruht prästabilisiert die Repräsentation der Phänomene als in deren objektiver Interpretation" (Gesammelte Schriften I. 1. 228).]

60 Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 47.

61 Monadology §60; in Leibniz, Philosophical Essays, 221.

62 See, for example, Leibniz's "Discourse on Metaphysics," §26 (Philosophical Essays, 58), which appeals to Plato’s doctrine of reminiscence. Benjamin writes, in very similar terms to Leibniz’s, "Since philosophy may not presume to speak in tones of revelation, this can only be done by recalling in memory the primordial form of perception. Platonic anamnesis is, perhaps, not far removed from this kind of remembering; except that here it is not a question of the actualization of images in visual terms; but rather, in philosophical contemplation, the idea is released from the heart of reality as the word, reclaiming its name giving rights," Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 37.
describes a process of remembering what we once had as objects of knowledge,

Benjamin characterizes monadic fullness as lost for consciousness: the deepening of attention is, at the same time, the ‘death of intentionality’: “…truth content is only to be grasped through immersion in the most minute details of subject-matter.”

Benjamin’s description of the infinite within the finite as confusion, and his depiction of the ‘virtual history’ packed within the monad, reveal the two most decisive differences between his and Cohen’s interpretation of Leibniz. First, Cohen depicts the idea as a spontaneous product of the intellect, which can be produced by the application of concepts and categories of mind. Benjamin rather points to the pre-existence of the idea, which cannot be contained – much less generated – by consciousness: “Whereas the concept is a spontaneous product of the intellect, ideas are simply given to be reflected upon. Ideas are pre-existent.”

Second, whereas Cohen’s infinitesimal method emphasizes the process of generating objects from intensive functions, Benjamin’s monad represents the world from the standpoint of rest. The difference between these accounts reveals the gaps between Benjamin's Baroque monadology, and Cohen's anachronistically enlightened Leibniz. (Heimsoeth’s argument is ahistorical in a different way, since it distils the naïve immediacy of creaturely life from the expression of calculated force.)

63 Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 29, 36.

64 Idem, 47.

65 Idem, 30.

66 Idem, 47.
Benjamin’s reading captures the decisive differences between Baroque and Enlightenment metaphysics, which Cohen’s interpretation of Leibniz fails to grasp. In the first place, Cohen understands nature according to the paradigm of the natural sciences, and accordingly, he interprets the relationship between law and phenomena as constitutive. Benjamin shows that the Baroque concept of nature, by contrast, was invested with political-theological significance. Nature, for the Baroque, was understood in terms of a pre-historical state of creation. Benjamin argues that history was secularized in nature, and accordingly, “[t]he nature of creation which absorbs history back into itself, is quite different from the nature of Rousseau.”

The relationship between law and nature also differs in a corresponding way: the permanence of nature – an exceptionless state – was predicated upon the exceptional power of the sovereign (whether we understand by this the voluntaristic God, or the sovereign dictator). The constitution of nature was inseparable from the constituting act of the sovereign, whose dictatorial edict arrested the unpredictable course of history, and regulated it according to the permanent image of nature: “The function of the tyrant is the restoration of order in the state of emergency: a dictatorship whose utopian goal

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67 Idem, 91.

68 Benjamin writes, paraphrasing Schmitt: “For as an antithesis to the historical ideal of restoration, it [nature] is haunted by the idea of catastrophe. And it is in response to this antithesis that the theory of the state of emergency is devised. If one wishes to explain how ‘the lively awareness of the significance of the state of emergency, which is dominant in the natural law of the seventeenth century’ disappears in the following century, it is not therefore enough simply to refer to the greater political stability of the eighteenth century. If it is true, that ‘for Kant... emergency law was no longer any law at all,’ that is a consequence of his theological rationalism” (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 66, c.f. Schmitt, Political Theology, 14).
will always be to replace the unpredictability of historical accident with the iron
constitution of the laws of nature.”

The Baroque sovereign is like the occasionalist God, who stands outside of
history and arranges the events of the world, depriving creaturely life of spontaneous
animation:

This is the context within which not only the organic life of man is enacted, but
also the deeds of the courtier and the action of the sovereign, who, in conformity
to the occasionalist image of God, is constantly intervening directly in the state so
as to arrange the data of the historical process in a regular and harmonious
sequence, which is, so to speak, spatially measurable.

The tyrant is like a lightning rod, charged with the task of absorbing the wild energy of
history and transforming it, through his own person, into predictable nature. In order to
control history, the tyrant must subject his own nature to thorough mechanization. This
is why the tyrant and the martyr are two faces of the same coin in the world of Baroque
drama. At the very point where nature is most rigorously subjected to convention, a
profound expression of mourning is released: nature suffers its lost immediacy.

Benjamin describes the ‘Baroque dialectic’ that reveals itself in the synthesis of these
extremes:

Spirit – such was the thesis of the age – shows itself in power; spirit is the
capacity to exercise dictatorship. This capacity requires both strict inner
discipline and unscrupulous external action. Its practice brought to the course of
the world an icy disillusion which is matched in intensity only by the fierce

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69 Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 74.

70 Idem, 97.

71 Idem, 73, 98.
aspiration of the will to power. Such a conception of perfect conduct on the part of the man of the world awakens a mood of mourning [Trauer] in the creature stripped of all naïve impulses. And this, his mood permits the paradoxical demand for saintliness to be made of the courtier or even, as Gracián does, actually to declare that he is a saint.\textsuperscript{72}

Nature is posited as the antithesis of history. In the dialectic of sovereignty, this is the anti-historical act of the tyrant, whose ‘emergency law’ arrests the perpetual catastrophe of historical and political life. But the absorption of history into creaturely life is deprived of any natural immediacy. Benjamin discovers the dialectical synthesis in the expression of suffering nature.\textsuperscript{73}

The anti-historical edict of the sovereign has its parallel in the Baroque theory of allegory, in which the allegorist strips nature of any independent life, in order to preserve its meaning as knowledge. This brings us to the second Baroque feature that Cohen’s reading of Leibniz neglects: namely, the seventeenth century had a different teleology than the Enlightenment. Benjamin describes Baroque teleology as establishing the highest purpose of nature in knowledge, and he distinguishes this from the eighteenth-century notion of happiness as the ‘end’ of nature (an idea which is realized in the dissolution of nature into the ideal of reason).\textsuperscript{74} Even though Cohen’s generative method implies no empirical history, it remains oriented towards a regulative ideal, which it progressively approximates. By contrast, the Baroque age valued the

\textsuperscript{72} Idem, 98.

\textsuperscript{73} Idem, 175.

\textsuperscript{74} In the “Theological-Political Fragment,” Benjamin remarks that the secular order is erected on the idea of happiness, which does not have as its telos the Kingdom of God, but unobtrusively approaches the messianic in seeking its own downfall: “For in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall, and only in happiness is its downfall destined to find it” (Benjamin, Selected Writings, III, 305).
permanence of knowledge above all historical becoming.⁷⁵ All history is rendered ‘virtual’ from the standpoint of the ‘transfixed face of signifying nature’:

‘Hominis causa’ should not be considered in terms of the teleology of the Enlightenment, for which human happiness was the supreme purpose of nature, but in terms of a quite different, Baroque, teleology. Devoted neither to the earthly nor to the moral happiness of creatures, its exclusive aim is their mysterious instruction. From the point of view of the Baroque, nature serves the purpose of expressing its meaning, it is the emblematic representation of its sense, and as an allegorical representation it remains irremediably different from its historical realization. In moral examples and in catastrophes history served only as an aspect of the subject matter of emblems.ics. The transfixed face of signifying nature is victorious, and history must, once and for all, remain contained in the subordinate role of stage-property.⁷⁶

The Baroque ideal is the permanence of knowledge. On the one hand, this ideal is profoundly anti-historical: it reduces all natural becoming to mere transience in deference to the essential and enduring. On the other hand, signifying nature ‘contains’ history within itself, albeit in a ‘subordinate role’. The negation of extensive history is taken up within an essence as intensive history. This is not expressed in progress, or the infinite, transformative activity of life; it is rather registered in the infinite analyzability of signifying nature.

Benjamin’s theory of allegory shows how the Baroque teleology leads into an abyss of contemplation. This is the strict consequence of restricting the ‘infinite task’ of knowledge within the secular domain. Cohen’s infinitesimal method describes the theoretical construction of the object as an infinite task, but he represents this infinity as


a temporal succession, or the progressive approach of objective knowledge towards the rational ideal. Benjamin concentrates the infinite task of knowledge within the profane world. The insights of the allegorical mode of expression follow from this damming-up of the infinite within the finite space of the secular world. Benjamin describes this as allegory's ability to keep faith with the thing-like character of its knowledge.77 But the thing-like character of knowledge is not devoid of a corresponding confusion. In the first place, succession is flattened into a spatial representation: all the states of development and decline are presented simultaneously. Benjamin points to allegories depicting the sun rising and setting at once, or flowers blooming and decaying at the same time.78 Spatial simultaneity results in the multiplication of the same image, or its internal fracturing – bodies are separated into limbs, and words are atomized into letters. The simple is pervaded by multiplicity.79

In the second place, the allegorist empties external reality of any life of its own in order to fix nature under the schema of knowledge. He reduces nature to mere matter, or an empty world of things. But the allegorist does not remain in this empty realm; he fills it by enciphering things as ‘emblems’ of a higher order. Once again, the simple thing-like character of allegorical writing gives way to complexity. The signs of allegory “fill out and deny the void in which they are represented.”80 The empty world is

77 Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 225.
78 Idem, 194.
79 Idem, 218, 208, 193.
80 Idem, 233.
extravagantly appointed with a “wealth of ciphers.” But this ostentatious fullness is not the reconciliation of nature and spirit in life; it is rather the imitation of life in melancholy immersion: “The purely material and this absolute spiritual are the poles of the satanic realm; and the consciousness is their illusory synthesis, in which the genuine synthesis, that of life, is imitated.”

Knowledge of things implies a double alienation, to which Benjamin’s theory of allegory draws attention. In the first place, the allegorist strips exteriority of any independent life in order to transfix it under the schema of knowledge. In the second place, the mere thing becomes an object of interpretation, or a sign which points beyond itself. This introduces an abstract generality into language, for any ‘thing’ can mean anything else. It is no accident that Benjamin singles out Shakespeare’s Hamlet in order to illustrate the mournfulness expressed in the functional generality of language.

Hamlet’s crisis is a crisis of language; the tragedy unfolds from the substitutability of all beings. Hamlet mourns that this ‘father’ could so easily be replaced; that the name, ‘King,’ which designated one person, can be immediately assumed by the usurper; that a mother’s ‘love’ can so quickly find a new object. Hamlet even discovers that his own sincerity of feeling is dissimulated and theatrical. The absolute power of the allegorist over his signs introduces arbitrariness into linguistic expression (a corollary of the asymmetrical power of the knowing subject over mere things).

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81 Idem, 184.

82 Idem, 230. I will expand on Benjamin’s interpretation of allegory in Chapter Four. In that chapter, I show that Benjamin interprets allegory as the linguistic expression of the Fall from paradise. In simple terms, for now, this is why Benjamin describes allegory as securing knowledge within the ‘guilt-context’ of fallen nature, and this is also why he refers to the ‘satanic realm.’

83 In the “Epilogue” of this thesis I will offer an interpretation of Benjamin’s reading of Hamlet.
Allegory plunges into a bottomless abyss of interpretation. This vertiginous analysis is the source of its greatest insights, as it delves into the details of the profane world, ringing its images with layer upon layer of significance. Each thing is presented in its own allegorical setting, or ‘confused court.’ The source of this infinite analysis is the very opacity of things, which are invested with meaning as ‘signs’ of divine providence, or filled with the promise of mysterious instruction. The fall of knowledge into the abyss of endless contemplation is arrested only when the knowing subject recognizes his own activity as the animating force behind the appearance of life in things:

This solves the riddle of the most fragmented, the most defunct, the most dispersed. Allegory, of course, thereby loses everything that was most peculiar to it: the secret, privileged knowledge, the arbitrary rule in the realm of dead objects, the supposed infinity of a world without hope. All of this vanishes with this one about-turn, in which the immersion of allegory has to clear away the final phantasmagoria of the objective and, left entirely to its own devices, re-discovers itself, not playfully in the earthly world of things, but seriously under the eyes of heaven.

With the final absorption of exteriority into subjectivity, allegory loses its profound knowledge, and “goes away empty-handed.”

Heimsoeth and Cohen both present Leibniz’s monad as having entirely accomplished the absorption of external things into spirit or mind. Heimsoeth’s monad is a self-enclosed microcosm, which is capable of immediately reflecting the Absolute within itself because of its capacity as a soul to receive revelation. Likewise, Cohen describes the constitution of the object from intensive functions, which deprives the

84 Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 188.
85 Idem, 232.
86 Idem, 233.
object entirely of its ‘thing-like’ character, and grounds reality in the concepts and categories of cognition. Benjamin’s understanding of Baroque teleology, by contrast, shows the dual alienation of the thing-like character of knowledge. The profane illumination of allegory is only possible when the details of the world are read as signs of a divinity that we cannot know directly, but that we can only glean from the faint traces and fragments of spiritless nature.

Thinking cannot conceive of its own origins. The infinite distance between divine providence and finite knowledge is a profound measure of the melancholy of creaturely life. As Leibniz puts it in the ‘Discourse on Metaphysics,’ “...here is the occasion to recognize the altitudinem divitarum, the depth and abyss of divine wisdom, without seeking a detail that involves infinite considerations.” Leibniz acknowledges that divine wisdom is an abyss for finite minds. He warns us of the danger involved in seeking a detail that involves infinite considerations. The phrase, the ‘depth and abyss’ of divine wisdom, expresses the paradoxical character of the Baroque transfiguration of nature into knowledge: on the one hand, all of nature can be interpreted, down to the smallest detail. On the other hand, the ultimate sufficient reason in nature is God, who stands outside the subjective order of reasons.

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87 Leibniz, Discourse on Metaphysics. §30, 61.

88 As Leibniz writes in the ‘Monadology,’ God is the ultimate ground of the sufficient reason of all things, but our analysis never arrives at this ultimate reason: And since all this detail involves nothing but other prior or more detailed contingents, each of which needs a similar analysis in order to give its reason, we do not make progress in this way. It must be the case that the sufficient or ultimate reason is outside the sequence or series of this multiplicity of contingencies, however infinite it may be (Leibniz, Philosophical Essays, 217–18).
§3 Benjamin’s Monadology and the Interpretation of Contingent Experience

I have argued in this chapter that Benjamin’s monad turns on a particular interpretation of the ‘infinite within the finite’, as the impossibility of capturing contingent reality within a finite set of principles, or deducing being from a system. Benjamin’s monad **disenchants** two ‘myths’ of secular modernity: the first is the myth of positivism – the ‘fetish of the concept,’ that material reality can be captured by categories of mind without any remainder. The second is the myth of progress, which depicts time as both an infinite recursive process, and also as the inevitable unfolding of the ideal within history.

First, Benjamin shows that the infinity within the monad opens up an abyss for speculative reason, which can never *ground* contingent facts in concepts and categories of mind. Cohen reads Leibniz as a step on the way to Kant’s philosophy, and sees the ‘law of the series’ within the monad as evidence for taking Leibniz’s ‘metaphysical points’ as halfway houses to the lawful *constitution* of reality. But Benjamin is interested in Leibniz precisely because he does not take the step of constituting reality according to subjective principles. The active force in monads is not yet the *spontaneity* of reason, since individual monads are contingent upon the free choice of God, who selects the best possible world from an infinite set of compossibles. In contrast to the ‘universalism’ of law in neo-Kantianism, Leibniz preserves the ‘personalism’ of the divine lawmaker, albeit in the last stage of its retreat. The *unique* sequence within each monad is not strictly derivable from *general* laws of logic: its ‘sovereign’ truth is in excess of any classificatory scheme. Benjamin does not interpret this excessive fullness in aesthetic or
mythical terms. Rather, he shows that the simple sovereignty of truth gives way to the arbitrariness of power when it is brought to bear within the restricted realm of profane knowledge.

The ‘intensive infinity’ within the monad is in excess of any concept. Monadic fullness is dizzying, ‘confused.’ This lacks any whiff of the spiritualized fullness of life. The infinity within the monad is infinitely analyzable, which means that it cannot be captured by a finite consciousness, but is lost for intentionality. Nonetheless, this loss is not an abstract negation of knowledge, since the monad has all the complex determinacy of an intensive gathering of relations. This is the redemptive aspect of the functional construction of experience, which Benjamin pits against the false semblance of totality implied by Heimsoeth’s microcosm. Knowledge endures: “What has survived is... an object of knowledge which has settled in the consciously constructed ruins.”

Benjamin’s monad is subtly positioned against Cohen’s understanding of the rational construction of reality, since the confused complexity within each monad shows that reality cannot be classified without remainder. His rejection of Heimsoeth’s closed microcosm is much more damning: the pretence of capturing the infinite within the particular human soul is what shows this philosophy to be resolutely finite, or mythological.

Second, the ‘pregnant’ fullness of the monad intends no mythic re-enchantment of nature. On the contrary, it definitively secularizes temporality, and shows how the modern notion of progress reintroduces the Christian via recta into the representation of time. Whereas Cohen understands the generation of reality from functions as the

89 Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 182.
progressive development of reason within history, or as the *successive* unfolding of the law of continuity within contingent reality, Benjamin’s monad is *simultaneously* packed with all of its predicates – past, present, and future. In contrast to Cohen’s logical generation of existence from functions, Benjamin describes the *intensive* infinity within the monad as its absorption of all of its ‘virtual history’ (both becoming and passing away) in a pre-stabilized essence. We become aware of the infinite complexity in our perceptions by intensifying our attention to what is *already* implicit in our representations. If Cohen gives an account of the origin of ideas in terms of logical generation, Benjamin gives us their pre-history. His claim that content within the monad is ‘innate’ or pre GIVEN must be understood as a corrective to the notion that consciousness *produces* its objects.

Once again, the contrast between Benjamin’s two sources is revealing: recall that Heimsoeth’s ‘living God’ is the descent and fulfillment of Being in history, or its unfolding through its states of becoming. For Cohen, by contrast, the unique Being of God negates the independent reality of all becoming, as merely privative. His ‘logical’ constitution of becoming is explicitly intended to extirpate an ontological or mythical account of creation as the *emanation* of worldly becoming from being. Nonetheless, Cohen’s merely ‘logical’ generation of reality assumes a representation of time as progressive and teleologically oriented toward the fulfillment of the ideal of reason. Benjamin’s argument is positioned against both of these views: the monad contains all of its virtual history simultaneously, but this totality can only be discovered by submerging ourselves in the infinite complexity of minute details. This is another way of saying that the *original* totality in the monad is not an object of possible experience: it is neither
immediately present in life (its fulfillment is ‘virtual’), nor can it be approached as an ‘infinite task’.

Benjamin’s monad gives rise to a novel conception of the relationship between contingency and infinity: the contingent is infinitely complex, and therefore cannot be conceptualized without remainder. Furthermore, it informs an understanding of time as intensive, rather than successive. The intensive infinity in monads allows for a depiction of the historical *remnant* not just as a nullity, but as the contraction of forces that are released in the disintegration of any static form or position. It is no accident that Benjamin turns to metaphysics precisely at the point where metaphysics has lost its home in theology; his monadology is a meditation on the status of the Absolute within secular modernity. The metaphysical object has been successively dissolved by the negativity of enlightened rationality. But transcendence is not reduced to nothing, as philosophical positivists would argue. As a remnant, it has absorbed its inner history. The history absorbed in the remainder is not immediately or directly meaningful, but requires deciphering. In light of the inner-history of the object (which is no inert ‘thing,’ but an enciphered text), perception becomes a hermeneutics of the remainder. Investigation is driven into the smallest, most peripheral traces of experience, with no guarantee that its object will correspond to subjective concepts and categories.
Two: The Representation of Ideas and the Redemption of Phenomena

In the context of these considerations... criticism becomes the representation of an idea. Its intensive infinity characterizes ideas as monads. My definition is: criticism is the mortification of the works. Not the intensification of consciousness in them (that is Romantic!), but their colonization by knowledge.¹

Benjamin first mentions Leibniz's monadology in 1923 in a letter to Florens Christian Rang. Therein, Benjamin writes that "Leibniz’s entire way of thinking, his idea of the monad, which I adopt for my definition of ideas... seems to me to comprise the summa of a theory of ideas."² The most fruitful way of approaching what Benjamin means by the monad, at least in his early work, is through an examination of what he refers to as a ‘theory of ideas.’

Benjamin wrote two academic dissertations, both of which address the relationship between individual artworks and a theory of ideas. In The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism (1919), Benjamin explores the ‘idea of art’ in Jena Romanticism. This work remains in the background when Benjamin revisits the topic of ideas in the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’ to The Origin of German Tragic Drama (1928). Yet, Benjamin’s monadic theory of ideas differs substantially from the early Romantic idea of art, and in order to appreciate the stakes of this distinction, it is necessary to examine what Benjamin means by the ‘idea’ in both dissertations. Benjamin’s letter to


² Ibid.
Rang, cited in the epigraph, contains the most concise statement of the difference that Benjamin perceived between his theory of ideas as monads and the Romantic idea of art: whereas the early Romantics conceived of ideas as products of the reflective consciousness, or as the *intensification of consciousness* in individual works, Benjamin’s monadic theory of ideas is linguistic in character. In Chapter Three, I will elaborate the differences between Benjamin’s monadic theory of ideas and the ‘idea of art’ in the early Romantics. In Chapter Four, I will trace what Benjamin means by the linguistic character of ideas to an Adamic theory of language, which received one of its clearest philosophical formulations in Leibniz’s concept of expression. But first, in this chapter, I will examine Benjamin’s monadic theory of ideas as it is articulated in the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue.’

In the ‘Prologue,’ Benjamin invokes a theory of ideas in order to redeem the minute complexity of phenomena. According to Benjamin, ideas salvage the phenomena by *representing* them, rather than subsuming them under concepts or laws. Whereas the phenomena are reduced to mere particularity when subsumed under concepts, even the most minute detail has an essential place in the representation of an idea. Each idea expresses the world from a unique point of view, and that point of view is thoroughly determined in the nexus of perceptual detail that individuates an idea as an essence. This nexus of detail – the very *texture* of thought – cannot be brought under concepts without remainder. Benjamin characterizes the relationship between ideas and phenomena as one of ‘representation’ (variously, *Darstellung* and *Repräsentation*); this, I
argue, should be interpreted as akin to Leibnizian expression. Leibniz uses the term ‘expression’ almost interchangeably with ‘representation’ to signify a structural isomorphism between *representatio* and *representans*. This isomorphism is not a relationship of resemblance, or sensuous *mimesis*. Rather than issuing in an image of the truth, Leibnizian representation preserves the same order and ratio of internal relationships as that which it expresses. Benjamin’s argument that ideas are to phenomena as constellations are to stars, or that ideas represent the phenomena by determining the nexus of their relations, is wholly consistent with Leibnizian expression.

As representations of the phenomena, ideas are manifest in determinate configurations of concrete elements. Ideas have a phenomenal ‘body,’ in the Leibnizian sense of the term. The irreducible phenomenality of ideas means that philosophy has something in common with art, since both confront the question of representation.

Leibniz and Benjamin both describe an intrinsic relationship between truth and beauty,
since truth is represented in the *harmonious* arrangement of individual ideas, each of which unifies the manifold from its own point of view. This harmony, although beautiful, is semblance, rather than substance. Leibniz explains the beautiful as a *confused* perception that is ultimately reducible to truths of reason. Benjamin also describes an intrinsic, yet equivocal relationship between truth and beauty, in which only the destruction of beautiful form reveals the kernel of truth:

> [T]ruth is the content of beauty. This content, however, does not appear by being exposed; rather, it is revealed in a process that might be described metaphorically as the burning up of the husk as it enters the realm of ideas, that is to say a destruction of the work in which its external form achieves its most brilliant degree of illumination.⁴

As Benjamin puts it in the body of the *Trauerspiel* book, the semblance of beauty

> “evaporates when the light of divine learning falls upon it.”⁵ What is left for the critic is an arrangement of knowledge, which preserves its configuration for all time.⁶

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⁵ Idem, 176, my emphasis.

⁶ Benjamin’s essay, “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin” (1914–15), contains the earliest formulation of the idea that the task of criticism is to distil the ‘inner form’ or nexus of relations at the core of a work of art. Benjamin refers to this nexus of relations as the “intellectual-perceptual structure of the world to which the poem bears witness.” As an ‘intellectual-perceptual’ structure, this complex is not capable of separation into form and matter; perception itself is intellectual; it has an ‘inner form’ or structure of relationships, which is itself the ‘idea’ of the work of art. This structure is what makes it possible to criticize art. As Benjamin puts it in the essay on Hölderlin, it is “the ultimate basis accessible to analysis” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings, I*, 18). The inner form of the poem is only discoverable as a *configuration* of relations, which Benjamin describes in terms of a ‘Law of Identity’: “This law of identity states that all unities in the poem already appear in intensive interpenetration; that the elements are never purely graspable; that, rather, one can grasp only the structure of relations, whereby the identity of each individual being is a function of an infinite chain of series in which the poetized unfolds…. No element can be singled out, void of relation, from the intensity of the world order” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings, I*, 25). Benjamin’s subsequent work on art criticism, including his essay on translation, remain within the sphere of this first formulation: What is accessible to criticism in the work of art is a structure of relationships, rather than the phenomenal elements in their immediacy, ‘singled out, void of relation.’ Benjamin’s
Even though Benjamin does not explicitly outline a theory of expression in the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue,' he makes a series of claims about the representational nature of ideas, which, taken together, point to an underlying Leibnizian framework. These are: a) that ideas represent the phenomena by establishing the relationships between phenomenal elements in 'timeless constellations'; b) that the ideas have a phenomenal manifestation in a determinate configuration of concrete elements; c) that the form of an essence appears in action, “like blood coursing through the body”; d) that the ideas are not forms of conscious thought, but are linguistic in character; and e) that this linguistic character is not a matter of outward communication, but pertains instead to a primordial form of perception [Urvernehmen] that unfolds inwardly.

Doctoral thesis on “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism” likewise describes the peculiar infinity of Romantic reflection as “a full infinitude of interconnection” (idem, 126, my emphasis).

7 “Whereas phenomena determine the scope and content of the concepts which encompass them... their relationship to ideas is the opposite of this inasmuch as the idea, the objective interpretation of phenomena – or rather their elements – determines their relationship to each other. Ideas are timeless constellations, and by virtue of the elements’ being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed” (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 34).

8 “As the salvation of phenomena by means of ideas takes place, so too does the representation of ideas through the medium of empirical reality. For ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of these elements” (ibid).

9 “In terms of concepts of psychology it is perhaps possible to reproduce a variety of impressions... but it is not possible to express the essence of the essence of a field of artistic endeavour. This can only be done in a comprehensive explanation of the underlying concept of its form, the metaphysical substance of which should not simply be found within, but should appear in action, like blood coursing through the body” (idem, 39).

10 Benjamin argues that the linguistic, rather than the conscious character of ideas, is something that the early Romantics missed in their attempt to renew a theory of ideas: “Ignorance of this, its discontinuous finitude, has, not infrequently, frustrated energetic attempts to renew the theory of ideas, most recently those undertaken by the older generation of the Romantics. In their speculations truth assumed the character of a reflective consciousness in place of its linguistic character” (idem, 38).

11 “It is the task of the philosopher to restore, by representation, the primacy of the symbolic character of the word, in which the idea is given self-consciousness, and that is the opposite of all outwardly-directed
My argument in this chapter proceeds in three main sections: In Section One, I outline Leibniz's concept of expression, with an emphasis on its implications for a theory of ideas. In Section Two, I show how Benjamin's theory of ideas involves a Leibnizian concept of expression. Finally, in Section Three, I develop the implications of Benjamin's expressionism for his understanding of the relationship between truth and beauty.

§1 ‘Expression’ in Leibniz

Leibniz discusses expression, in the most general terms, as a kind of structural isomorphism between a representation and what it represents. Expression obtains whenever there is an ordered relationship between one thing and another. Leibniz writes, “One thing expresses another (in my language) when there is a constant and ordered relation between what can be said of the one and of the other.” What is characteristic of expression is that it preserves the same nexus of relations, even when communication. Since philosophy may not presume to speak in the tones of revelation, this can only be achieved by recalling in memory the primordial form of perception” (idem, 36).


transposed into a different medium. For example, musical notation is the graphic representation of a sequence of sounds, since it maintains the same order and internal proportions, such that it is possible to read music from the score. This relation, although ‘exact,’ is not a perfect similitude, but is rather an analogy. An idea expresses the phenomena when the internal sequence of its predicates correlates with the order and relationships between phenomena.

As a structural analogy, rather than a visual image, expression records what is only latent within our ‘confused’ sensations. Leibniz uses representation to explain the continuity of perception, even in unconscious states of a monad. According to Leibniz, the soul expresses the body perfectly, and has minute perceptions that represent subconscious bodily processes, such as the circulation of blood, and the regeneration of tissue. Even though there is no sense in which these processes are consciously apperceived, they are expressed in the infinity of ‘petites perceptions’ in the monad. Souls (or monads) maintain themselves in the continuous unfolding of ‘petites perceptions,’ most of which never reach the threshold of consciousness.

14 Leibniz’s notion of expression developed in lock-step with a new perception of mathematics as a science of relations and structures, which came to succeed the Greek view of mathematics as the contemplation of ideal mathematical entities and their eternal properties. As Amos Funkenstein points out, “[b]ecause mathematics turned into a formal language of relations, not only could numbers be represented by figures and vice versa, but also nonmathematical relations – motions, forces, intensities – could be expressed in a mathematical language,” Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth-century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 1986), 297.

15 See for instance the *New Essays*, in which Leibniz writes that ideas represent the motions in bodies “through a rather exact relation”; Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding* (eds. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Francis Bennett; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 133.

16 Leibniz writes: “Hence it is clearly not necessary for that which expresses to be similar to the thing expressed, if only a certain analogy is maintained between the relations”; see “What is an Idea?” in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters* (ed. Leroy Loemker, 2nd ed.; Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969), 207.
Although the minutest details of perception never reach the threshold of consciousness, they are nonetheless representationally distinct. They are expressed, but not to our eyes. Human consciousness is not the ultimate subject of this representation, nor do our clear and distinct intuitions adequately register what is true. Adequacy in knowledge, according to Leibniz, is not only a matter of forming ‘clear and distinct’ intuitions, in the Cartesian sense; it must also represent the thoroughgoing interconnection of all the determinations and ‘marks’ of an idea, or the nexus of predicates contained in a ‘complete individual concept.’ The subject of such representation is not psychological, but logical, and it has its ideal in the divine understanding, which simultaneously intuits all the predicates contained in a subject. The phenomena are ‘saved,’ in all of their complexity, by their legibility to God.\textsuperscript{17}

Leibniz’s contention that representation is prior to consciousness has been interpreted as a theory of the unconscious.\textsuperscript{18} I suggest, however, that Leibniz’s concept

\textsuperscript{17} In Leibniz, the chaos of minute perceptions serves not to undermine, but rather to reinforce the idea of an absolute order, legible in all of its detail to the divine understanding. Benjamin describes a similar structure when he notes that the fragmentation of the medieval mosaic testifies to the “transcendent force of the sacred image” (Benjamin, \textit{Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 28–9). The same thing could be said of Baroque architecture: the overwhelming mass of detailed ornamentation, which can appear oppressive and disorienting, is not intended for earthly eyes, but for God, who instantly perceives the order and harmony of all the parts.

\textsuperscript{18} The interpretation of Leibniz in terms of a theory of the unconscious became popular in the nineteenth century; there was something of a Leibniz renaissance which centered around a reading of Leibniz’s \textit{New Essays}, and which challenged the Wolffian orthodoxy. Leibniz’s notion of ‘petites perceptions’ had a marked influence on nineteenth-century \textit{Lebensphilosophie}; it can be detected in Herbartian psychology, and in Hans Driesch’s embryology, or philosophy of ‘entelechies.’ In the early twentieth century, Leibniz’s non-Freudian notion of the unconscious is celebrated by Ludwig Klages, whom Benjamin had read carefully, albeit with some suspicion, due to the latter’s overt hostility to Jews. Indeed, Benjamin’s own doctoral thesis advisor, Richard Herbertz, wrote his inaugural dissertation on Leibniz’s theory of the unconscious; see Richard Herbertz, \textit{Die Lehre vom Unbewussten im System des Leibniz} (Halle a.d. S.: M. Niemeyer, 1905). Herbertz’ dissertation focuses on a reading of Leibniz’s \textit{New Essays}, and its first chapter reflects on the innate ideas as the site of the unconscious: “Die idées innées als ‘angeborenes Unbewußtes’” (Innate Ideas as ‘Innate Unconscious’).
of representation is grounded in an understanding of thinking as linguistic, rather than as conscious or unconscious per se. Image, sound, and color – all species of confused sensation for Leibniz – can be ‘read’ as configurations of ‘petites perceptions.’ These forms of sensation are not treated as disparate secondary qualities which have their unity only in the knowing subject; they are rather mutually translatable expressions of the same objective structure. It is possible to speak of the objectivity of perception, even though monads do not refer to external objects. The objectivity in question is a result of the harmony (i.e. the translation) between different expressions of the same world, each of which preserves the same structure of relations intensively, in the order of its perceptions.¹⁹

Leibniz’s works are scattered with references to what can be ‘read’ in the perceptions within a monad. For instance, in the New Essays, Leibniz describes how “eyes as piercing as God’s could read in the lowliest substance the universe’s whole sequence of events.”²⁰ Leibniz depicts the natural world as an enciphered text, legible in its entirety only to the penetrating eyes of God. Leibniz views human minds, moreover,

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¹⁹ Robert McRae interprets Leibnizian expression as a species of translation in the following remarks: “Not only will the perceptions of different perceivers be different expressions of the same thing, but the perceptions of the same perceiver through his different senses, for example touch and sight, may be different expressions of the same thing also. In the Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Locke raised Molyneux’s problem, whether the man born blind, and knowing by touch how to distinguish a cube from a sphere, could by sight, if sight were miraculously bestowed to him, immediately say which was the cube and which was the sphere. In his response to this, Leibniz is less interested in whether the man could solve the problem than in the exact correlations which must hold between the visual and the tactile appearances, for however dissimilar qualitatively the appearances, both are expressions of the same thing and therefore must be mutually translatable by the perceiver” (McRae, Leibniz: Perception, Apperception, and Thought, 22, cf. Leibniz, New Essays, 2, 9, 8).

²⁰ Leibniz, New Essays, “Preface.” Leibniz emphasizes the exactitude of God’s understanding, for instance in the ‘Discourse on Metaphysics’: “…with what exactitude he has provided for everything that concerns us;… that all the hairs on our head are numbered…” (§37) in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Philosophical Essays (eds. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber, Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1989), 68.
as writing tablets, ‘engraved’ at creation with the ‘innate ideas’ that virtually, or implicitly, inform our thought.\textsuperscript{21} This writing on the soul is, for the most part, latent; it does not depend for its existence on our ever actually thinking everything that is implicitly inscribed in the mind. Yet, in virtue of our innate ideas, it is possible to read the ‘Book of Nature’ through introspection alone, or by attending to the intensive relationships within a monad. According to Leibniz, all expression is a species of character (whether natural or constructed), since what is expressed can be read from the internal structure and sequence of relations in an expression. The interconnections between our minute perceptions represent the order of the universe, the past and the future, and even an image of God.

\textbf{§1.1 Expression and Anti-Cartesianism}

Leibniz developed the notion of ‘expression’ in reaction to Cartesianism, which was predominant in the first part of the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{22} One of the achievements of Cartesianism was the thoroughgoing mechanization of nature, whereby knowledge of

\textsuperscript{21} Leibniz describes his disagreement with Locke on the question of the existence of innate ideas in terms of whether or not the soul is “blank like a writing tablet on which nothing has yet been written – a \textit{tabula rasa}” (Locke’s view) or, on the other hand, “whether the soul inherently contains the sources of various notions and doctrines, which external objects merely rouse up on suitable occasions, as I believe and as do Plato and even the schoolmen and all those who understand in this sense the passage in St. Paul where he says that \textit{God’s law is written in our hearts} (Romans, 2:15),” Leibniz, \textit{New Essays}, “Preface” (my emphasis).

\textsuperscript{22} By Cartesianism, I mean more than just the thought of Descartes, but the broader movement that Descartes’ thought inspired in the seventeenth century. In \textit{Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza}, Gilles Deleuze shows how Leibniz and Spinoza both developed (different) concepts of expression as a reaction to Cartesian mechanism. He writes: “Independently of one another the two philosophers [Leibniz and Spinoza] seem to reply on the idea of expression in order to overcome difficulties in Cartesianism, to restore a Philosophy of Nature, and even to incorporate Cartesian results in systems thoroughly hostile to Descartes’ vision of the world. To the extent that one may speak of the Anticartesianism of Leibniz and Spinoza, such Anticartesianism is grounded in the idea of expression.” Gilles Deleuze, \textit{Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza} (trans. Martin Joughin; New York: Zone Books, 1992), 17.
the world could be explained entirely in terms of parts of matter (i.e. extension) in motion. The mechanistic understanding of nature strips things themselves of their qualities, or the capacity for self-representation. Leibniz’s abiding problem with Cartesianism is that it invites a certain arbitrariness by denying an essential relationship between our perceptions and their objects. Leibniz’s notion of expression is an attempt to ward off this arbitrariness by restoring the inner qualities of things – that is, the capacity of individual substances to express the order of the world intensively, according to the sequence of their perceptions.

Leibniz casts aspersion on the Cartesians for introducing arbitrariness into the order of ideas, and consequently into the order of nature as well:

[T]he Cartesians... regard it as arbitrary what perceptions we have of these [sensory] qualities, as if God had given them to the soul according to his good pleasure, without concern for any essential relation between perceptions and their

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23 I use the language of ‘stripping’ things of their qualities deliberately: Descartes describes removing the clothes from sensible appearances in order to reveal their true being. For Descartes, the metaphor of clothing indicates the semblance character of secondary qualities. Referring to the thought experiment with the ball of wax in the second Meditation, Descartes writes: “But when I distinguish the wax from its outward forms – take the clothes off, as it were, and consider it naked – then although my judgment may still contain errors, at least my perception now requires a human mind” Meditations, II, §32; in René Descartes, Discourse on Method. Meditations on First Philosophy (ed. Donald A. Cress, Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 1988). Benjamin also emphasizes the Baroque metaphor of stripping things of their sensible qualities, as though removing their clothes. As he writes in The Origin of German Tragic Drama: “The function of Baroque iconography is not so much to unveil material objects as to strip them naked. The emblematist does not present the essence implicitly, ‘behind the image.’ He drags the essence of what is depicted out before the image, in writing, as a caption, such as, in the emblem-books, forms an intimate part of what is depicted” (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 185). It is noteworthy that Leibniz also uses the language of clothed and bare monads. But for him, unlike Descartes, the folds that clothe beings are what individuate them; such folds are the very texture of beings. Deleuze coins the term ‘texturology’ to describe Leibniz’s way of thinking about secondary matter: “Then matter has not only structures and figures but also textures, insofar as it comprises these masses of monads from which it cannot be detached. A Baroque conception of matter, in philosophy as in science or in art, has to go up to that point, to a texturology.... Secondary matter is clothed, with ‘clothed’ signifying two things: that matter is a buoyant surface, a structure endowed with an organic fabric, or that it is the very fabric or clothing, the texture enveloping the abstract structure”; Gilles Deleuze, The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1993), 115.
objects. This is a view that surprises me and appears unworthy of the wisdom of the author of things, who does nothing without harmony and reason.24

For Leibniz, the connection between perceptions and the things that they represent is far from arbitrary. Perceptions are expressive, and as such, it is possible to read what they represent from their order and the structure of their internal relations. The essential relationship between perceptions and their objects is guaranteed by God. According to Leibniz, every seemingly arbitrary detail has its ultimate ground, or sufficient reason, in the divine understanding. Due to the harmony that obtains between all substances, perceptions are not only determinations of a subject, but they can be interpreted as objective expressions of the created world, and of the divine understanding.

Because each monad is intensively endowed with the capacity for representation, each individual thing is itself an idea. As Leibniz puts it in the 'Discourse on Metaphysics,' "[w]e could call that which includes everything we express our essence or idea; since this expresses our union with God himself, it has no limits and nothing surpasses it."25 As expressions of our union with God, our ideas virtually include God as their ground.26 The ‘virtuality’ of our ideas indicates that the complete determination of

24 Leibniz, New Essays, "Preface" (my emphasis).

25 Discourse on Metaphysics, §16, in Leibniz, Philosophical Essays, 49.

26 In a passage from the Discourse on Metaphysics, Leibniz implicitly refers to the Cartesian argument that truth is dependent on God’s absolute will, rather than his understanding. Because of Descartes’ argument that nothing limits the divine will, he denies an intrinsic mark of truth in our ideas. Everything true can be traced to an arbitrary decision. Leibniz opposes this position, and does so by asserting an inner mark of truth within our ideas, which he explains in terms of the possibility of discovering God’s mark within all created substances: “the excellence of God’s works can be recognized by considering them in themselves, even when we do not reflect on this empty external denomination which relates them to their cause. This
an essence involves an infinity that exceeds what can be made explicit for finite minds.\textsuperscript{27} According to Leibniz, “It must be the case that the sufficient or ultimate reason is outside the sequence of this multiplicity of contingencies, however infinite it may be.”\textsuperscript{28} Since our ideas contain infinitely more than we can ever explicate, the mind has bottomless depths from which it can draw. Even though our ideas are ‘virtual identities,’ and, as such, they already \textit{include} everything that will ever be predicated of them, it will always be possible to \textit{discover} new aspects within our ‘pregnant’ conceptions by focusing on a different order, or configuration, within the infinity of detail contained therein. Accordingly, our ideas can never be completely exhausted, or ‘presented’ to consciousness. Adequate knowledge of essences would involve a thoroughgoing determination of everything that an idea contains, including an explication of God as its source. The Cartesian standard of truth – the clear and distinct perceptions of a

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\item is all the more true, since it is by considering his works that we can discover the creator. His works must therefore carry his mark in themselves. I confess that the contrary opinion seems to me extremely dangerous and very near to the opinion of the recent innovators [including Descartes]” (\textit{Discourse on Metaphysics}, §2, in Leibniz, \textit{Philosophical Essays}, 36).
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{27} In the \textit{Discourse on Metaphysics}, Leibniz gives a logical definition of individual substance, as a ‘complete individual concept.’ He distinguishes between what is explicitly contained in a concept, and what is only ‘virtually’ or implicitly included in the complete notion of a subject. The virtual predicates of a subject – such as its past and subsequent history – are seen by God, who beholds the complete notion of an individual all at once. Leibniz writes: “Now it is evident that all true predication has some basis in the nature of things and that, when a proposition is not an identity, that is, when the predicate is not explicitly contained in the subject, it must be contained in it \textit{virtually}…. Since this is so, we can say that the \textit{nature} of an individual substance or of a complete being is to have a \textit{notion} that is so complete that it is sufficient to contain and to allow us to deduce from it all the predicates of the subject to which this notion is attributed…. God, seeing Alexander’s individual notion or haecceity, sees it in at the same time the basis and reason for all predicates which can be said truly of him, for example, that he vanquished Darius and Porus; he even knows a priori (and not by experience) whether he died a natural death or whether he was poisoned, something we can know only through history. Thus when we consider carefully the connection of things, we can say that from all time in Alexander’s soul there are vestiges of everything that has happened to him and marks of everything that will happen to him and even traces of everything that happens in the universe, even though God alone could recognize them all” (\textit{Discourse on Metaphysics}, §8, in Leibniz, \textit{Philosophical Essays}, 41; my emphasis).

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Monadology}, §37, in Leibniz, \textit{Philosophical Essays}, 217–18.
conscious subject – is unable to distinguish between ideas that are adequate and those that are inadequate. This is because it is impossible for a finite understanding to come to an end in analyzing all the predicates contained within our ‘complete individual concepts.’

§1.2 Expression and ‘Adequate’ Ideas

Leibniz’s notion of expression issues a profound challenge to the Cartesian theory of knowledge. For Leibniz, the subject of knowledge is logical, rather than psychological, and an adequate idea must be capable of logically demonstrating that an idea is possible by representing the thoroughgoing coherence of its predicates.

Leibniz’s clearest statement of the implications of expression for a theory of ideas can be found in his short essay, *Meditations on Knowledge, Truth and Ideas.* In this essay, Leibniz distinguishes between the adequacy of ideas, and what is merely clear and distinct. It is evident that he has Descartes’ theory of knowledge in view, and that he upholds a more exacting standard of the truth of ideas than Descartes’ criterion of ‘clarity and distinctness.’ Leibniz begins the essay by noting that the question of how to distinguish between true and false ideas is “an issue on which Descartes himself is not altogether satisfactory.” Whereas Descartes upholds the evidentiary character of ‘clear and distinct’ intuitions, Leibniz notes that, in addition to being clear and distinct,

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30 Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays,* 23.
ideas can also be adequate or inadequate. Leibniz classifies the different types of knowledge as follows:

[Knowledge is either obscure or clear, and again, clear knowledge is either confused or distinct, and distinct knowledge is either inadequate or adequate, and adequate knowledge is either symbolic or intuitive; and, indeed, if knowledge were, at the same time, both adequate and intuitive, it would be absolutely perfect.][31]

Obscure knowledge is knowledge that does not suffice for recognizing the thing that is represented. If I have obscure knowledge of a certain color, that means that I can only identify it by pointing to it, as it appears in the moment. I would not be able to recognize it again, or distinguish it from other similar shades. Clear knowledge, by contrast, is knowledge that allows me to identify something. Even though clear knowledge allows me to identify something and distinguish it from other kinds of things, such knowledge can still be confused. Knowledge is confused when I cannot enumerate the details that are sufficient to distinguish one thing from another; ‘confused’ in this sense literally means ‘fused together.’ Knowledge is clear and distinct when I can clearly identify a concept and can also distinctly enumerate the ‘marks,’ or essential attributes, that differentiate this notion from others. Whereas Descartes is satisfied with this level of knowledge as a criterion of truth, Leibniz thinks that clear and distinct knowledge can still be inadequate; this is the case when, even though I am able to expressly enumerate all the marks in a notion, each mark is still confused when taken by itself. Knowledge is only adequate when every single predicate in a notion is known clearly and distinctly in itself, or when the analysis of a concept has been carried to the end. Leibniz writes that

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31 Ibid.
he is not sure whether human beings can provide a perfect example of adequate knowledge, although he allows that the knowledge of numbers comes close.\textsuperscript{32} Adequate knowledge can be either symbolic ('blind'), or perfect. We can substitute symbolic expressions for adequate knowledge, and this allows us to represent ideas to ourselves without running through a full analysis of all the marks contained in our concept each time we have occasion to think of a concept.\textsuperscript{33} Leibniz gives the example of a chiliagon, or a thousand-sided polygon; it is impossible for us to \textit{intuit} a chiliagon, or hold all of its properties explicitly before our mind all at once. But a word or symbol can be substituted for intuitive knowledge.\textsuperscript{34} Symbols are not just convenient placeholders, but they also allow us to extend our knowledge beyond what we can cognize explicitly without their aid, as Leibniz’s own discoveries in symbolic logic and algebra demonstrate.

Perfect knowledge, according to Leibniz, is both adequate and intuitive; it is grasped in all of its detail, and all at once. Such knowledge is the \textit{ideal} of cognition, and it is instantiated in the eternal \textit{archetypes} of divine ideas. Perfect knowledge is capable of adequately representing all the marks of knowledge simultaneously, in the ‘eternal presence,’ or \textit{nunc stans}, of intellectual intuition: “when a notion is very complex, we

\textsuperscript{32} Leibniz, \textit{Philosophical Essays}, 24.

\textsuperscript{33} The substitutability of symbols for what they express goes to the heart of Leibniz’s notion of expression as a species of analogy. Each symbolic expression contains a latent infinity, which can be interpreted and unfolded if need be, but can also be abbreviated. In mathematical calculations, the symbol of a thousand-sided polygon analogically expresses the complete idea of such a polygon. The symbol preserves the structure of the whole in an abbreviated form, and it is capable of being substituted with no (irretrievable) loss of essential information. Similarly, Leibniz thinks that the ideas of human reason ‘abbreviate’ the eternal archetypes of the divine understanding.

\textsuperscript{34} Leibniz, \textit{Philosophical Essays}, 25.
cannot consider all of its component notions at the same time. When we can, or indeed insofar as we can, I call knowledge intuitive.”

Leibniz distinguishes between nominal and real definitions on the basis of the above taxonomy of knowledge. Clear and distinct knowledge is what Leibniz refers to as a merely ‘nominal’ definition. The enumeration of all the predicates, or marks, of a clear notion is not enough to demonstrate the possibility of an essence. Simply by enumerating all the predicates of a notion, it is impossible to see if a contradiction is contained amongst the marks, which would make such an idea false: “For we cannot safely use definitions for drawing conclusions unless we know first that they are real definitions, that is, that they include no contradictions, because we can draw contradictory conclusions from notions that include contradictions, which is absurd.”

A real definition of an essence not only enumerates the predicates, but shows their thoroughgoing interconnection – the nexus of marks – and thereby demonstrates the internal consistency of an idea. A real definition corresponds to what Leibniz refers to as adequate knowledge: “And so we also have a distinction between nominal definitions, which contain only marks of a thing to be distinguished from other things, and real definitions from which one establishes that a thing is possible.”

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35 Ibid; my emphasis.

36 Idem, 26.

37 Idem, 25.

38 Idem, 26; my emphasis.
We are now in a position to understand why Leibniz thinks that Descartes’ psychological determination of the difference between truth and falsity of ideas is not sufficient to demonstrate the truth (i.e. the possibility) of a concept. As Leibniz writes:

Nor do I see that the people of our day have abused any less the principle that they have laid down, that whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive about a thing is true or is assertable of the thing in question. For, often, what is obscure and confused seems clear and distinct to people careless in judgment. Therefore, this axiom is useless unless we use criteria for the clear and distinct, criteria which we have made explicit, and unless we have established the truth of the ideas.39

The axiom upheld by Descartes is “useless,” unless it is supplemented by a further criterion, namely adequacy. The subject of truth cannot be psychological, since “what is obscure and confused seems clear and distinct” to careless people. Rather, according to Leibniz, the criterion of truth is logical. It involves nothing short of the complete determination of an idea, for only such a thoroughgoing determination is capable of demonstrating an essence in its possibility. As Leibniz puts it, “the rules of common logic... are not to be despised as criteria for the truth of assertions, as, for example, the rule that nothing is to be admitted as certain, unless it is shown by careful testing or sound demonstration.”40

What Leibniz means by a logical demonstration of an essence must be distinguished from an empty statement of identity (i.e. ‘A = A’). Since an idea is an expression of a ‘complete individual concept,’ its representation must pay attention to how each idea unifies the manifold. To know something adequately, it is not enough

39 Idem, 26–27.
40 Idem, 27.
simply to classify it, or even to enumerate all of its ‘marks,’ but one must be capable of representing the nexus of its determinations in an interconnected totality. Each idea brings together a multiplicity of predicates in an essence, but each individual essence does so in a unique way, according to a determinate configuration. The way in which these predicates are ordered, and the intrinsic coherence of the marks of an essence, will differ according to the ‘point of view’ from which each individual concentrates the manifold of perception. This is why, according to Leibniz, the denomination of individual substances can never be merely external, but must be *intrinsic*.

§1.3 Expression and Perception: the Restoration of Inner Qualities

Cartesian mechanism stripped matter of its *inner qualities*. Leibniz’s argument that all simple substances are continuously *perceiving* refutes the externality of Cartesian knowledge of nature. In the *Principles of Nature and Grace*, Leibniz explains that simple substances (i.e. monads) can only be differentiated from each other by their *internal qualities*. These internal qualities are what Leibniz calls ‘perceptions,’ and they represent what is composite within the simple by expressing the variety of its relations to external things, just as a center-point expresses the intersection of an infinity of angles:

For the simplicity of a substance does not prevent a multiplicity of modifications, which must be found together in this same simple substance, and which must consist in the variety of its relations to external things. Similarly, in a center or point, though entirely simple, we find an infinity of angles formed by the lines that meet there.\(^{41}\)

It is telling that Leibniz uses the example of a mathematical point to explain what he means by perception. The example makes it clear that Leibniz does not mean anything like an act of a conscious subject when he talks about perception, or expression. What he means, simply, is the concentration of a multiplicity within a single ‘point of view,’ or focal point. Sensation and consciousness are higher levels of awareness, which Leibniz attributes to animal and rational souls.

Leibniz’s notion of expression, of which perception is a species, is not an activity or product of consciousness, since even ‘bare monads’ are representational. Whereas for Descartes, thinking is immediately self-conscious, for Leibniz, self-consciousness, or apperception, requires a second-order act of reflection. Not all perceptions become the object-thought of apperception. Leibniz clarifies the distinction between perception and apperception in the ‘Principles of Nature and Grace’:

[I]t is good to make a distinction between ‘perception,’ which is the internal state of the monad representing external things, and ‘apperception,’ which is ‘consciousness,’ or the reflective cognition of this internal state, which is not given to all souls, or at all times to the same soul.

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43 As Leibniz writes, “Perception is the expression of many things in one, or in a simple substance; if is combined with the reflection of the percipient, it is called thought. We judge perception to apply not only to us but also to other living and organic beings, and thought to be only in us but also (and, indeed, most perfectly) in God. This quality of the percipient is treated in logic...” (Revision note of 1697–1700 to “A New Method for Learning and Teaching Jurisprudence,” cited in Robert McRae, *Leibniz: Perception, Apperception, and Thought*, 6).

At every moment, a monad contains an infinity of perceptions which will never reach consciousness; both the complexity and the scope of these perceptions exceed what a subject can apperceive. As Leibniz describes in the New Essays:

[T]here are hundreds of indications leading us to conclude that at every moment there is in us an infinity of perceptions unaccompanied by awareness or reflection; that is, of alterations in the soul itself of which we are unaware because these impressions are either too minute and too numerous, or else too unvarying, so that they are not sufficiently distinctive on their own. But when they are combined with others they do nevertheless have their effect and make themselves felt, at least confusedly, within the whole.  

Although it is not possible to apperceive all of the minute perceptions that make up our confused notions, the minute perceptions are nonetheless representationally distinct. For instance, Leibniz describes the confused sensation that results from hearing the roar of the sea: “To hear the roar of the sea as one does, one must hear the parts that compose this whole... although each of these little noises makes itself known only in the confused collection of all of them together and would not be noticed if the wave that made it were by itself.” The sensation of the sound of the sea is composed of a multiplicity of ‘petites perceptions’ that are fused together, presenting themselves as apparently simple, when the sensation actually represents a complex phenomena. Although it is not possible to apperceive all of the minute perceptions that make up our confused notions, each part of the noise is represented (“one must hear the parts.”) Representation is a perfect mirror, as finely grained as what it represents. It is our inability to notice the minute and

45 Leibniz, New Essays, “Preface.”
46 Ibid.
indistinct perceptions from which our impressions are composed that renders our sensations confused.

Representation is not limited to a part of things, but is a perspective that takes in the whole. Each monad expresses a complete view of the world, which means that the universe is multiplied in each of its representations. Leibniz refers to monads as living mirrors: the metaphor does not mean that monads express a fixed, or external reflection of an image. Rather, each monad internally reproduces the order of the universe within itself, according to its own spontaneous drive to unify the perceptual manifold. The drive to represent the universe as a whole is an active principle within each individual substance. Each monad is “ordered as the universe itself.” Because of the representational nature of monads, a perfect harmony obtains between each individual substance, since each one preserves the same internal relations as all the others, albeit from a distinct perspective.

47 Leibniz writes in the Discourse on Metaphysics that, “every substance is like a complete world and like a mirror of God or of the whole universe, which each one expresses in its own way.... Thus the universe is... multiplied as many times as there are substances, and the glory of God is likewise multiplied by as many entirely different representations of his work” (Discourse on Metaphysics §9, in Leibniz, Philosophical Essays, 42).

48 Leibniz refers to the monad as a speculum vitale (i.e. living mirror) in the 'Principles of Nature and Grace' §3, in the 'Monadology' §§63 and 77, and in the “Letter to Remond” (July 1714, in Leibniz, Philosophical Essays 207, 221, and 223 and Leibniz, Philosophical Papers and Letters, 656).

49 Principles of Nature and Grace, §3; in Leibniz, Philosophical Essays, 207.

50 As Leibniz writes in the Theodicy, “It is true that the same thing may be represented in different ways; but there must be an exact relation between the representation of the thing, and consequently between the different representations of one and the same thing.... Nothing appears so different nor so dissimilar as these figures; and yet there is an exact relation between each point and every other point. Thus one must allow that each soul represents the universe to itself according to its point of view, and through a relation which is peculiar to it; but a perfect harmony always subsists therein” (Theodicy, §357).
§1.4 The Equivocal Nature of Expression

Even though monads perceive the whole universe, they are differentiated from each other because they unify the perceptual manifold according to a unique ‘point of view.’ Each representation is only clear and distinct with respect to a small portion of what it perceives, and this portion stands out against a horizon of confused perceptions that goes to infinity.\textsuperscript{51} In Deleuze’s words, “each monad traces its distinct partial expression against the background of a confused total expression.”\textsuperscript{52} The part of a monad’s perceptions that it clearly expresses is determined by the relationship that it has to its own body.\textsuperscript{53} A Leibnizian body is not an ‘extended substance’ that causally interacts with a soul, as it is for Descartes. Rather, a body is a ‘well-founded phenomenon,’ or an

\textsuperscript{51} “[S]ince the nature of the monad is representative, nothing can limit it to represent only a part of things. However, it is true that this representation is only confused as to the detail of the whole universe, and can only be distinct for a small portion of things, that is, either for those that are closest, or for those that are greatest with respect to each monad, otherwise each monad would be a divinity. Monads are limited, not as to their objects, but with respect to the modifications of their knowledge of them. Monads all go confusedly to infinity, to the whole; but they are limited and differentiated by the degrees of their distinct perceptions” (\textit{Monadology}, §60, in Leibniz, \textit{Philosophical Essays}, 220–21).

\textsuperscript{52} Deleuze, \textit{Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza}, 329.

\textsuperscript{53} As Leibniz writes to Antoine Arnauld, “the nature of every substance carries a general expression of the whole universe and... the nature of the soul carries, more particularly, a more distinct expression of that which is now happening with regard to its body” (28 November/ 8 December 1686, in Leibniz, \textit{Philosophical Essays}, 77). Leibniz’s suggestion that a monad most clearly expresses its own body caused great difficulty for Arnauld, who could not detect any greater degree of clarity in representing the unconscious processes of his own body, than in representing the stars of a distant galaxy. Leibniz’s response to Arnauld indicates that a monad’s expression of its own body cannot be a matter of some privileged insight, or heightened awareness. This would be manifestly false, since we are generally unaware of the subconscious processes of our bodies. Leibniz explains that there is a correlation, or a structural analogy, between minute motions in the body and ‘petites perceptions’ in the monad. A body is itself representational; it expresses the relationships that it has to all other bodies. Nerves, according to Leibniz, are particularly sensitive to the motions of other bodies, which act on them remotely through vibrations. The remote affection of all other bodies on one’s own corresponds to the way in which each monad indistinctly abbreviates all the others, or concentrates the world from its unique point of view: “I do not think that there is any difficulty in my saying that the soul expresses more distinctly, other things being equal, that which belongs to its body, since it expresses the whole universe in a certain sense, in particular accordance with the relation other bodies have to its own, since it cannot express all things equally well; otherwise there would be no differences among souls” (“Letter to Arnauld,” April 30, 1687, in Leibniz, \textit{Philosophical Essays}, 81).
aggregate that depends for its arrangement on the genuine unity of a substantial form (i.e. a monad).\textsuperscript{54} A body is the \textit{configuration} of phenomena that converges around each monad.\textsuperscript{55}

In an analogous sense, \textit{ideas} can also be said to have a ‘body.’ Ideas do not express the whole perfectly, but only equivocally, according to their focus within an infinite horizon of latent or unconscious perceptions. Since each idea perceives the manifold from its unique point of view, it is inseparable from a determinate arrangement of detail. Likewise, the relationship between ideas and linguistic characters can be described in terms of the expressive analogy that obtains between souls and bodies. Just as the soul corresponds to a particular body, or ‘well-founded’ arrangement of phenomena, so too is all thinking accompanied by a well-founded arrangement of \textit{characters} – be they graphic, audible, or gestural.\textsuperscript{56}

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  \item[\textsuperscript{54}] In the same letter to Arnauld (op. cit.), Leibniz writes that the body “can only be called a substance in an improper sense, just as in the case of a machine or a pile of stones, which are only beings by aggregation; for regular or irregular arrangement does not constitute substantial unity” (idem, 78).
  \item[\textsuperscript{55}] In a letter to Bayle, Leibniz calls the soul “a simple substance, or what I call a true unity...[which] nevertheless expresses a multitude, that is, bodies”; Gottfried W. Leibniz, \textit{Leibniz’s ‘New System’ and Associated Contemporary Texts} (eds. Roger S. Woolhouse and Richard Francks; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 132. In ‘Principles of Nature and Grace,’ he writes that, “Composites or bodies are multitudes; and simple substances – lives, souls, and minds – are unities” (Leibniz, \textit{Philosophical Essays}, 207). See also Leibniz’s letter to Des Bosses: “What will remain is only a phenomenal extension, grounded in the monads, along with the other things that result from them; they alone exist if there is no unifying substance. If that substantial chain for monads did not exist, all bodies, together with all of their qualities, would be nothing but well-founded phenomena, like a rainbow or an image in a mirror ... For one should no more say that monads are parts of bodies, that they touch one another, that they compose bodies, than that points and souls do the same. And a monad, like a soul, is, as it were, a certain world of its own, having no connections of dependency except with God” (“Letter to Des Bosses,” 5 February 1712, in Leibniz, \textit{Philosophical Essays}, 198–99).
  \item[\textsuperscript{56}] As D.P. Walker writes, “It follows that there can be no thinking without some signs or symbols, just as there can be no soul without some kind of body. Even the most highly abstract chain of thought must be accompanied by a parallel series of visual or auditory images corresponding to the physical goings on in the brain” (D.P. Walker, ‘Leibniz and Language,’ \textit{Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes} 35 (1972): 294–307).
\end{itemize}
Since expression is perspectival, each monad brings with it an indistinct horizon, which belongs to it only 'virtually,' rather than explicitly. It is possible to think of this perspectivalism in terms of a certain privation implicated in each striving to unify the whole. In the 'Monadology,' Leibniz describes how creatures derive their perfection from God (who alone is absolutely unlimited), but that created substances themselves are incapable of being without limits: “creatures derive their perfections from God’s influence, but... they derive their imperfections from their own nature, which is incapable of being without limits. For it is in this that they are distinguished from God.”\(^{57}\) As Deleuze puts it, Leibnizian expression is equivocal, and it involves “combinations of unity with zero.”\(^{58}\) Creation itself requires this combination of unity and privation, since this is what allows for the production of difference and multiplicity.

The way in which Leibniz introduces negativity into the perfect fullness of perception is important for Benjamin’s argument. This nullity is not a matter of abstract limitation, but of concentration, or the abbreviation of infinity within a perspective. Differentiation is the result of focusing, or concentrating the infinitely nuanced continuum of perception from a point of view. Focus is an abbreviation of the whole that virtually expresses the entire universe. This virtual infinity can be recollected by a deepening of attention to the minute details that are latent in a pregnant expression.\(^{59}\)

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57 Monadology, §42, in Leibniz, Philosophical Essays, 218.

58 Deleuze, Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza, 330.

59 Benjamin emphasizes both the full infinity within the monad, as well as the equivocal nature of what is expressed only indistinctly within the monad: “The idea is a monad. The being that enters into it, with its past and subsequent history, brings – concealed in its own form – an indistinct abbreviation of the rest of the world of ideas, just as, according to Leibniz’s Discourse on Metaphysics (1686), every single monad contains, in an indistinct way, all the others....The purpose of the representation of the idea is nothing less
The extreme implication of this ability of expression to abbreviate the universe and to recollect what is latent within it is found in Leibniz’s discussion of death. According to Leibniz, death is not an end, or annulment of life, but rather its contraction into a more concentrated form. Death exists on a continuum with life; it is an organic form that has literally ‘gone to seed,’ or contracted itself into a smaller stage. I will come back to this point at a later stage of my argument to show how Leibniz’s account of death anticipates Benjamin’s conception of criticism as the ‘mortification’ of works of art (i.e. the ‘shriveling up’ of beautiful form, which leaves the bare configuration of elements of knowledge.) A certain negativity is involved in criticism, but Benjamin understands this in Leibnizian terms, as an *abbreviation* of the whole. Criticism reveals the nexus of relations in an idea that has been stripped of its aura of phenomenality: in Benjamin’s terminology, criticism distills the ‘expressionless’ core of beauty.

than an abbreviated outline of this image of the world” (Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 47–48, my emphasis).


61 Benjamin describes the ‘expressionless’ as the center of all relations, which is not perspectival, but governs all perspectives. The ‘expressionless’ is characterized as a standstill amidst the quivering harmony of life: “The life undulating in it [in the work of art] 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 but, in this flooding-through, seems only to enliven it. What arrests this semblance, spellbinds the movement, and interrupts the harmony is the expressionless” (“Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I, 340; see also “On Semblance,” idem, I, 224, and ‘Task of the Translator,’ idem, I, 261). The petrified nexus of relations that Benjamin characterizes as ‘expressionless’ can ‘come alive’ again in the monad. As Benjamin writes to Adorno, “in the monad everything that formerly lay mythically petrified within the given text comes alive” Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940* (ed. Henri Lonitz; Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), 292.
§1.5 Expression and Language

Leibniz originally developed his notion of expression in the context of his project to develop a universal characteristic, or a universal language of thought. Accordingly, the primary sense in which Leibniz considered expression was in terms of *characters*. Leibniz defines “the law of expression” as the correlation between the *composition* of an expression and the *collection of characters* representing the thing expressed:

I call that a character which is a visible mark representing thoughts. The *ars characteristica* is the art of forming and ordering characters, so that they refer to thoughts, or that they have that relation among themselves that the thoughts have among themselves. An *expression* is the collection of characters representing the thing which is to be expressed. The law of expression is this: when the idea of the thing to be expressed is composed of certain things, the expression of the thing should be composed of the characters of those things.

In defending the exact correlation between an expression and the characters that express it, Leibniz positions himself against the radical nominalism of Hobbes, according to which the relationship between characters and what they designate is merely conventional. For Leibniz, by contrast, although the characters themselves may be conventional signs, the relationship between characters represents the order of things in reality. As Leibniz writes in the 1677 *Dialogue*:

For although characters are arbitrary, their use and connection have something which is not arbitrary, namely a certain analogy between characters and things,

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62 Robert McRae makes this argument: “The nature of expression was not worked out by Leibniz directly in relation to perception, but in the totally different area of his great schemes for dividing a universal language and a universal characteristic” (McRae, *Leibniz: Perception, Apperception and Thought*, 20).

and the relations which different characters expressing the same thing have to each other. This analogy or relation is the basis of truth. For the result is that, whether we apply one set of characters or another, the results will be the same, or equivalent, or correspond analogously.64

Recall that one of Leibniz’s main reasons for developing the notion of expression was to avoid the arbitrariness that he saw as a feature of mechanistic philosophy. In the philosophical literature of the seventeenth century, this specter of arbitrariness announced itself most persistently in the breakdown of a divinely ordained relationship between words and things.65 The threat of language’s arbitrary use was exacerbated by the political reality of a split between power and authority. Seventeenth-century thinkers were torn between nominalism and theories of natural language. Language was seen as either arbitrary (i.e. merely conventional), or else natural, which, in this context, means that language expresses the natural order of the things that it names. Natural language philosophy in the seventeenth century drew on a secularized interpretation of the Genesis narrative of Adam, who named the creatures according to their essences.

Even though, according to Leibniz, there is no possibility of recovering the original language of Adam, such a language could be constructed. The construction of a universal characteristic depends on our resolving complex ideas into simple ones. But the simple ideas are not merely subjective notions. For Leibniz, ideas are innate, and


65 I will take up the discussion of language, and its relationship to Benjamin’s monadic theory of ideas, at greater length in Chapter Four.
*inscribed* in the soul at the time of creation. They are discovered in us by clarifying what is *virtually* contained in our confused perceptions. Not only are our ideas innate, rather than produced by consciousness, but they are also abbreviations of God’s ideas, which serve as eternal archetypes: “all ideas of the intellect have their archetypes in the eternal possibility of things.”  

Finite human ideas have the same logical relationships as God’s ideas, even though the divine ideas are infinitely more perfect than our own. This is how Leibniz interprets the *Genesis* idea that human beings are created in God’s image.

There is a strong conceptual link between Leibniz’s theory of innate ideas and his argument upholding a natural *language* of thought. Even if the characters that we use

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67 Idem, 397.
68 According to Nicholas Jolley, there were two extremes in the understanding of ‘ideas’ in the seventeenth century. Malebranche represents one extreme: according to Malebranche the unaided mind is mired in false sensations which have no bearing on the true world, and it would remain in such a delusional state so long as it did not receive the *grace* of the light of God. Ideas are just this divine light, for Malebranche; they are not within the scope of the human mind, but come to us from a *wholly other*, divine source. According to Jolley, Malebranche upholds the scriptural precedent of the *Gospel of John*, particularly in its opening theme that God is the *light* of souls (John, 1:9). At the other end of the spectrum, Leibniz went the furthest in plumbing the philosophical significance of the *Genesis* dictum that humanity is created in the image of God. Leibniz’s notion that our innate ideas fashion us in the image of God is one facet of this idea. Another facet is Leibniz’s project to construct a natural language, which, like the language of Adam, would name things *as they are*, or properly express the relationships between essences. Leibniz was certainly not alone amongst his contemporaries in drawing philosophical inspiration from *Genesis*. Descartes also quotes *Genesis* when he writes in the *Meditations* that human beings are made in God’s image, first of all because of our infinite *free will*, but also because our ideas themselves are Godlike. Rather than making human minds utterly dependent on grace, or divine illumination, Leibniz repeatedly emphasizes that our souls are like ‘little Gods,’ differing from the divine intellect only by degree, rather than quality. For instance, in Leibniz’s letter to Arnaud of October 9th, 1687, he writes: “It is this society or commonwealth of minds under this sovereign monarch which is the noblest part of the universe, composed of many *little Gods* under this great God. For it can be said that created minds differ from God only as lesser from greater, as finite from infinite” (see also Leibniz, “Letter to Hansch,” July 25th, 1707, and the *Principles of Nature and Grace*, §14). Leibniz finds scriptural support for this idea in first chapter of *Genesis*: human beings are created in the image of God. Just as the universe *expresses* the divine intellect, so too does the human mind *express* the universe (in its confused ideas), as well as the mind of God (in its clear and distinct ideas). Because of its implicit infinity and its capacity to *express* the universe (not by creating it, as God does, but by representing, or perceiving it in its manifold complexity), the human mind is an image of God, or a mirror of the divine intellect.
are arbitrary, or merely conventional, their arrangement is expressive, and pertains, analogically, to the natural order of ideas. According to Leibniz, our minds are inscribed with innate ideas at the moment of creation, and due to these internal notions, it is possible to have knowledge of nature through introspection alone, or by attending in sufficient detail to the marks within our souls. The given order of our ideas is the basis for constructing a ‘universal language’. For Leibniz, this language is not the Ursprache spoken by Adam; it is the language implicit in our thought. We can recollect the order of creation from its abbreviation in an idea by reading the configuration of ‘petites perceptions’ contained therein.

Benjamin’s argument that ideas are linguistic in character should be understood as an interpretation of Leibnizian expression. The title that Benjamin chose for one of his early fragments – “Perception is Reading” – encapsulates what he means by the linguistic nature of ideas (1917). In a short essay entitled “On Perception” (written in the same year), Benjamin describes experience as a continuum that immediately ties the most minute and contingent detail of nature to the divine understanding. Whereas in Kant, ‘representation’ became associated with the faculty of imagination and was restricted to the unification of a sensible manifold, in Leibniz, ‘representation’ immediately links the finite to the infinite. God expresses himself in creation, and all created substances thereby represent a view of the whole universe, and an idea of God. Benjamin describes the rationalist understanding of experience as a ‘symbol’ of the

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70 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I, 92.
totally interconnected nexus of knowledge: “Previously the symbol of the unity of knowledge that we know of as ‘experience’ had been an exalted one; it had, even though to varying degrees, been close to God and divine.” Benjamin argues that the task of philosophy is the *symbolic representation of the manifold of knowledge*, which is not experience as the possible object of consciousness, but is rather an *expression* of experience as language: “Philosophy is absolute experience deduced in a systematic, symbolic framework as language. Absolute experience is, in the view of philosophy, language – language understood, however, as a systematic, symbolic concept. It is articulated in types of language, one of which is perception.”

The next section will build on the above interpretation of Leibniz to argue that Benjamin’s theory of ideas is informed by a Leibnizian concept of expression. I have emphasized the following three points, all of which are significant for Benjamin’s theory of ideas: First, I have shown that Leibniz’s concept of expression restores the inner qualities of things, or their intrinsic denomination. Perceptions within the monad are not secondary qualities, or determinations of the knowing subject; they are rather the expression of an objective order, as it is translated into the intensive relations within an individual point of view. Second, I showed that expression issues in a logical determination of ideas, as ‘complete individual concepts,’ rather than a psychological determination of ideas as the ‘clear and distinct perceptions’ of a subject. As such, expressionism displaces the centrality of a conscious subject. Consciousness, for Leibniz, pertains to a limited portion of our perceptions, and what is conscious is always

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71 Idem, 95.

72 Idem, 96.
informed by a sea of minute perceptions that will never become explicit. Third, I argued that Leibnizian expression should be understood as linguistic, since the perceptions of a monad can be read as a species of ‘character.’ This is significant for Benjamin’s argument, since he considers ideas to be linguistic, not in the narrow sense of a communicative language, but in that that they ‘translate’ the nexus of relations in the material world into constellations, or a nexus of intensive relationships in an idea.

§2 Representation in Benjamin’s Monadic Theory of Ideas

Benjamin invokes a theory of ideas in order to ‘save’ the phenomena. His argument in the ‘Prologue’ specifically concerns the interpretation of art, and seeks to salvage the detail of the individual works without sacrificing the essential unification performed by ideas. Benjamin contends that Trauerspiel is an idea, as opposed to a concept, and that only as an idea is it possible to explore the essential unity of this form, without losing contact with the details. The method involves abandoning a deductive, conceptual framework, and this allows the investigator to focus on the ‘very minutest object,’ “[f]or the very minutest things will be discussed wherever the work of art and its form are

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73 As Benjamin writes, “Conceptual distinctions are above all suspicion of destructive sophistry only when their purpose is the salvation of phenomena in ideas, the Platonic τα φαινομένα σωζέιν” (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 33).

74 “In the sense in which it is treated in the philosophy of art the Trauerspiel is an idea. Such a treatment differs most significantly from a literary-historical treatment in its assumption of unity, whereas the latter is concerned to demonstrate variety....Trauerspiel, as a concept, could, without the slightest problem, be added to the list of aesthetic classifications. But not as an idea, for it defines no class and does not contain that generality on which the respective conceptual levels in the system of classification depend: the average” (idem, 38).
considered with a view to judging its content." The investigation of phenomenal detail is not purely inductive, however, since it is bound-up with the representation of an idea, and only as such are the phenomena more than just "objects of vague wonder," for they are taken up and organized as the elements in an individual essence:

In the act of true contemplation... the abandoning of deductive methods is combined with an ever wider-ranging, an ever more intense appraisal of phenomena, which are, however, never in danger of remaining the objects of vague wonder, as long as the representation of them is also a representation of ideas, for it is here that their individuality is preserved.

Benjamin’s argument addresses an apparent tension between an idealist theory of art forms and maintaining contact with the concrete detail of the subject-matter. In philosophical terms, Benjamin's question is how idealism can be reconciled with concrete facts of history. His answer hinges around the argument that ideas represent the phenomena, which suggests that, although ideas are not causally determined by historical events, they intensively express historical content in the structure of their internal relationships.

75 Idem, 45.
76 Ibid.
77 Idem 34. Benjamin’s argument in the ‘Prologue’ primarily concerns the method of art criticism, but his general question about the relationship between ideas and history can be framed in terms of the philosophical discussion – contemporary to Benjamin – concerning the relationship between idealism and historicism. Benjamin contends that ideas represent the phenomena, and that as representations of the phenomena, ideas are not without historical content; this content is redeemed in the intensive structure of relationships within the idea. In the ‘Prologue’ Benjamin implicitly distinguishes his own position from other forms of idealism, which, he argues, have mistakenly reduced the idea to a function of the law (i.e. a ‘hypothesis’), or to a concept (which ‘incorporates’ or subsumes the particulars under a general form). In particular, Benjamin differentiates his theory of ideas from the interpretation of ideas as ‘hypotheses’ put forward by the Marburg School of neo-Kantianism (Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp). Benjamin also implicitly refutes the methodology of eidetic intuition (Wesenschau), or ‘essential seeing,’ which he became familiar with by reading the early work of Edmund Husserl. Despite sharing with Cohen and
Benjamin distinguishes his argument from two theories of art criticism: the first is Konrad Burdach’s argument against the hypostatization of historical periods such as ‘Baroque,’ or ‘Renaissance.’ By seeking to avoid universal in re, Burdach’s position is, according to Benjamin, a nominalism that does not want to lose contact with historical detail. The second position that Benjamin refers to is Benedetto Croce’s argument against classifying individual works under genres. According to Croce, each individual work of art is irreducibly original, and any mediation under generic terms (or genre) would be unacceptably abstract. Benjamin refers to Croce’s position as an ‘analogous nominalism’ which refuses to lose contact with what is essential.

Croce insists that his argument against abstract classification is not meant to deny the value of ‘that genetic and concrete classification which is not, in fact,

Husserl a move to re-orient philosophy towards the investigation of ideas or essences, Benjamin considered the question of how ideas relate to the phenomena to have been inadequately answered by the older generation of his contemporaries. In a short curriculum vitae written in 1928, Benjamin acknowledged four philosophical sources for his ‘theory of ideas’. As he wrote then, his focus on the ‘philosophical content’ (i.e. the idea) of works of art was shaped by his study of Plato, Kant, Husserl, and Marburg neo-Kantianism: “In particular, I read and reread Plato and Kant, then the philosophy of Husserl and the Marburg School. Gradually, my interest came to focus on the philosophical content of imaginative literature and artistic form, and ultimately found expression in my dissertation. This tendency also dominated my subsequent work, in which I strove to concentrate ever more narrowly on concrete detail, both for greater precision and as a result of the content of my literary investigations” (Benjamin, Curriculum Vitae III, in idem, Selected Writings, I, 77). The two contemporary schools of philosophy that Benjamin mentions studying – Marburg neo-Kantianism and Husserlian phenomenology – both converged in grounding the phenomena in necessary and universal ‘ideas’ or ‘essences.’ Although it is beyond the scope of this project, a consideration of Benjamin’s critical engagement with Cohen and Husserl is poised to reveal the core of his argument that ideas represent the phenomena.


‘classification’ at all, but is what we call History.” Yet, according to Benjamin, Croce was unable to resolve the antimony between an idealist theory of art forms and history because he did not develop the implications of his definition of art as ‘expression.’ Benjamin writes that, Croce “touches – alas, all too fleetingly – on the core of the theory of ideas” but fails to develop the key concept of expression:

But the psychologizing tendency, thanks to which his definition of art as ‘expression’ is undermined and replaced by that of art as ‘intuition,’ prevents him from perceiving this. He fails to see how the contemplation which he described as ‘genetic classification’ can be reconciled with an idealist theory of art forms in the problem of origin.”

Alas, Benjamin is just as brief as Croce. He does not explain what he means by the crucial distinction between expression and intuition; nor does he indicate whether Leibniz’s concept of ‘expression’ informs this distinction (although it must be in the background, since Croce himself was indebted to Leibniz).

The clue to what Benjamin means by expression should be sought in his more robust argument concerning the representational nature of ideas. Benjamin suggests that ideas represent the phenomena as constellations represent stars. Ideas save the phenomena by intensively representing the nexus of their interrelations. In this section,

80 “[W]hereas the nominalism of Burdach, which is based on the concept of the historical epoch, and his resistance to the slightest loss of contact with the factual, are to be attributed to the fear of departing from what is correct, Croce’s totally analogous nominalism, which is based on the concept of aesthetic genre, and his analogous devotion to the particular, are to be attributed to the concern that departure from it might mean the complete loss of the essential” (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 43).

81 Idem, 45.

82 “If ideas do not incorporate phenomena, and if they do not become functions of the law of phenomena, the ‘hypothesis,’ then the question of how they are related to phenomena arises. The answer to this is: in the representation of phenomena” (idem, 34).
I argue that what Benjamin means by ‘representation’ can be understood in terms of Leibniz’s concept of expression. This, moreover, illuminates how Benjamin combines an idealist theory of art forms with fidelity to concrete historical detail.\textsuperscript{83}

\textbf{§2.1 Benjamin’s Ideas as Virtual Totalities and the History within Ideas}

As we saw in the previous section, Leibniz defines an idea as, “that which includes everything we express... since this expresses our union with God himself, it has no limits and nothing surpasses it.”\textsuperscript{84} Since an idea expresses our union with God, it is infinite and perfect (i.e. it has no limits). But since our power of expression is finite, we can only unify the manifold from a determinate perspective, and are only capable of bringing a portion of our perceptions to clarity. The ideal of cognition – the fully determined individual essence – is only \textit{virtually} included in our ‘complete individual concept.’

Benjamin follows Leibniz’s definition of ideas as the virtual representation of the totality of predicates within an essence. As Benjamin indicates, “[t]he representation of an idea cannot to be considered successful unless the whole range of possible extremes it contains has been \textit{virtually} explored”:

\begin{quote}
Virtually, because that which is comprehended in the idea of origin still has history, in the sense of content, but not in the sense of a set of occurrences which
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{83} The English translation of \textit{The Origin of German Tragic Drama} consistently translates Benjamin’s term \textit{Darstellung} as ‘representation.’ But some commentators have preferred to translate this term as ‘presentation.’ See, for instance, Hans-Jost Frey, “On Presentation in Benjamin,” in \textit{Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions} (ed. David Ferris; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 139–164. Admittedly, it is worth paying careful attention to the difference between \textit{Darstellung} (presentation) and \textit{Vorstellung} (representation). Indeed, the German translation of Leibniz’s \textit{representatio} is typically \textit{Vorstellung}, not \textit{Darstellung}. Despite these compelling reasons to translate ‘Darstellung’ as ‘presentation,’ I maintain that ‘representation’ accurately brings out what Benjamin means by revealing its paternity in Leibniz.

\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Discourse on Metaphysics}, §16, in Leibniz, \textit{Philosophical Essays}, 49.
have befallen it. Its history is inward in character and is not to be understood as something boundless, but as something related to essential being, and it can therefore be described as the past and subsequent history of this being.\textsuperscript{85}

Ideas ‘virtually’ contain all of their history, just as, according to Leibniz, “Every individual substance [or monad] contains in its perfect notion the entire universe and everything that exists in it, past, present, and future.”\textsuperscript{86} If one were capable of adequately representing the pre-determined relationships between a monad’s \textit{petites perceptions} (i.e., as God sees an essence), one could read in the monad all of its past and future contingent states. As Leibniz writes, “the supreme Reason, \textit{who overlooks nothing}, can distinctly grasp the entire infinite and see all the causes and all the results. All we can do with infinities is to know them confusedly and at least to know distinctly that they are there.”\textsuperscript{87} From the perspective of a finite understanding, the sum total of determinations in an individual substance can only be known sequentially, or in temporal succession. In the divine understanding, on the other hand, all of the marks within an essence are known entirely and all at once. Leibniz suggests that the full infinity, or perfection, of eternal archetypes is implicit, or ‘innate’ within human cognition. All of the past and the future determinations of an idea are latent in it, and are discoverable through introspection, or by deepening one’s attention to the minutiae of perception.

Consequently, the futurity of the future is re-defined, not in chronological terms, but in

\textsuperscript{85} Benjamin, \textit{Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 47.

\textsuperscript{86} “Primary Truths,” in Leibniz, \textit{Philosophical Essays}, 32.

\textsuperscript{87} Leibniz, \textit{New Essays}, “Preface,” 57.
terms of the minuteness of a detail that eludes the confused investigator. The fullness of time is rendered spatially, as the configuration of minute details of perception.

Benjamin’s discussion of this point brings out a certain structural ambivalence in Leibniz’s formulation. On the one hand, historical ephemera are represented in an essential configuration of detail. This is what Leibniz emphasizes when he suggests that contingent truths of fact can be grasped as virtual identities in the eternal presence, or ‘nunc stans’ of divine intuition. This would seem to strip contingent truths of their historical character, since even future contingent states are already known in the perfect representation of an essence. But Benjamin privileges a different interpretation of this point: if our logical ideas are irreducibly bound-up with a nexus of historically contingent detail, this means that the truth is not timeless, but is preeminently contextual. It exists only in a fragile structure of historical detail – a configuration that takes form in what Benjamin refers to as the “now of knowability.” In a fragment entitled ‘Theory of Knowledge’ (1920–21), Benjamin describes the “nexus” of determinations in the truth as that which is recognizable in “logical time”:

The truth of a given circumstance is a function of the constellation of the true being of all other circumstances.... Truth resides in the ‘now of knowability.’ Only in this is there a (systematic, conceptual) nexus – a nexus between existing things and also with the perfected state of the world. The now of knowability is logical time, which has to replace that of timeless validity.88

Far from being ‘timeless,’ the nexus of determinations within an idea takes shape in a contingent configuration of detail at a precise moment in time – the ‘now of knowability.’

88 Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 276.
This time is *logical*, rather than historical, since it refers to the fulfillment of an idea, which exceeds empirical time.\(^9\)

As Benjamin’s argument suggests, Leibniz introduced a unique way of understanding historical events in terms of their contextual 'setting.'\(^9\) This shift in the representation of history, from a sequence of events, to an arrangement of attributes within a 'complete individual concept' led to a new understanding of the historian's task, as the search amidst minutiae for “immanent structures,” capable of a ‘virtual’ fulfillment that would prove their authenticity as ‘original’ ideas.\(^9\)

\(^9\) The distinction between 'historical time' and 'empirical time' is one that informed Benjamin’s thinking from very early on. In a fragment written in 1916 ('*Trauerspiel and Tragedy*'), Benjamin describes 'historical time' as an idea – as 'fulfilled time,' which is empirically indeterminate: “For we should not think of time as merely the measure that records the duration of a mechanical change. Although such time is indeed a relatively empty form, to think of its being filled makes no sense. Historical time, however, differs from this mechanical time. It determines much more than the possibility of spatial changes of a specific magnitude and regularity – that is to say, like the hands of a clock – simultaneously with spatial changes of a complex nature. And without specifying what goes beyond this, what else determines historical time – in short, without defining how it differs from mechanical time – we may assert that the determining force of historical time cannot be fully grasped by, or wholly concentrated in, any empirical process. *Rather, a process that is perfect in historical terms is quite indeterminate empirically; it is in fact an idea*” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I, 55).

\(^9\) Reinhardt Koselleck and Amos Funkenstein have both argued that a new understanding of history as contextual and perspectival emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and owed significant debts to Leibniz’s monadology. See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (trans. Keith Tribe; New York, Columbia UP, 2004), and Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth-century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986). As Amos Funkenstein writes: “The first historians to speak of a unique historical ‘point of view’ of each age were the German historians of the eighteenth century, such as Gatterer and Chladenius. They borrowed the term from Leibniz’s Monadology, in which each ‘metaphysical point’ reflects in its unique way the entire universe in which it is embedded” (Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*, 208–209). Again, according to Funkenstein: “Leibniz had already developed the logical foundation of the concept of contextual harmony and made it a cornerstone of his metaphysics. If the predicate-in-notion principle... is to be taken literally, the monads are contexts of attributes. Monads cluster into ‘possible worlds,’ inasmuch as they are, beyond their logical possibility, composable on the grounds of the principle of sufficient reason” (idem, 286).

\(^9\) Although Benjamin does not make this argument explicit in relation to Leibniz, he suggests that the Baroque authors secularized history in ‘setting.’ Rather than representing time as a linear progression towards the eschaton, divine providence and the unfolding of history became absorbed in a spatial configuration of detail. Koselleck makes a similar suggestion when he argues that Leibniz’s monadology enacts the early modern secularization of history. In the first place, Koselleck describes the stabilizing
Benjamin strikingly appropriates the language of the ‘task,’ while changing its meaning: rather than the ‘infinite task’ of Kant and the neo-Kantians, which is progressively approached but never fulfilled, the Leibnizian task is already ‘virtually’ fulfilled in the ‘setting,’ or the configuration of minute detail. The task is to penetrate so deeply into the minutiae of perception that one can detect the nexus of relations even in the smallest and most unobtrusive detail of experience. According to Benjamin, “The higher the order of the ideas, the more perfect the representation contained within them. And so the real world could well constitute a task, in the sense that it would be a

impact of early modern political absolutism on the fluctuations of history, and he connects this political stabilization to Leibniz’s metaphysical notion of a pre-established harmony: “The future was a known quantity insofar as the number of politically active forces remained restricted to the number of rulers.... In this plane, history was relatively static, and Leibniz’s statement that ‘the whole of the coming world is present and prefigured in that of the present’ can here be applied to politics” (Koselleck, Futures Past, 20; my emphasis). Benjamin likewise makes the connection between political stabilization and Leibniz’s ‘pre-established’ harmony, describing the Baroque ideal as one of complete stabilization (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 65). But Benjamin goes further in his analysis of the connections between Leibniz’s metaphysics and the political history of the Baroque: he argues that after the schism of the church, the idea of progress toward an eschatological absolution was no longer viable, and that, consequently, temporal infinity was re-directed and grasped within a spatial setting as an infinity of detail. Divine providence is at work in each contingent detail of nature: “[W]ith what exactitude he [God] has provided for everything that concerns us; that, caring for sparrows, he will not neglect the rational beings which are infinitely more dear to him; that all the hairs on our head are numbered; ...that none of our actions are forgotten; that everything is taken account of, even idle words or a spoonful of water are well used” (Discourse on Metaphysics §37, in Leibniz, Philosophical Essays, 68; my emphasis). Whereas Benjamin understands Leibniz’s argument as the spatialization of time in ‘setting,’ Koselleck has a different understanding of Leibniz’s role in the shift from a supernatural to a mundane horizon of history; he describes this as a temporalization of the ideal of completeness, or perfection, and hence as the first instantiation of the Enlightenment ideal of progress: “Terminologically, the spiritual profectus was either displaced or dissolved by a worldly progressus. The objective of possible completeness, previously attainable only in the Hereafter, henceforth served the idea of improvement on earth and made it possible for the doctrine of the Final Days to be superseded by the hazards of an open future. Ultimately, the aim of completeness was temporalized (first by Leibniz) and brought into the process of worldly occurrences: progressus est in infinitum perfectionis” (Koselleck, Futures Past, 265). Based on the ‘pre-established’ or static nature of Leibniz’s system, which Benjamin constantly emphasizes, I maintain that Benjamin’s reading is more faithful to Leibniz than Koselleck’s. The latter reads Leibniz as the first step in a process that is so general that it could be said to include all of modernity, while neglecting those specifically Baroque features of Leibniz’s thought.
question of penetrating so deeply into everything real as to reveal thereby an objective interpretation of the world."  

§2.2 Petites Perceptions and the Optical Unconscious

Benjamin describes the mode in which truth is given as a deepening of attention to the infinite complexity implicit within the phenomena. What Benjamin describes as total immersion and absorption in the truth is brought about by abandoning a conceptual scheme, and focusing instead on “the minutest object,” or the smallest details. According to Benjamin, the “ever more intense reappraisal of phenomena” is accompanied by a “death of intentionality.” But this descent into minute detail is by no means ecstatic or irrational. It alone reveals an “objective interpretation of the world.”

By contrast, the model of cognition in which the subject retains possession of herself, grasping the phenomena as ‘objects’ of knowledge, falsifies experience by providing a merely ‘subjective interpretation’ of the world, or one that is limited by the notion of theoretical experience as the intentional relationship between a conscious subject and ‘objects’ of cognition.

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92 Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 47–48. Benjamin continues the above citation as follows: “In the light of such a task of penetration it is not surprising that the philosopher of the *Monadology* was also the founder of infinitesimal calculus.” (ibid) In the body of the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin speculates that the infinitesimal calculus springs from a metaphysical tendency to grasp chronological movement in a *spatial image*: “If history is secularized in the setting, this is an expression of the same metaphysical tendency which simultaneously led, in the exact sciences, to the infinitesimal method. In both cases chronological movement is grasped and analyzed in a spatial image” (*Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 92).

93 Idem, 45.

94 Idem, 36, 45.

95 Idem, 48.
Benjamin’s argument recalls Leibniz’s criticism of Cartesian ‘clarity and distinctness.’ Whereas Descartes defines mental substance in terms of a consciousness that is immediately aware of itself and can clearly and distinctly apprehend its mental states, Leibniz places clear and distinct ideas within a continuum that includes unconscious and confused ideas. According to Leibniz, our confused ideas contain a wealth of minute details that overwhelms the finite understanding. Leibniz even suggests that the infinity of ‘petites perceptions’ may cause the subject to ‘swoon’ or temporarily lose consciousness. Monads do not ‘apperceive’ all that they ‘perceive.’ Indeed, according to Leibniz, “knowledge, ideas and truths can be in our minds without our ever having actually thought about them.” Ideas exceed consciousness because they express an overwhelming fullness.

Like Leibniz, Benjamin argues that ideas apprehend infinitely more than they comprehend: “The idea thus belongs to a fundamentally different world from that which it apprehends. The question of whether it comprehends that which it apprehends, in the way in which the concept genus includes the species, cannot be regarded as a criterion of its existence.” Ideas can only be recognized after the fact, by becoming aware of the infinity of ‘petites perceptions’ that make up our confused perceptions. According to Benjamin, thinking is pre-eminently recollection, rather than intentionality. The crux of

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96 As Descartes puts it: “By the term ‘thought’ I understand all the things that we are conscious of happening in us, insofar as we are conscious of them” (René Descartes, Œuvres de Descartes, eds. Charles Adam & Paul Tannery; Paris: J. Vrin. 1957, 8A:7, 7:160, and 264, cf. Alison Simmons, “Changing the Cartesian Mind,” 34).

97 Monadology, §20; Principles of Nature and Grace, §4; in Leibniz, Philosophical Essays.

98 Leibniz, New Essays, I.iii, 106.

99 Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 34.
the matter is that, for both Benjamin and Leibniz, ideas contain more than the explicit content of consciousness. The truth does not have the structure of consciousness, or intentionality; it is ‘intentionless,’ and can only be discovered by submersion in the minute detail of perception. The discovery of ideas – those virtual unities within the infinity of our ‘petites perceptions’ – is like waking up from being selectively ‘asleep’ to some aspects of the phenomena, or becoming aware of an imperceptible noise only after its cessation. Ideas are recognized, rather than intended.

Benjamin’s affinity with Leibniz on this score is best exemplified by what he refers to as the ‘optical unconscious,’ in the 1931 essay, ‘A Little History of Photography.’ Benjamin describes how the camera records what is too minute or too indistinct to be detected by the human eye. The camera is able to capture a split-second in time; the resulting image records the infinitesimally minute details of perception. The ‘optical unconscious’ recorded in photographs clarifies how the high fidelity of expression requires a subject of experience ‘other’ than consciousness. The photograph exposes what is only latent in conscious experience:

[T]he beholder [of a photograph] feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality

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100 In the New Essays, Leibniz describes how, “there are always objects which strike our eyes and ears, and therefore touch our souls as well, without our being aware of them. For our attention is held by other objects, until a given object becomes powerful enough to attract it…. It is as though we had been selectively asleep with regard to that object…. “ (Leibniz, New Essays, II.i, 115). Again, in the ‘Preface’ to the New Essays, Leibniz refers to the infinity of indistinct ‘petites perceptions’ to explain how one can ‘tune out’ the noise of a mill after living beside it for a long time: “…at every moment there is in us an infinity of perceptions, unaccompanied by awareness or reflection; that is, of alterations in the soul itself, of which we are unaware because these impressions are either too minute or too numerous, or else too unvarying, so that they are not sufficient distinctive on their own. But when they are combined with others they do nevertheless have their effect and make themselves felt, at least confusedly, within the whole. This is how we become so accustomed to the motion of a mill or a waterfall, after living beside it for a while, that we pay no heed to it” (idem, “Preface”).
has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the
immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we,
looking back, may rediscover it. For it is another nature which speaks to the
camera rather than to the eye: ‘other’ above all in the sense that a space informed
by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious.
Whereas it is a commonplace that, for example, we have some idea of what is
involved in walking (in only in general terms), we have no idea at all what
happens during the fraction of a second when a person actually takes a step.
Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the
secret.\textsuperscript{101}

Benjamin’s ‘optical unconscious’ is presaged by Leibniz’s discussion of the ‘\textit{petites
perceptions}’ which constitute the indistinct background of our clear and distinct
apperceptions. Sufficient attention to ‘\textit{to mikron},’ according to Leibniz, reveals not only
what is present, but the vestiges of the past and the incipient future, in the nexus of
undetectable detail within the ‘now.’\textsuperscript{102}

\section*{§2.3 Representation and the Method of Philosophy}

From the very outset of the ‘Prologue,’ Benjamin argues that the task of philosophy must
be the \textit{representation} of ideas. The need to confront the question of representation is
what definitively distinguishes philosophy from the natural sciences, while showing that
there is a certain \textit{art} to philosophy:

\textsuperscript{101} Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings}, II. 2, 510.

\textsuperscript{102} As Leibniz puts it in the Preface to the \textit{New Essays}: “These minute perceptions... are more effective in
their results than has been recognized. They constitute that \textit{je ne sais quoi}, those flavors, those images of
sensible qualities, vivid in the aggregate but confused as to the parts; those impressions which are made
on us by the bodies around us and which involve the infinite; that connection that each being has with all
the rest of the universe. It can even be said that by virtue of these minute perceptions, the present is big
with the future and burdened with the past, that all things harmonize – \textit{symphoia panta}, as Hippocrates
put it – and that eyes as piercing as God’s could read in the lowliest substance the universe’s whole
sequence of events – ‘What is, what was, and what will soon be brought in by the future [Virgil]’” (Leibniz,
\textit{New Essays}, “Preface”).
The artist shares with the philosopher the task of representation. There has been a tendency to place the philosopher too close to the scientist, and frequently the lesser kind of scientist; as if representation had nothing to do with the task of the philosopher.\textsuperscript{103}

The mathematical method, which gained ascendency in early modern philosophy, constructs its object from first principles, or axioms. Modern philosophy extended the method of construction to all of natural philosophy. According to Bacon’s paradigmatic expression of this point, to know something is to be able to \textit{produce} the thing in question.\textsuperscript{104} But the amplification of the mathematic method to include all forms of inquiry was not without its losses: what was sacrificed in the name of constructability was the \textit{inner qualities} of things.\textsuperscript{105}

The method of acquiring one’s object by producing it oneself deforms the object of knowledge by construing it in advance as something to be possessed. As Benjamin writes, “Its very object is determined by the fact that it can be taken possession of – even if in a transcendental sense – in the consciousness.”\textsuperscript{106} The constructed object is denied a

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\textsuperscript{103} Benjamin, \textit{Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 32.
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\textsuperscript{104} Funkenstein describes \textit{construction} as a new ideal of natural philosophy, which became dominant in the seventeenth century: “This new ideal... was the ideal of knowing through doing, or knowing by construction. Francis Bacon, who still believed in the task of science to discover the ‘forms’ of things, also believed that to discover a form is the same as being able to produce the thing in question. This is the reason why ‘science is power’” (Funkenstein, \textit{Theology and the Scientific Imagination}, 298–99).
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\textsuperscript{105} “If representation is to stake its claim as the real methodology of the philosophical treatise, then it must be the representation of ideas. Truth, bodied forth in the dance of represented ideas, resists being projected, by whatever means, into the realm of knowledge... For knowledge, method is a way of acquiring its object – even by creating it in the consciousness; for truth it is \textit{self-representation}, and is therefore immanent in it as form” (Benjamin, \textit{Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 29).
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\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
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prior existence as something representing itself.\textsuperscript{107} Accordingly, form is contributed by concepts and categories of the understanding, and the ‘secondary qualities’ of things become nothing more than the determinations of a knowing subject. Matter is reduced to the mere substrate of domination, to borrow Adorno’s suggestive phrase.\textsuperscript{108} Also sacrificed to the expedient of construction is the notion that genuine unities can be found in nature. The method of construction can only have knowledge of aggregates. Leibniz had objected to Cartesian mechanism on just these grounds. His concept of expression sought to restore the self-representation of nature, as well as the ‘entelechies,’ or genuine unities of substantial forms.\textsuperscript{109}

The method of construction can only know things according to their external form. As Benjamin writes, it is an attempt to “ensnare the truth as if it were something which came flying in from outside.”\textsuperscript{110} The representation of the truth, by contrast, is a striving for expression, or the ‘exercise of a form.’ On Benjamin’s account, “[t]his can only be done in a comprehensive explanation of the underlying concept of its form, the

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{108} Adorno writes: “The man of science knows things to the extent that he can make them. Their ‘in-itself’ becomes ‘for him.’ In their transformation the essence of things is revealed as always the same, a substrate of domination. This identity constitutes the unity of nature…. It is the identity of mind and its correlative, the unity of nature, which subdues the abundance of qualities. Nature, stripped of qualities, becomes the chaotic stuff of mere classification, and the all-powerful self becomes a mere having, an abstract identity,” Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment} (London: Verso Editions, 1979), 6.

\textsuperscript{109} The notion of ‘self’ involved here cannot be construed as the ‘I’ or ego of Descartes. Monads are individuated by their drive to unify the manifold of perception, and as ‘expressive centers’ that concentrate a view of the whole, they are selves, regardless of whether they have conscious apperceptions. The Cartesian ego restricts the notion of self to the consciousness of an ‘I,’ and this restriction not only deprives nature of unities that are not imposed by consciousness, but it also reduces the mental to apperception, which for Leibniz, are clear and distinct zones against a horizon of implicit and unconscious states.

\textsuperscript{110} Benjamin, \textit{Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 28.
metaphysical substance of which should not simply be found within, but should appear
*in action*, like the blood coursing through the body.”\(^{111}\) The form of an idea cannot be
abstracted from the *force* of its unification, or its drive to bring together a perceptual
manifold.

The representation of ideas is, moreover, irreducibly *perspectival*. Benjamin
describes the representation of ideas as a gradual ascent from a partial and confused
perspective, mired in apparent contradictions, to an adequate representation, capable of
taking in the whole panorama:

> Only by approaching the subject from some distance, and, initially, foregoing any
view of the whole, can the mind be led, through a more or less ascetic
apprenticeship, to a position of strength from which it is possible to take in the
whole panorama and yet remain in control of oneself.\(^{112}\)

Thinking approaches the truth *from below*, from the perspective of the finite
understanding; it proceeds from the distinct and disparate, the *disjecta membra*. The
impossibility of capturing the whole truth within the coherence of consciousness bears

\(^{111}\) Idem, 39, my emphasis.

\(^{112}\) Idem, 56. ‘Panorama’ is a term of art. According to Benjamin’s argument, the idea of history as a
panorama was discovered in the seventeenth century: “The term ‘panoramic’ has been coined to give an
excellent description of the conception of history prevalent in the seventeenth century” (idem, 92; cf.
Herbert Cysarz, *Deutsche Barockdichtung: Renaissance, Barock, Rokoko*, Leipzig: H. Haessel, 1924). In the
context of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin brings up the ‘panorama’ of history to describe
the spatialization of time in a perspectival ‘setting’ – in which all that is memorable is gathered together
and arranged in a configuration of detail. Benjamin brings up the idea of ‘panorama’ again in *The Arcades
Project*, and in this text he adds a new layer of meaning. The panorama of history is ‘windowless’: it is a
self-enclosed perspective, that reflects the whole intensively, without access to an exteriority: “The true
has no windows. Nowhere does the true look out to the universe. And the interest of the panorama is in
seeing the true city. ‘The city in the bottle’ – the city indoors. What is found within the windowless
house is the true,” Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (ed. Rolf Tiedemann; Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of
Harvard University Press, 1999), PW [F,24], 840.
witness to the *transcendence* of the truth. Benjamin's insistence on the perspectival character of philosophy is not an assertion of subjective relativism (at least not for its own sake); it is rather a recognition of the non-identity of truth and knowledge, or in Benjamin's terms, of the irreducible difference between an essence and a concept. The unity of an essence cannot be captured conceptually. It can only be discovered through immersion in the most minute and disparate details. This is what Benjamin draws attention to when he compares the method of the philosophical treatise to the medieval mosaic:

> Just as mosaics preserve their majesty despite their fragmentation into capricious particles, so philosophical contemplation is not lacking in momentum. Both are made up of the distinct and disparate; and nothing could bear more powerful testimony to the transcendent force of the sacred image and the truth itself.

Because the truth is not circumscribable within the coherence of consciousness, it cannot be completely exhausted in any one idea, but is given expression only in the harmony of multiple perspectives. Truth is unity in plurality, or the consonance of discontinuous ideas, rather than a systematic totality. In Benjamin's words: “Every idea is a sun and is related to other ideas just as suns are related to each other. The

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113 Like Benjamin's, Leibniz's perspectivalism serves to reinforce a hierarchy between God and all created monads, each of which expresses an equivocal, or limited view of God. As Leibniz writes in a letter to Des Bosses: "the distinction between the appearance bodies have with respect to us and with respect to God is, in a certain way, like that between a drawing in perspective and a ground plan. For there are different drawings in perspective, depending upon the position of the viewer, while a ground plan or geometrical representation is unique. Indeed, God sees things exactly as they are in accordance with geometrical truths, although he also knows how everything appears to everything else, and so he eminently contains in himself all other appearances" ("Letter to Des Bosses"; *Philosophical Essays*, 199).

harmonious relationship between such essences is what constitutes truth. Its oft-cited multiplicity is finite; for discontinuity is characteristic of the [essences].”

§2.4 Representation in Ideas and Subsumption under Concepts

Not only is it the task of philosophy to represent original ideas, but the ideas are themselves representational: ideas represent the phenomena. Benjamin distinguishes between the representation of phenomena in an idea and the subsumption of phenomena under a concept. Concepts do not represent the phenomena, but only abstract what is ‘common’ between them. Ideas, on the other hand, determine the relationships of phenomena to one another:

Whereas phenomena determine the scope and content of the concepts which encompass them, by their existence, by what they have in common, and by their differences,’ their relationship to ideas is the opposite of this inasmuch as the idea, the objective interpretation of phenomena – or rather their elements – determines their relationship to each other.

Benjamin elaborates the distinction between the representation of phenomena in ideas and their subsumption under concepts in a fragment entitled ‘Language and Logic’ (1920–21). Therein, Benjamin writes that, whereas lower concepts are subsumed or ‘incorporated’ under higher ones and thereby lose their autonomy, essences remain distinct from each other, or discontinuous, because they do not engulf what they represent. Instead, essences ‘rule over’ the disparate phenomena, gathering them into

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115 Idem, 37.
116 Idem, 34.
unities, without negating their plurality: ideas are consonant unities within difference, which distinguishes them from the conceptual ‘all in one.’ Each sovereign idea is surrounded by a ‘court’ of subsidiary ideas, and each of these reflectively multiplies the whole from its own distinctive point of view.\textsuperscript{117} As Benjamin describes it, representation preserves a regional separation, “as irreducible as the gulf between monarch and people”:

The legitimacy that characterizes their relations possesses canonical validity for the relation between the unity of essence and the multiplicity of essences.... Every essence possesses from the outset a limited – and moreover determinate – multiplicity of essences, which do not derive from the unity in a deductive sense but are empirically assigned to it as the condition of its representation and articulation. The essential unity reigns over a multiplicity of essences in which it manifests itself, but from which it always remains distinct.\textsuperscript{118}

Benjamin’s description brings out the political-theological dimension of representation, which was an important facet of this concept in Leibniz’s thought.\textsuperscript{119} In Leibniz’s

\textsuperscript{117} Benjamin’s discussion of the sovereignty of the proper name, and the constellation of courtiers that surround and prop up its individuality, echoes Hegel’s description of the absolute monarch in the Phenomenology of Spirit. Hegel describes how the sovereign is an empty universal, or the pure form of individuality, who is only made actual by the flattery of his courtiers – the “vocal reflection of service.” Hegel writes: “In the name, the individual counts as a pure individual, no longer only in his own consciousness, but in the consciousness of everyone. By his name, then, the monarch is absolutely separated off from everyone else, exclusive and solitary; as monarch, he is a unique atom that cannot impart any of its essential nature. This name is thus the reflection-into-self, or the actuality which the universal power has in its own self; through the name the power is the monarch. Conversely, he, this particular individual, thereby knows himself, this individual, to be the universal power, knows that the nobles not only are ready and prepared for the service of the state power, but that they group themselves round the throne as an ornamental setting, and that they are continually telling him who sits on it what he is” Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit (trans. A. Miller; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), §§511, 311.

\textsuperscript{118} Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 273.

\textsuperscript{119} There are unmistakable parallels between Benjamin’s discussion of the representational relationship between ideas and phenomena in the ‘Prologue,’ and the representative relationship of the sovereign to the ‘body politic’ in the main text of the Trauerspiel book. In Chapter Five, which is devoted to political theology in Benjamin and Schmitt, I argue that Benjamin opposes Schmitt’s concept of sovereignty with a
explicitly political writings, he argued for an articulated hierarchy of different ‘organs’ of representation, ranging from God (who encompasses all representations while transcending each of them), to the universal church (God’s representative on earth), all the way down to individuals. This meaning of representation is implicit in Leibniz’s Leibnizian notion of the same. This is not the place to elaborate my argument; however, I will take this opportunity to simply note a few of the parallels between Benjamin’s ‘ideas’ and his account of political-theological sovereignty. In the first place, ideas represent the phenomena (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 34), while the sovereign is the representative of history (idem, 65). In the ‘Prologue,’ Benjamin invokes ‘representation’ in order to distinguish between the sovereignty of ideas and the mere ‘generality’ of concepts. In the main text, Benjamin uses ‘representation’ in the theological-juridical sense, in order to differentiate the seventeenth-century notion of sovereignty from the eighteenth-century notion of law, which came to be modeled on universal laws of nature, rather than the decree of a sovereign. Second, representation eschews the general for the extreme: “The idea is best explained as the representation of the context within which the unique and extreme stands alongside its counterpart” (idem, 35). Benjamin borrows this idea of the rule as demonstrated by the extreme, or the exceptional, from Carl Schmitt’s Political Theology. Therein, Schmitt writes: “The exception is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything.... In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition,” Carl Schmitt, Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1985), 15. Third, ideas are isolated from each other and contain the totality within themselves; as such the ideas are like suns: “Just as the harmony of the spheres depends on the orbits of stars which do not come into contact with each other, so the existence of the mundus intelligibilis depends on the unbridgeable distance between pure essences. Every idea is a sun and is related to other ideas just as suns are related to each other” (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 37). Likewise, in the Baroque literature of the seventeenth century, the sovereign is described as a sun: “The comparison of the prince with the sun is repeated countless times in the literature of the epoch. The purpose of this is to stress the exclusiveness of this ultimate authority” (idem, 67). Fourth, ideas are manifest in a ‘constellation’ of empirical elements (idem, 34). Likewise, the sovereign both represents and is represented by the circle of courtiers who surround him, reflecting his glory. Benjamin reinforces this image of unity in multiplicity by invoking the ‘confused court’ as the stylistic principle of Baroque allegory: “[I]n its fully developed, Baroque, form allegory brings with it its own court; the profusion of emblems is grouped around the figural center, which is never absent from genuine allegories, as opposed to periphrases of concepts. They seem to be arranged in an arbitrary way: The confused court – the title of a Spanish Trauerspiel – could be adopted as the model of allegory. This court is subject to the law of ‘dispersal’ and ‘collectedness.’ Things are assembled according to their significance; indifference to their existence allowed them to be dispersed again” (idem, 188).

\[120\] For instance, in ‘On Natural Law,’ Leibniz describes the articulated hierarchy of political representation, in a way that is fully consistent with his theory of a hierarchy of monads, each representing the dominant or ruling monad: “If everything in the world were arranged in the most perfect way, then, first of all, parents, children, and relatives would be the best of friends, and whole families would have chosen an art of living ... would abide in it and continue to perfect themselves in their art and direct their children to the same end. They would marry people of the same calling in order to be united through education from their parents. These clans would make up guilds or estates out of which cities would arise; these would enter into provinces, and all countries, finally, would stand under the Church of God” (Leibniz, Philosophical Papers and Letters, 706, cf. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Political Writings, ed. Patrick Riley; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 80).
metaphysics, since each monad has its own configuration of dependent essences, which it represents, and which, in turn, reflects a view of the ruling monad.\textsuperscript{121}

The representation of phenomena under ideas, unlike the subsumption of phenomena under concepts, allows for the expression of a discontinuous multiplicity within unity. Each singular unity expresses a multiplicity, and each multiplicity converges again in a unity. In the ‘Principles of Nature and Grace,’ Leibniz describes how each monad is the center of an infinity of other monads, which are configured around it, and which constitute its body:

[E]ach distinct simple substance or monad, which makes up the center of a composite substance... and is the principle of its unity, is surrounded by a mass composed of an infinity of other monads, which constitute the body belonging to this central monad, through whose properties the monad represents things outside of it, similarly to the way a center does.\textsuperscript{122}

In strikingly similar terms to the way that Leibniz describes bodies, Benjamin argues that each idea is associated with a unique configuration of detail, which is its empirical manifestation. Accordingly, ideas are discovered in a determinate arrangement of phenomenal elements.\textsuperscript{123} The ideas ‘appear’ only insofar as they bring about clusters and configurations within the phenomena:

\textsuperscript{121} All organization, for Leibniz, involves the representation of a dominant monad, which is reflected by its subsidiaries. The following passage from the ‘Monadology’ describes this structure as follows: “Thus we see that each living body has a dominant entelechy, which in the animal is the soul; but the limbs of this living body are full of other living beings, plants, animals, each of which also has its entelechy, or its dominant soul” (\textit{Monadology}, §69, in Leibniz, \textit{Philosophical Essays}, 222).


\textsuperscript{123} The essences cannot be arrived at through logic alone, but require a ‘laborious’ search amongst the details of phenomena. In this vein, Benjamin cites the phenomenologist, Jean Hering, to the effect that the ‘essences... lead a life that differs utterly from that of objects and their conditions; and... cannot be forced
As the salvation of phenomena by means of ideas takes place, so too does the representation of ideas through the medium of empirical reality. For the ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of these elements.\textsuperscript{124}

The ideas “remain obscure so long as phenomena do not declare their faith to them and gather round them.”\textsuperscript{125} Even though the ideas do not appear without the configuration of phenomenal detail, the phenomenal constellations are mere aggregates, whereas the ideas are self-sufficient (albeit virtual) unities. The ideas provide an ‘objective interpretation’ of the phenomena; in the configuration of detail within an essence, phenomena are redeemed in a totality.\textsuperscript{126}

§2.5 Representation and Constellations

Benjamin contrasts the ‘virtuality’ of ideas with their ‘actuality,’ or their manifestation in a configuration of phenomenal elements. Ideas are the “virtual arrangements” of phenomena; yet, “[t]he set of concepts which assist in the representation of an idea lend it actuality as such a configuration.”\textsuperscript{127} Benjamin’s distinction between the virtuality of

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dialectically into existence by our selecting and adding some... complex of properties which we happen to encounter in an object; but whose number is, by the same token, limited, and every single one of which must be searched for laboriously at the appropriate place in its world, until it is found, as a \textit{rocher de bronze}, or until the hope that it exists is shown to be illusory” (Jean Hering, “Bemerkungen über das Wesen, die Wesenheit und die Idee,” \textit{Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung}, IV (1921): 522; cf. Benjamin, \textit{Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 37–38).
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\textsuperscript{124} Idem, 34.

\textsuperscript{125} Idem, 35.

\textsuperscript{126} Idem, 46.

\textsuperscript{127} Idem, 34; my emphasis.
ideas and their actuality recalls Leibniz’s argument that ideas express their body most clearly against an indistinct and confused background that goes to infinity. Although ideas virtually express the whole world and God, they only clearly represent a portion of what they implicitly contain. They concentrate the world in an ‘embodied’ representation. The ‘actuality’ of an idea is its body, or the configuration of phenomenal elements that represent an idea. Monads do not incorporate their body, but only ‘represent’ or ‘express’ it in the series of their perceptions. Likewise, Benjamin emphasizes that the ideas do not ‘incorporate’ phenomena: “If ideas do not incorporate phenomena... then the question of how they are related to phenomena arises. The answer to this is: in the representation of phenomena.”

The ideas relate to phenomena by expressing a bodily composite in the internal arrangement of their perceptions: “Ideas are timeless constellations, and by virtue of the elements’ being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed.”

Whether we think in terms of the body politic, or the aggregate of ‘well-founded phenomena,’ Benjamin’s description of the representation of ideas in a constellation of phenomenal elements shows a marked affinity to Leibniz’s discussion of the body belonging to a monad. As Benjamin puts it, “[t]he idea is best explained as the representation of the context within which the unique and extreme stands alongside its counterpart.”


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128 Idem, 34.
129 Ibid.
130 Idem, 34–35.
which he defines as aggregates made up of “extremities of extension.” As Leibniz writes
to Samuel Masson, bodies are dependent composites, just as a line is a composite of
points, but these points are not to be thought of as the constitutive parts of a
substance. Rather, the points are “extremities of extension,” and the figure is
represented in a determinate arrangement of these extremes.

§3 Representation and Aesthetic Ideas

Representation is not only the key to what Benjamin means by the salvation of
phenomena in ideas; it is also at the core of his argument that philosophy has an affinity
to art, and cannot be assimilated under the methodology of mathematics. Benjamin's
insistence on the representational quality of truth means that it is impossible to
eliminate perspective from philosophy. Each idea is a concentrated view of the whole,
and it is manifest in a determinate configuration of phenomenal elements – a
constellation, in Benjamin's terms, or a 'phaenomena bene fundata' in Leibniz's. Each

131 “If a corporeal substance is something real, over and above monads, just as a line is held to be
something over and above points, then we will have to say that corporeal substance consists in a certain
union, or better, in a real unifying thing that God superadds to the monads.... If the substantial chain for
monads did not exist, all bodies, together with all of their qualities, would be nothing but well-founded
phenomena....For one should no more say that monads are parts of bodies, that they touch one another,
that they compose bodies, than that points and souls do the same. And a monad, like a soul, is, as it were, a
certain world of its own, having no connections of dependency except with God” (Leibniz, “Letter to Des
Bosses,” 5 February 1712, in idem, Philosophical Essays, 198–99).

132 “I confess that my opinion, according to which matter cannot pass for a real substance, will surprise
some minds who think superficially, having been led to believe that matter is the only substance in the
universe; but my hypothesis is no less true for this. To say that souls are intelligent points is to use an
expression that is insufficiently exact. When I call them centers or concentrations of external things, I am
speaking analogically. Points, strictly speaking, are extremities of extension, and not, in any way, the
constitutive parts of things; geometry shows this sufficiently” (Leibniz, “Letter to Masson,” in idem,
Philosophical Essays, 228).
idea is concentrated in a unique way; it has a foreground, which is expressed most clearly and distinctly, but it also has an obscure and confused horizon that is virtually limitless. The irreducible phenomenalism of ideas is what renders the truth beautiful. The 'beauty' of the truth is also its fragility, since its configuration is irreducibly contingent. It comes together in the 'now of knowability,' but its unique configuration is lost as soon as it has been recognized.

Rationalism, for Leibniz, acquires a concrete form, since all ideas formed by a finite understanding have a degree of phenomenality, corresponding to the view from which they represent the world. It is true, according to Leibniz, that all ideas, no matter how obscure and confused, contain a rational content, which needs only to be unfolded. But this rational content is 'virtual,' and, in the case of our contingent representations, it can never be fully explicated: according to Leibniz, an infinite analysis is required to resolve contingent truths into truths of reason.

How one characterizes the phenomenality of ideas is of decisive importance for an aesthetic theory. To anticipate the argument that I will make in the next chapter, Benjamin interprets the 'confused infinity' within monads in a way that is precisely opposed to the early Romantics. A very clear statement of the Romantic interpretation is found in Ernst Cassirer's reading of Leibniz in the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. According to Cassirer, the virtual infinity contained in our representations has a 'very positive aspect,' since it endows every finite, sensuous symbol with an infinite, spiritual significance. As Cassirer writes:

Even our 'most abstract' ideas always contain an admixture of imagination, and though it is true that we can further analyze this element of imagination, yet our analysis never arrives at an ultimate limit but rather can and must continue ad
infinitum.... But this contingency has by no means a purely negative character; it contains within it a very positive factor. Just as every sense perception, however obscure and confused, includes within it a true, rational content of cognition, which merely requires to be unfolded and ‘developed,’ so every sensuous symbol is the vehicle of a purely spiritual signification, which to be sure is given only ‘virtually’ and implicitly in it.\textsuperscript{133}

In Cassirer’s view, each finite individual is a symbolic expression of the truth because of the virtual infinity that it contains. Cassirer’s reading is ‘typically Romantic,’ according to Benjamin’s understanding of Romanticism: “What is typically Romantic is the placing of this perfect individual within a progression of events which is, it is true, infinite but is nevertheless redemptive, even sacred.” Benjamin continues, once the individual is absorbed in this infinite progression towards perfection, “[i]ts heart is lost in the beautiful soul. And the radius of action – no, only the radius of culture – of the thus perfected beautiful individual is what describes the circle of the ‘symbolic.’”\textsuperscript{134}

Rather than the “very positive factor” that Cassirer celebrates, Benjamin emphasizes the bottomless infinity implicit in our confused notions. As a result of our confused perceptions, our ideas are tempered by semblance, and the attempt to analyze our confused representations into truths of identity is irresolvable. The infinity in question is not, as Cassirer suggests, a spiritualization of sensuous nature. It is rather an abyss that finite thinking falls into when it tries to identify the non-identical. Such is the interpretation of infinity that Benjamin upholds when he describes how theoretical inquiry is drawn into “the empty abyss of evil”:


\textsuperscript{134} Benjamin, \textit{Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 160.
What tempts is the illusion... of infinity – in the empty abyss of evil. For it is characteristic of all virtue to have an end before it: namely its model, in God; just as all infamy opens up an infinite progression into the depths.... In the form of knowledge instinct leads down into the empty abyss of evil in order to make sure of infinity. But this is also the bottomless pit of contemplation. Its data are not capable of being incorporated in philosophical constellations.¹³⁵

Benjamin’s portrayal of the ‘bottomless’ infinity that we fall into when we seek the rational content of our contingent representations has its roots in Leibniz. This is perhaps surprising, since Leibniz insists that there is a sufficient reason for everything, and that even “the hairs on our head are numbered.”¹³⁶ Yet, Leibniz also warns that “…here is the occasion to recognize the altitudinem divitarum, the depth and abyss of divine wisdom, without seeking a detail that involves infinite considerations.”¹³⁷ There is danger in seeking a detail that involves infinite considerations. Virtually speaking, our contingent representations can be unfolded to reveal a rational content, but this process of analysis is endless.

Benjamin’s account of the infinite depths that open up for contemplation reflects a deep-seated ambivalence in Leibniz’s understanding of the relationship between truth and representation, or truth and beauty. The early Romantics reflect this ambivalence differently, since even though they saw all representation as fragmentary and perspectival, they thought of the idea as the infinitization of a form, which could be critically fulfilled or perfected by the intensification of consciousness in a finite work.

For Leibniz, as for Benjamin, truth is shown to be the content of beauty only when the

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¹³⁵ Idem, 231.

¹³⁶ Discourse on Metaphysics, §37, in Leibniz, Philosophical Essays, 68.

¹³⁷ Discourse on Metaphysics, §30, in Leibniz, Philosophical Essays, 61.
beautiful form 'shrivels up,' revealing the nexus of rational relations, as an object for knowledge.

§3.1 The Ambivalent Beauty of Leibniz’s System

Leibniz’s conception of the truth as a harmonious unity in multiplicity has clear implications for aesthetics, and indeed, Leibniz exerted a profound influence on the tradition of German philosophical aesthetics, including the work of the Jena Romantics. According to Leibniz, the harmonious structure of truth renders it beautiful. But Leibniz displays a marked ambivalence towards beauty: certainly, the harmony of ideas is beautiful, but ultimately this beauty is an illusion, arising from the confusion inherent in finite representations.

Even though Leibniz did not have much to say about aesthetics as a separate branch of philosophy, his entire system has a “deep aesthetic strand,” which, according to Fred Beiser, is manifest in his pre-arranged harmony: “Unity amid variety is order or harmony, which is the structure of beauty itself. Hence living force manifests itself as beauty, so that beauty is the measure of the power of a substance. The greater the power of a substance, the greater the beauty.”¹³⁸ Leibniz’s aestheticism is most evident in a late fragment, ‘Initia et Specimina Scientiae novae Generalis’:

Regarding power, the greater it is the more it shows itself through making many from one and [many] in one, since one governs many things and forms them in itself. Now unity in multiplicity is nothing other than harmony; and... the order that flows from it is that from which all beauty derives... From this, one sees how

¹³⁸ Frederick C. Beiser, Diotima’s Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 32.
happiness, pleasure, love, perfection, essence, power, freedom, harmony, order and beauty are connected together, which is properly seen only by a few.\textsuperscript{139}

Leibniz argues that all \textit{perfections} are themselves beautiful, and that each aspect of the universe has its place in the pre-arranged harmony of the whole.

Yet, Leibniz treats the beauty of ideas as the result of \textit{confusion}, which is ultimately reducible to a rational kernel. He writes in the ‘Principles of Nature and Grace’ that “[m]artyrs and fanatics...show what power the pleasure of the mind has. And further, even the pleasures of the senses reduce to intellectual pleasures known confusedly.” Beauty, in the last analysis, is \textit{calculable}:

Music charms us, even though its beauty consists only in the harmonies of numbers and in a calculation that we are not aware of, but which the soul nevertheless carries out, a calculation concerning the beats or vibrations of sounding bodies, which are encountered at certain intervals. The pleasures that sight finds in proportions are of the same nature, and those caused by the other senses amount to something similar, even though we might not be able to explain it so distinctly.\textsuperscript{140}

According to Leibniz, beauty is, at bottom, a confused representation of an intellectual pleasure. There are two sides to this statement: first, the harmony that we perceive in beautiful appearances is an ‘intellectual pleasure.’ It would be shown, upon complete analysis, to be rational. Second, our representations confuse things, and this confusion is, in some sense, \textit{essential} to our sensations. As Leibniz writes to Queen Sophie Charlotte, sensible appearances are ‘occult’ and confused, because even though they


\textsuperscript{140} \textit{Principles of Nature and Grace}, §17; in Leibniz, \textit{Philosophical Essays}, 212.
consist in nothing more than the “vibrations in the air or the motions of particles,” we perceive them as sensible qualities.\textsuperscript{141} The nature of the senses is to confuse things, or to join together the marks that are distinct for the understanding. No amount of analysis will make it possible for us to see green as the composite of blue and yellow, or as the effect of light waves on the retina, even though we are capable of such an analysis intellectually.

Sensible representations have a peculiar status in Leibniz: they are both images and characters, and as characters, they express more than meets the eye. Benjamin’s account of allegorical perception provides a striking description of this status of images: “[A]t one stroke the profound vision of allegory transforms things and works into stirring writing.”\textsuperscript{142} This means that “the image is only a signature, only the monogram of essence, not the essence itself in a mask.”\textsuperscript{143} Leibniz’s argument that sensuous beauty is a confused but rational idea that can be ‘read’ by the divine understanding exhibits a profound affinity to what Benjamin describes as the allegorical attitude.

Leibniz is the philosopher who stands closest to the Baroque allegorists, and Benjamin models his interpretation of the allegorical on Leibniz’s idea of representation as a complex character.\textsuperscript{144} Monads represent the universe and God intensively in the

\textsuperscript{141} Leibniz, “Letter to Sophie Charlotte”; in idem, Die philosophischen Schriften, VI, 499–500.

\textsuperscript{142} Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 176.

\textsuperscript{143} Idem, 214.

\textsuperscript{144} In a fragment from 1919–1920, Benjamin writes that every great work of art has its sibling in the realm of philosophy, and that it is the task of the true critic to discover a work’s siblings. I am suggesting here that Baroque allegory has its sibling in Leibniz’s monads; the relationship is not direct, or causal. It can rather be described as an elective affinity. Benjamin writes: “Suppose you make the acquaintance of a young person who is handsome and attractive, but who seems to be harboring a secret. It would be tactless and reprehensible to try to penetrate this secret and wrest it from him. But it is doubtless
configuration of their relationships. As such, each confused image, or finite presentation, can be read as a complex of relations, signifying the idea. Although Benjamin never makes this argument explicit, he shows a certain ‘elective affinity’ between the monadic ideas and constellations of the ‘Prologue,’ and the ‘confused court’ of emblems that gathers around a figural center in allegorical representation. Not only is there a structural affinity between monadic ideas and constellations, on the one hand, and Leibniz’s ‘well-founded phenomena,’ on the other, but Leibniz’s metaphysics also informs Benjamin’s description of the allegorical transformation of a confused image into a written ‘character.’

§3.2 The Relationship between Truth and Beauty

Benjamin’s ‘Prologue’ argues that truth is the essential content of beauty. But as the essential content of beauty, truth only appears when the outward form of beauty (eidos) permissible to inquire whether he has any siblings, to see whether their nature could not perhaps explain somewhat the enigmatic character of the stranger. This is exactly how the true critic inquires into the siblings of the work of art. And every great work has its sibling (brother or sister?) in the realm of philosophy” (Benjamin, “The Theory of Criticism,” in Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 219).

145 As Benjamin describes it, allegory brings with it its own court: “the profusion of emblems is grouped around the figural center, which is never absent from genuine allegories, as opposed to periphrases of concepts” (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 188).

146 Admittedly, Benjamin does not mention Leibniz at all in this connection, but rather invokes an interpretation of Plato’s Symposium. The Symposium, above all, “presents truth – the realm of ideas – as the essential content of beauty. It declares truth to be beautiful” (idem, 30). The Symposium shows that the ‘mode of existence’ of ideas is aesthetic: ideas are manifest in beautiful semblance, or as Benjamin puts it, beauty is the self-representation of ideas, which ‘shine forth’ in semblance (idem 31). Although Benjamin offers up this analysis in relation to Plato, it is plausible that Leibniz is in the background, even here. In an early fragment entitled ‘The Theory of Criticism’ (1919–1920), Benjamin shows how the beautiful is manifested in the truth as a harmonious totality. In point-form, he summarizes the structural relationship between truth and beauty as follows: “The true: unity. The beautiful: multiplicity assembled into a totality” (Benjamin, Selected Writings I, 219). Benjamin provides a condensed ‘history’ of this harmonic conception of truth. First of all, this conception is found in Plato’s Symposium, which “at its climax, deals with this topic. Its message is that beauty achieves its virtual manifestation only within the
Benjamin’s formulation betrays precisely the same ambivalence that comes to the fore in Leibniz. According to Benjamin, the truth is beautiful because it is representational. Insofar as the truth is represented, it is as a *harmonious* configuration of a multiplicity of ideas. However, Benjamin suggests that beauty is only the external *appearance* of truth, and that, under the aspect of eternity, this appearance would ‘shrink up’ to reveal a ‘character,’ or the nexus of purely rational relations.

Leibniz’s ambivalent attitude toward sensory images provides a clue for interpreting Benjamin’s discussion of allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Benjamin suggests that the Baroque allegorists – in complete accord with Leibniz – approached beauty in an anti-artistic way, as the ‘confused’ perception of the true: whatever is beautiful is semblance, and as semblance, it is resolvable into truths of reason only upon an *infinite* analysis. But beauty evaporates under the light of divine learning. What retains permanent cognitive value for the ‘confused investigator’ is only truth as a whole.” (ibid.) Second, the early Romantics also recognized this point when they perceived a harmonious arrangement in the multiplicity of works of art. For the Romantics, this harmony “does not stem from a vague principle peculiar to art and implicit to art alone. Rather it arises from the fact that works of art are ways in which the ideal of the philosophical problem makes itself manifest” (idem, 218). Although Benjamin does not mention Leibniz in this fragment, his notion of the ‘virtual manifestation’ of beauty in the truth as a whole is redolent of Leibniz, as is his formulation of the harmony of works of art as the ideal of the philosophical problem – that is, the systematic unity of philosophy is only expressed in the harmony of beautiful individuals. I read this fragment as an anticipation of Benjamin’s Leibnizianism, and this is born out by the history of ideas: the early Romantic appeal to a Platonic harmony of forms was not direct, but was mediated through their reception of Leibniz. It was Leibniz – not Plato – whose philosophy directly informed the rehabilitation of ‘Platonism’ in Romantic aesthetics. Leibniz adapted Plato when he described the beauty of the truth as its harmonious arrangement. As Beiser notes, it was Leibniz’s great achievement to resurrect the beauty of the intellect by adopting themes from Plato’s *Phaedrus* and the * Symposium*, at a time when the dominant intellectual culture, influenced by the Protestant Reformation, was hostile to beauty. Thus, writes Beiser, Leibniz was able to “give refuge and comfort to Diotima,” against the grain (Beiser, *Diotima’s Children*, 34). The early Romantics went back to Leibniz, in reaction to Kant’s restriction of intuition to sensible experience. Beiser writes: “The aesthetic conception of the world – the view of the world as a work of art or organism – that was so essential for the Frühromantik and the *Goethezeit* has its deepest roots in Leibniz’s metaphysics” (idem, 31).
the complex of relations, which is legible within the image as a character (i.e. as writing), or as a ‘rebus’:

   In the field of allegorical intuition the image is a fragment, a rune. Its beauty evaporates when the light of divine learning falls upon it. The false appearance of totality is extinguished. For the eidos disappears, the simile ceases to exist, and the cosmos it contained shrivels up. The dry rebuses which remain contain an insight, which is still available to the confused investigator.147

Benjamin ascribes the Baroque ambivalence toward beauty to “[a] deep-rooted intuition of the problematic character of art.”148 If criticism discerns the ‘idea’ in art, the result of this insight is a shriveling up of its beautiful semblance. What remains is an eviscerated arrangement of knowledge. This is why Benjamin refers to the critical task as the ‘mortification’ of works of art in his letter to Rang: “My definition is: criticism is the mortification of the works. Not the intensification of consciousness in them (that is Romantic!), but their colonization by knowledge.”149

Both early Romanticism and the Baroque allegorists were drawn to fragments and ruins, which point beyond themselves to a unity that has either ceased to exist, or has not yet been fulfilled. Only the destruction of the semblance of beauty can reveal the ‘idea,’ or the truth-content in a work of art. Yet, according to Benjamin, the Romantics and the Baroque allegorists approached this destruction differently. The Romantics idealized destruction; they saw the negation of finite positivity as revolutionary, even

147 Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 176, my emphasis.
148 Ibid.
149 Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 389.
messianic. The Baroque allegorists, on the other hand, saw destruction as the inevitable passing away of natural life and works.\textsuperscript{150} Benjamin argues, furthermore, that the Baroque allegorists and the Romantics approached the \textit{ruin} of beautiful form in terms of different temporal indices. He describes the Baroque work as a ruin that preserves its arrangement of knowledge, long after the outward beauty of its form has decayed. Criticism brings about the ‘mortification’ of a work’s material content in order to reveal its truth-content. Romantic criticism, on the other hand, seeks to ‘awaken consciousness in living works.’ In Benjamin’s words:

> What has survived [in the \textit{Trauerspiel}] is the extraordinary detail of the allegorical references: an object of knowledge which has settled in the consciously constructed ruins. Criticism means the mortification of the works. By their very essence these works confirm this more readily than any others. Mortification of the works: not then – as the Romantics have it – awakening of the consciousness in living works, but the settlement of knowledge in dead ones.\textsuperscript{151}

If the Romantics ‘correct’ art through criticism that awakens the work to self-consciousness, the Baroque allegorists immediately transform the image into writing.\textsuperscript{152}

\textsuperscript{150} In a frequently cited passage from \textit{The Origin of German Tragic Drama}, Benjamin describes the distinction between the Romantic symbol and the Baroque allegory as follows: “Whereas in the [romantic] symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the \textit{facies hippocratica} of history, as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather in a death’s head. And although such a thing lacks all ‘symbolic’ freedom of expression, all classical proportion, all humanity – nevertheless, this is the form in which man’s subjection to nature is most obvious…” (Benjamin, \textit{Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 166).

\textsuperscript{151} Idem, 182.

\textsuperscript{152} The full quotation, excerpted above, reads as follows: “Both, Romanticism as much as Baroque, are concerned not so much with providing a corrective to classicism, as to art itself. And it cannot be denied that the Baroque… offers a more concrete, more authoritative, and more permanent version of this correction. Whereas Romanticism inspired by its belief in the infinite, intensified the perfected creation of form and idea in critical terms, at one stroke the profound vision of allegory transforms things and works into stirring writing” (Benjamin, \textit{Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 176).
§3.3 The Mortification of Art

Benjamin’s account of the mortification of the work of art in criticism echoes Leibniz’s discussion of death as the contraction or enfolding of organic life as it passes to a smaller stage. According to Leibniz, nature unfolds from pre-existent living beings, or ‘preformed seeds,’ which are continuously metamorphosed into animals and conscious beings: “There are small animals in the seeds of large ones, which, through conception, assume new vestments that they appropriate for themselves, which gives them the means to nourish themselves and grow in order to pass to a larger state [théatre] and to bring about the propagation of the large animal.”\(^{153}\) Death, on the other hand, is the contraction of organic life, which shrivels up into a smaller form:

And since animals generally are not fully born in conception or generation, they do not fully perish in what we call death, for it is reasonable that what does not begin naturally does not end in the order of nature. Thus, abandoning their mask or their tattered dress, they merely return to a smaller stage, where they can, nevertheless, be just as sensitive and as well-ordered as in the larger.\(^ {154}\)

The Jena Romantics (especially Goethe and Novalis) adopted this notion of a morphological continuum of nature, in which preformed seeds unfold to generate the manifold species of natural life. However, for the Romantics, the principle of transformation is the ‘intensification of consciousness’ in an individual form. Novalis, for instance, refers to the ‘bildung’ of nature, by which it is gradually transformed into

\(^{153}\) Principles of Nature and Grace, §6; in Leibniz, Philosophical Essays, 209.

\(^{154}\) Ibid.
culture (or endowed with self-consciousness). Benjamin argues in his doctoral thesis that, although the Romantics were able to coherently explain the enlargement of a form, as it ‘engulfed’ or subsumed lower forms, they were unable to account for the contraction, or self-limitation of consciousness, without falling into irresolvable paradoxes. Leibniz’s account of contraction is not a matter of the self-limitation of consciousness. It is rather an expressive analogy that preserves the same relations, albeit in a smaller form, just as, in death, a ‘bare monad’ still perceives the totality of interconnections, but lacks sensation and conscious awareness. Despite occupying a lesser stage in death, the bare monad still intensively expresses its relationships to the world. It is a ‘character’ in Leibniz’s sense of the term.

According to Benjamin’s argument in The Origin of German Tragic Drama, beautiful form likewise contracts into an arrangement of knowledge once “the light of divine learning falls upon it.” This contraction, or ‘shriveling up’ of eidos is like death in organic life. Benjamin explains that the allegorical attitude towards organic life and natural beauty was conceived in terms of this shriveling up, or decay. This attitude can be explained by referring to what Benjamin calls ‘Baroque teleology,’ which sees the

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155 According to Novalis, “[k]nowledge is the transformation of nature into an ideal (symbolic) reality” (NS:2 650-651), in Dalia Nassar, “Idealism is nothing but genuine empiricism”: Novalis, Goethe, and the Ideal of Romantic Science; Goethe Yearbook XVIII, (2011). As I will argue in Chapter Three, on the ‘idea of art’ in early Romanticism, Benjamin criticized the early Romantic emphasis on the transformation of nature into a symbolic reality. Rather than seeing nature as the substratum for continuous transformation into history, or culture, Benjamin sought a view of history itself as absorbed back into the permanence of nature, or ‘under the aspect of eternity,’ as Spinoza would say.

156 As Benjamin writes: “In fact, where knowledge is concerned, it can be a question only of a heightening, a potentiation of reflection; a retrogressive movement appears inconceivable, both for the thought-scheme of reflection and for recognition through reflection, despite the falsely schematizing statements which Schlegel and Novalis made in this connection.... For reflection may very well be intensified if not diminished again; neither a synthesis nor an analysis makes for diminution. Only a breaking off, never a lessening, of heightened reflection is thinkable” (Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 191n146).
purpose, or ‘end’ of life in the expression of meaning. Nature is read as a source of knowledge, or an instructive text. In light of this task of reading nature, the historical unfolding of natural life was deemed to be the virtual content of a ‘pre-stabilized’ essence. As Benjamin writes, "From the point of view of the Baroque, nature serves the purpose of expressing its meaning, it is the emblematic representation of its sense, and as an allegorical representation it remains irremediably different from its historical realization."\textsuperscript{157} Rather than perceiving nature “in bud and bloom,” the Baroque authors saw the “transfixed face of signifying nature,” in which history is grasped only as a context of relations.\textsuperscript{158} “In the process of decay, and in it alone, the events of history shrivel up and become absorbed in the setting.”\textsuperscript{159} In the process of decay, all that was once lively goes to seed: “History merges into setting... [it] is scattered like seeds over the ground.”\textsuperscript{160}

To return to the point where this chapter began, let us look again at Benjamin’s formulation of the critical task in his letter to Rang. In that letter, Benjamin had written that “criticism becomes the representation of an idea. Its intensive infinity characterizes ideas as monads. My definition is: criticism is the mortification of the works. Not the intensification of consciousness in them (that is Romantic!), but their colonization by knowledge.”\textsuperscript{161}

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\textsuperscript{157} Benjamin, \textit{Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 170.
\textsuperscript{158} Idem, 179, 171.
\textsuperscript{159} Idem, 179.
\textsuperscript{160} Idem, 92.
\textsuperscript{161} Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings}, I, 389.
the work of art – is the true method of criticism. The intensive infinity within the idea is not reflectively generated, but is rather represented. Benjamin informs Rang that, “[t]he task of interpreting works of art is to concentrate creaturely life in ideas. To establish the presence of that life.”¹⁶² In this account of representation, Benjamin brings together three terms that do not obviously cohere: creaturely life, presence, and knowledge. The connections between these terms remain underdeveloped in the letter to Rang, but they come together in The Origin of Tragic Drama. All of nature can be interpreted as an expression of divine knowledge. The task of interpreting nature is to establish its meaning under the aspect of eternity, or to read it as an archetype of divine knowledge. The eternal truths can be discovered introspectively by following up on the infinite implications contained within our ‘confused’ representations. Accordingly, history becomes the virtual content of an idea. To represent an idea by establishing the presence of creaturely life in it means wresting from even the most inconsequential detail a view of the universe as it would be seen under the aspect of eternity.

In the next chapter, I will show how Leibnizian expression grounds the difference between Benjamin’s theory of ideas and that of the early Romantics. Whereas Benjamin’s ideas ‘redeem’ the phenomena in the legibility of the most minute details of experience to God, the Romantic theory of ideas ‘absolves’ all finite positivity in the continuous transformation of forms within the medium of reflection.¹⁶³ Rather than

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ As Benjamin states in a footnote to “The Concept of Criticism,” valuable materials for a definition of the essence of Romanticism may be sought in Romantic messianism. He substantiates this point with a quote from Friedrich Schlegel’s Athenaeum Fragments: “The revolutionary desire to realize the kingdom of God
saving the phenomena, the Romantics over-expose them in the dazzling light of reflection. Benjamin concludes his doctoral dissertation with the image of this dazzling light:

The absolutizing of the created work, the critical activity, was for [Friedrich Schlegel] the highest. This can be illustrated in an image as the generation of dazzling brilliance in the work. This dazzling – the sober light – extinguishes the plurality of works. It is the idea.164

According to Benjamin’s analysis of the ‘idea of art’ in early Romanticism, the idea is attained by absolutizing a created work, or by absolving the plurality of individual forms in the medium of reflection, symbolized by light. In the next chapter, I argue that Benjamin’s monadic theory of ideas – as the harmonious multiplicity of individual points of view, or as the refraction of truth into an irreducible plurality of ideas – is his antidote to the irresolute knowledge of the absolute that he found in the early Romantic theory of ideas.

164 Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 185.
Three: Windowless Monads and the Romantic ‘Idea of Art’

The task of positive criticism, even more... than for the Romantics, must be to concentrate on the individual work of art. For the function of great criticism is not, as is often thought, to instruct by means of historical descriptions or to educate through comparisons, but to cognize by immersing itself in the object. Criticism must account for the truth of works, a task as essential for literature as for philosophy. 1

As I suggested in the previous chapter, the most fruitful approach to interpreting Benjamin’s monadology is found in his articulation of a monadic ‘theory of ideas.’ A theory of ideas forms the philosophical core of both Benjamin’s dissertation, The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism, as well as the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’ to his Habilitation thesis, The Origin of German Trauerspiel. 2 It is this common point that allows us to bring out the differences between these two works.

In the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue,’ Benjamin argues that a detail-oriented criticism of artworks must be conceived of as the representation of ideas, rather than a deductive classification of genre, or an inductive generalization from empirical elements. The connection between a ‘theory of ideas’ and the criticism of artworks shows the


extent to which Benjamin’s ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’ is informed by his doctoral work on the concept of criticism in Jena Romanticism. In the ‘Prologue,’ Benjamin confirms that it was “the older generation of the Romantics” who initiated the most recent attempt to “renew the theory of ideas.”³

There is an apparent affinity between the concept of literary criticism that Benjamin describes in the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue,’ and that of the early Romantics. Both converge around the representation of the idea of art – a methodological imperative that has two equally important implications. First, it suggests that the fulfillment of philosophy’s systematic intentions – the complete determination of the system grasped absolutely, or as an individual – can only be represented aesthetically.⁴ Second, it points to the idea as the critical consummation of the artwork. Criticism ‘corrects’ the work of art by unfolding its truth-content, while destroying its external form (or eidos).⁵ The concept of criticism, so described, establishes an unstable interdependency between art and philosophy, or between a work’s presentational form and its truth-content. For the early Romantics, the negative moment of criticism – the


⁴ As an epigraph for his Habilitation thesis, Benjamin quotes from Goethe’s Materialien zur Geschichte der Farbenlehre: “Neither in knowledge nor in reflection can anything whole be put together, since in the former the internal is missing and in the latter the external; and so we must necessarily think of science as an art if we expect to derive any kind of wholeness from it. Nor should we look for this in the general, the excessive, but, since art is always wholly represented in every individual work of art, so science ought to reveal itself completely in every individual object treated” (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 27).

⁵ Benjamin argues, in line with the Romantic concept of the ironic destruction of a work’s presentational form, that the truth-content of a work is only revealed in the destruction of its external beauty: “This content [i.e. the truth-content of a work]... does not appear by being exposed; rather, it is revealed in a process which might be described metaphorically as the burning up of the husk as it enters the realm of ideas, that is to say a destruction of the work in which its external form achieves its most brilliant degree of illumination” (idem, 31).
destruction of the work’s external form – is overshadowed by a positive moment – the elevation of the reflecting consciousness in a work, which leads upward to the idea. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin describes the relationship between the work’s external form and the idea in similar terms, but rather than absolving the negative moment of criticism in the positivity of upwardly striving reflection, Benjamin sees the telos of criticism as the ruin itself. The decay of beautiful form leaves a configuration of knowledge, which does not comprehend, or contain the idea, but is rather a monument testifying to the shape of its absence.

Benjamin’s attitude to the early Romantics was, without doubt, ambivalent. On the one hand, he embraced the affinity between his own literary-critical work and that of the early Romantics. While finalizing the draft of his *Habilitation*, he wrote to Scholem

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6 In “The Concept of Criticism,” Benjamin describes how, for the early Romantics, the positive moment of heightening consciousness in a work outweighed the negative moment of judgment. Indeed, Romantic art criticism attains the negative only in the elevation of reflection over earlier stages of reflection. Benjamin writes: “Though the mind in every reflection elevates itself over all earlier stages of reflection and thereby negates them, it is this that gives reflection its critical coloring in the first place. But the positive moment of this heightening of consciousness far outweighs the negative” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I, 152).

7 Benjamin writes: “The Baroque work of art wants only to endure, and clings with all its senses to the eternal.... But for this very reason criticism is implied with rare clarity in the fact of their [Baroque works’] continued existence. From the very beginning they are set up for that erosion by criticism which befell them in the course of time. Beauty has nothing inalienable for the uninitiated. And for such people nothing is less approachable than the German Trauerspiel. Its outer form has died away because of its extreme crudity. What has survived is the extraordinary detail of the allegorical references: an object of knowledge which has settled in the consciously constructed ruins” (Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 182).

8 Benjamin concludes *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* by identifying the ‘idea’ of the Trauerspiel with the ruin of its external beauty. This is because, in the ruin, the configuration of structural elements is preserved for all time: “The powerful design of this form should be thought through to its conclusion; only under this condition is it possible to discuss the idea of the German Trauerspiel. In the ruins of great buildings the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in lesser buildings, however well preserved they are; and for this reason the German Trauerspiel merits interpretation. In the spirit of allegory it is conceived from the outset as a ruin, a fragment. Others may shine resplendently as on the first day; this form preserves the image of beauty to the very last” (idem, 235).
that he planned to introduce himself with a Romantic concept of philology. Yet, Benjamin also explicitly differentiated his ‘theory of ideas’ from the Romantic ‘idea of art.’ In the 1923 letter to Rang, Benjamin described his concept of criticism as the ‘mortification’ of a work, rather than the Romantic ‘intensification of consciousness’ in it. Moreover, in the ‘Prologue,’ Benjamin argued that the Romantics were ignorant of the ‘discontinuous finitude’ of ideas, and that by conflating truth with the intensification of the reflective consciousness, they failed to understand that ideas are linguistic in character:

The harmonious relationship between such essences is what constitutes truth. Its oft-cited multiplicity is finite; for discontinuity is a characteristic of the ‘essences [...]’. Ignorance of this, its discontinuous finitude, has, not infrequently, frustrated energetic attempts to renew the theory of ideas, most recently those undertaken by the older generation of the Romantics. In their speculations truth assumed the character of a reflective consciousness in place of its linguistic character.

In this chapter, I argue that Benjamin’s criticism of the early Romantic ‘idea of art’ anticipates his incipient theory of ideas as monads. My argument will draw out the nuanced distinctions between Benjamin’s theory of ideas and the Romantic idea of art. It will also clarify why Benjamin turned to Leibniz within the context of a theory of art criticism. This context, which seems out of place from the standpoint of Leibniz

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9 “The beginning and the conclusion ... will contain methodological observations on the systematic study of literature, in which I want to introduce myself with a Romantic concept of philology, to the best of my ability” (March 5, 1924), in Walter Benjamin, The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940 (eds. Gershon Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 236.

10 “My definition is: criticism is the mortification of the works. Not the intensification of consciousness in them (that is Romantic!), but their colonization by knowledge” (Benjamin, Selected Writings, 389).

11 Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 38–39.
reception, becomes intelligible when Benjamin’s detour through early Romanticism is taken into account.

I show that the crucial difference between Benjamin’s monadic theory of ideas and the early Romantic idea of art concerns the *autonomy* of the work.12 Romantic art criticism presupposes that individual works of art are only *relative* unities. This is essential to the Romantic method of art criticism, since it is only possible for criticism to consummate a work if it is deemed *incomplete*. Criticism reflectively transforms the work, and each subsequent act of criticism is taken up as a stage in the medium of art, which is conceived of as a continuum of interpenetrating forms. The Romantics compared the criticism of art to a mathematical power-series: each successive critical transformation raises the work to a higher power in a procedure that is expected to converge on the absolute.13 In this critical calculus, the work becomes a mere moment in the serial unfolding of the idea of art, or the ‘absolute work.’

From the vantage point of Benjamin’s monadic theory of ideas, it is possible to re-construct his argument against the early Romantics. This argument suggests that the Romantics erred by supposing that the multiplicity of works would converge on the absolute. According to the ‘Prologue,’ each original work of art expresses an idea, but this idea cannot be distilled by methodically intensifying reflection in a work’s formal

12 Benjamin argues that the Romantics “could not acknowledge prototypes, autonomous works complete in themselves, definitively fashioned entities exempted from eternal progression” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings* I, 182; my emphasis).

13 Benjamin cites Novalis, who writes of the method of intensifying reflection, or ‘romanticizing’ a form: “Romanticizing is nothing but a qualitative potentiation. The lower self becomes identified with a better self in this operation. Just as we ourselves are a series of such qualitative raised powers... Romantic philosophy... reciprocal elevation and reduction” (idem, 133; cf. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (eds. Rolf Tiedemann, Hermann Schweppenhäuser; 7 vols.; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972–1989), 304ff).
moments, and raising these to the absolute. The idea is rather embodied in the fragile nexus of phenomenal elements that come together in an utterly contingent and unique way. This means that there are as many ideas as there are original works, and that these cannot be made to coalesce in a system without the loss of what is essential. Rather than the medial transition of one form into another within a continuum, the truth is only represented in a refraction, or a discontinuous plurality of ideas. Each original work of art expresses an idea from its own perspective. The idea, so conceived, is a self-enclosed totality, or a ‘windowless’ monad. Just as monads do not communicate with each other, but can only translate the whole universe into their own expressive medium, so too do works of art represent the truth only when they delve intensively into the minutiae of their own material. No work comprehends the idea, or relates directly to the universal. Each original work, in representing the idea from its own point of view, conveys the promise of harmony. But this promise cannot be actualized in the completed standpoint of a thinking which immediately grasps the total context of relations in the absolute. The self-enclosed monad only relates to the absolute indirectly, by remaining intensively preoccupied with its own perceptual world.

As the epigraph to this chapter indicates, Benjamin thinks that the interpretation of art must focus minutely on the contingent detail of individual works. According to Benjamin, criticism must immerse itself in the work. By contrast, Romantic art criticism absolves what is contingent in works of art by intensifying reflection in them. As Benjamin describes it in his dissertation, “reflection grasps precisely the central – that is, universal – moments of the work and immerses them in the medium of art.” In this procedure, as Benjamin puts it, “criticism should go beyond the work and make it
absolute.\textsuperscript{14} It is only by renouncing the contingency of the individual work that the formal moments of art can be universalized. This is the paradox involved in Romantic art criticism. On the one hand, Benjamin recognizes that the Romantics innovated the concept of \textit{immanent critique}. Accordingly, art is only criticizable in virtue of the formal moments of the \textit{work} itself. The criterion of judgment is not imposed on a work abstractly, but it is generated by intensifying reflection in the work's own structural moments. On the other hand, it is only by \textit{dissolving} a work and going beyond it that criticism attains to the idea. The work becomes the mere occasion for the intensification of reflection in it.\textsuperscript{15}

Benjamin starts from a presupposition that is opposed, in principle, to early Romantic art criticism. Monads, far from being incomplete, or merely relative unities, are perfect and autonomous. They contain an abbreviated image of the entire universe in the intensive series of their perceptions. The full perfection of monads means that they are inaccessible to criticism, in the Romantic sense of \textit{consummating} a work by reflectively elevating its formal moments. The monad contains a \textit{pre-reflective} infinity of \textit{‘petites perceptions,’} which exceeds what can be consciously apperceived. In relation to this \textit{original} perceptual totality, reflection is at a loss; it is always only a partial delimitation within a horizon that goes confusedly to infinity. This is why Benjamin refers to the mode in which ideas are given to consciousness as a form of Platonic \textit{anamnesis}. It is only by submersion in the minute details of the work – by relinquishing

\textsuperscript{14} Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings}, I, 153.

\textsuperscript{15} As Benjamin writes in the ‘Afterword’ to his dissertation, “The Romantics wanted to make the lawfulness of the work of art absolute. But it is only with the dissolution of the work that the moment of contingency can be dissolved or, rather, transformed into something lawful” (idem, 182).
intentionality – that the confused investigator discovers the idea in a work of art. The objective interpretation of a work involves submersion in the details of its content, rather than the methodical cultivation of its formal moments, raised to the absolute.

Just as the full force of Benjamin’s critique of early Romanticism only becomes apparent in his articulation of a monadic theory of ideas, so is the reciprocal of this point also true: the philosophical import of Benjamin’s monads only becomes apparent against the backdrop of the prior – and in Benjamin’s mind, unsuccessful – attempt of the early Romantics to renew a theory of ideas in the criticism of art. The early Romantics invoked a quasi-Platonic theory of ideas in order to distinguish the idea of art from an inductive generalization from empirical works, or the abstract application of principles of taste. Benjamin honors this motive, but concludes that, in the end, the early Romantics vitiated their own best insights by absolving the content of individual works of art in the methodical absolution of form.

The argument in this chapter will proceed in two main sections. In Section One, I draw out the epistemological presuppositions of the Romantic theory of art criticism. On the basis of these presuppositions, I interpret what the Romantics mean by the ‘idea’ of art. In Section Two, I discuss Benjamin’s key criticisms of the early Romantic idea of art.
§1 The Idea of Art in Early Romanticism

Benjamin’s doctoral thesis, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism” (1919–20), extracts a concept of art criticism, and the epistemological presuppositions on which it was constructed, from the corpus of fragments, reviews, and manuscripts produced by the Jena Romantics. Benjamin’s material is drawn primarily from the *Athenaeum* and *Lyceum* Fragments, although he bolsters his argument with works of Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis), and the early Fichte.¹⁶ In this section, I will clarify what Benjamin means by the ‘idea of art’ in early Romanticism. Following the structure of Benjamin’s dissertation, I will begin by discussing the epistemological presuppositions of Romantic art criticism, and I will then show how these presuppositions are fulfilled in the concept of art criticism.

§1.1 The Medium of Reflection: Immediacy and Infinity

Benjamin shows that the early Romantics developed their epistemological presuppositions in close connection with the concept of reflection in Fichte’s *Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre* (On the Concept of the Science of Knowledge [1794]).¹⁷ As Benjamin notes, there is a “complete agreement” between the early Romantic concept of

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¹⁶ Throughout this chapter, I will refer to the ‘early Romantics’ generally, rather than specifying whether the ideas in question are those of Friedrich Schlegel or Novalis. My purpose is not to give a detailed account of the Jena Romantics themselves, but to differentiate between two positions in Benjamin’s thought – i.e. between his reading of the theory of ideas in early Romanticism and his own theory of ideas, as articulated in the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue.’

¹⁷ Johann G. Fichte, *Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre oder der Sogenannten Philosophie* (Jena; Leipzig: Gabler), 1798.
reflection on a form and Fichte’s concept of reflection in the *Wissenschaftslehre*. The basis for this convergence is Fichte’s argument that it is possible to ground the *immediacy* of thinking in the *interconnection* between two forms of consciousness in reflection.\(^{18}\)

According to the early Fichte, self-consciousness is not an immediate, intuitive accompaniment of mental acts. It is conceived of rather as the relationship between two forms of consciousness: namely, the consciousness of consciousness. In self-consciousness, so conceived, a first-order act of consciousness returns into itself and becomes the object-thought of a second-order act of consciousness. Fichte’s concept of reflection on a form sought to legitimate the immediacy of thinking in the spontaneous transition between two forms of consciousness.\(^{19}\) In other words, the immediate nature of this thinking is grounded in the *connection* between two forms, which spontaneously (by virtue of a reflective act) pass over into one another and return to themselves. This immediacy is not intuitive. It stems from the *purely formal* character of a method.

\(^{18}\) Benjamin argues that the major representatives of post-Kantian philosophy embarked on a “feverish” endeavor to recover intellectual intuition for thinking, following Kant’s denial of its possibility within the realm of experience. As Benjamin writes, “As soon as the history of philosophy, in Kant (although not for the first time), still explicitly and emphatically affirmed both the possibility of thinking an intellectual intuition and its impossibility in the realm of experience, a manifold and almost feverish endeavor emerged to recover this concept for philosophy as the guarantee of its highest claims. At the forefront of this endeavor were Fichte, Schlegel, Novalis, and Schelling” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I, 121).

\(^{19}\) According to Benjamin, “Fichte supposes that here he can ground an immediate and certain cognition though the *connection* of two forms of consciousness (that of form and the form of the form, or of knowing and the knowing of knowing), forms that pass over into one another and return to themselves. The absolute subject, the only thing to which the action of freedom has relation, is the center of this reflection and thus is to be known by immediate cognition. It is a question not of the cognition of an object through intuition, but of the self-cognition of a method, of something formal – and the absolute subject represents nothing other than this” (idem, 122; my emphasis).
Following Fichte’s method in the *Wissenschaftslehre*, the early Romantics seek the immediacy of thinking, not in its intuitive character, but in the totality of its *mediations*.\(^{20}\) By running through all of the connections between forms of consciousness, thinking returns into itself, immediately grasping the context of reflection. The two key implications of this procedure for the early Romantics are as follows: First, what is to be known by this immediate cognition is the *absolute subject*. All intermediate stages of reflection are relatively obscured, but, because thinking takes place within a medium, each form of consciousness is related, to a degree, to the absolute subject. In the absolute, reflection grasps the total context of relations all at once. The absolute subject is the ‘center,’ or midpoint of reflection, where the midpoint does not indicate a spatial point, but instead describes the medial character of reflection. From the beginning, thinking finds itself already *within* the interconnected totality of relations.\(^{21}\)

Second, the mediated immediacy of reflections is purely *formal*, and Benjamin clarifies this formality in terms of the self-cognition of a *method*. What the Romantics mean by ‘pure form’ is not the presentational form of a given content; it is rather the purely methodical character of thinking. The method is *incessant*: by reflecting on a form, the original form is transformed into the object of a subsequent act of reflection,

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\(^{20}\) As Benjamin writes, “This interconnection can be grasped in a mediated way from the infinitely many stages of reflection, as by degrees all the remaining reflections are run through in all directions. In this mediation by way of reflections, however, there is no antithesis to the immediacy of thinking comprehension, because every reflection is immediate in itself. It is thus a matter of mediation through immediacies…” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I, 126).

\(^{21}\) Benjamin explains that no single reflection is identified with the original, simple reflection, but each reflective act is a middle term: “[t]hat philosophy begins in the middle means that it does not identify any of its objects with *ur-*reflection, but sees in them a middle term in the medium” (idem, 137).
which is the form of a form, and so on, *ad infinitum*.22 It is important to underline that the early Romantic concept of ‘form’ is inimical to the classical notion of form as a finite and bounded shape. By equating form with the purely methodical character of thinking, the early Romantics hit upon a concept of form that bears no contradiction with infinity, and in fact it can be understood as the very presentation of infinity. Whereas the classical notion of form is bound to a particular content, Romantic form perpetually *dissolves* all finite shapes.23 The disintegration of whatever is merely objective (i.e. inert, or devoid of connections) leads upward to the presentation of an idea. The full determinacy of the idea is not a determinacy of content, but is linked to the successive, methodical intensification of reflection in a form.

The main reason that Benjamin introduces Fichte – apart from the ‘complete agreement’ of the early Romantics with Fichte’s method of reflection on a form – is to determine, on philosophical grounds, why the Romantics part ways with him. If, in the *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte invokes the reflection on a form in order to legitimate the immediacy of cognition, in his later writings, he grounds the immediacy of thinking in its *intuitive* character. The early Romantics do not follow the later Fichte’s recourse to

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22 Benjamin describes how “this process by which the mind becomes ‘the for of the form and its content’ takes place, according to the Romantic intuition, incessantly, and first of all constitutes not the object but the form, the infinite and purely methodical character of true thinking” (idem, 128).

23 Dissolution of finite positivity is the result of the incessant activity of reflection. Benjamin describes how, “[t]he early Romantics, thanks to their method, dissolve this world view completely into the absolute” (idem, 131).
intuition. Instead, they radicalize the implications of reflection on a form, as it is developed in the *Wissenschaftslehre*.24

In his later writings, Fichte sought to transfix the infinity of reflection, at least in the domain of theoretical philosophy, since he saw this infinity as a threat to the immediacy of ‘thinking thinking itself.’ According to Fichte’s argument, the infinity of reflection inevitably leads to a *regress*, in which it would become impossible for thinking to assume an actual consciousness; each act of reflection would constantly require a new form of consciousness.25 In order to halt this regress, Fichte introduced the notion of an intuitive self-consciousness, which immediately accompanies thinking. As Benjamin points out, Fichte’s intellectual intuition bears some similarity to Descartes’ *cogito*, which immediately thinks itself every time it thinks of an object.26 The later Fichte

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24 Benjamin writes that the early Romantics held to the early Fichte’s theory of cognition, despite Fichte’s subsequent divergence from it, and indeed, “they expanded it far beyond Fichte’s outline, whereas he, for his part, in the writings that followed, based the immediacy of cognition on its intuitive character” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I, 123).

25 Benjamin quotes an argument to this effect from Fichte’s *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre* (1797): “You are conscious of your ‘You,’ you say; accordingly, you necessarily distinguish your thinking ‘I’ from the ‘I’ thought of in that ‘I’s’ thinking. But in order that you can do so, what is thinking in that act of thinking must in turn be the object of a higher thinking, so that it can become the object of consciousness; and at the same time, you obtain a new subject, which is conscious itself of what previously was the state of being self-conscious. My argument here is as it was before; and after we have once begun to proceed according to this law, you can never show me a place where we must stop. Thus we shall continue *ad infinitum*, to require a new consciousness for every consciousness, a new consciousness whose object is the earlier consciousness, and thus we shall never reach the point of being able to assume an actual consciousness” (idem, 125).

26 As Benjamin writes, “The immediate consciousness of thinking is identical with self-consciousness. By virtue of its immediacy, it is called intuition. In this self-consciousness – in which intuition and thinking, subject and object, coincide – reflection is transfixed, arrested, and stripped of its endlessness, without being annulled” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I, 125). Benjamin points out, very obliquely, that here Fichte is taking a position that is similar to that of Descartes, whereas the early Romantics, by retaining the reflexive structure of self-consciousness, in fact are closer to Leibniz (for whom apperception, or consciousness, is the perception of a perception). Thus, Benjamin writes: “We need only point out that the contrast Fichte detects between himself and Descartes also obtains between him and the Romantics” (idem, 128).
confined reflection to a single act, in which the ‘I’ is conscious of itself in intellectual 

intuition.  

Unlike Fichte, the early Romantics capitalized on the methodological infinity of 

reflection. That they did not seek to annul the infinity of reflection points to two crucial 
differences between their position and that of Fichte. First, Fichte held a “completed 
infinity” to be impossible, since he thought of infinity as recursive, or additive. The 
early Romantics, on the other hand, saw no contradiction between the infinitude of 
reflection and the fulfillment of an idea. This is because they thought of the infinity of 
reflection as an infinite exactitude of interconnection, rather than an infinite advance. 

One could say, without deviating from Benjamin’s meaning, that the infinitude of 
reflection concerns the adequacy of an idea. An increase in adequacy does not ‘add’ any 
new determinations. An obscure idea contains all the same ‘marks’ as an adequate idea. 
The difference between these notions concerns the degree of clarity with which these 
determinations are analyzed. The infinity in question is qualitative and intensive, rather 
than additive, or recursive. Benjamin confirms that, within the medium of reflection, a 
simple original reflection is differentiated from a simple absolute reflection only in terms 
of the clarity with which these determinations are grasped:

27 Benjamin makes the connection between Fichte’s ‘active deed’ (an act) and the ‘fact’ (or ‘fait accompli’) of reflection. Fichte limits reflection to the absolute thesis: “Thus he recognizes only a single case of the fruitful application of reflection – namely, of that reflection which occurs in intellectual intuition” (ibid).

28 Idem, 123.

29 Benjamin quotes Fichte: “In the practical field the imagination continues to infinity, until it reaches the absolutely indeterminable idea of the highest unity – a unity that would be possible only in accord with a completed infinity, which is itself impossible,” Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 124; cf. Fichte, Sämtliche Werke, (Berlin: Veit und Comp, 1845–1846), 217.
In order to distinguish these two poles, one would have to assume that absolute reflection comprises the maximum of reality, whereas original reflection comprises the minimum of reality, in the sense that, though both enclose all the content of reality and all of thinking, that content is developed to its highest clarity in the former, while remaining undeveloped and unclear in the latter.\footnote{Idem, 130.}

The Romantic infinity is not an empty, recursive infinity, precisely because it takes form within a medium. As a ‘medium of reflection,’ Friedrich Schlegel conceived of the whole of the real, “unfolding in its full content, with increasing distinctness up to the highest clarity in the absolute, in the stages of reflection.”\footnote{Ibid, my emphasis.}

The canonical form of reflection is the second-order ‘thinking of thinking.’ Rather than stopping at the second level, the early Romantics infinitized reflection. Beginning with the third level, the ‘thinking of thinking of thinking,’ the rigorous form of reflection is beset by ambiguity. As Benjamin points out, the expression ‘thinking of thinking of thinking’ can either refer to the reflection of a subject – the ‘(thinking of thinking) of thinking’ – or else it can refer to the object-thought of ‘thinking (of thinking of thinking).’ This ambiguity “expands without limit or check” at every subsequent stage of reflection after the third level.\footnote{Idem, 129.} The dissolution of the rigorous form of reflection, and the resulting ambiguity between the subject and object poles of reflection, underlines the extent to which the early Romantics differed from Fichtean positivism.

In the intermediate stages of reflection, the early Romantics countenanced an unchecked fissuring and multiplication of forms of reflection. But this seemingly infinite

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\begin{itemize}
   \item \footnote{Idem, 130.}
   \item \footnote{Ibid, my emphasis.}
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multiplication of forms is not the final word. Because thinking takes place within a circumscribed medium of reflection, the early Romantics guaranteed that reflection would ultimately converge on the absolute – that is, in simple fulfilled reflection, in which thinking penetrates the total context of relations as immediately as it would penetrate an individual form.\footnote{In Benjamin's words: “This dissolution of the strict immediacy, is, to be sure, dissolution only for circumscribed thinking. It was already indicated above that the absolute can grasp itself reflectively without mediation – that is, in closed and completed reflection – whereas lower levels of reflection can approximate the highest only in the mediation by immediacy; this mediated reflection must in turn give way to complete immediacy as soon as these lower forms attain absolute reflection” (Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings}, I, 126).} The ultimate closure of reflection is captured by the early Romantic designation of their philosophy as a cyclical. As Benjamin writes, “the two poles of reflection... as simple ur-reflection and as simple absolute reflection, once again join together in the form of a circle.”\footnote{Idem, 137.} Thinking runs through all the degrees of reflection in all directions, until it immediately grasps all of its moments in the totality of their interconnections.\footnote{On the idea of “cyclical philosophy,” Benjamin quotes Schlegel as follows: “[P]hilosophy, like an epic poem, must start in the middle, and it is impossible to lecture on philosophy and pay it out piece by piece in such a way that the first piece would be completely grounded for itself and explained. It is a whole, and thus the path to recognizing it is no straight line but a circle” (Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings}, I, 137; cf. Friedrich Schlegel, \textit{Philosophische Vorlesungen aus den Jahren 1804 bis 1806: nebst Fragmenten Vorzüglich Philosophisch–Theologischen Inhalts; aus dem Nachlass des Verewigten}, ed. Carl J. H. Windischmann; Bonn: E. Weber, 1836, 407).}

The second major point of disagreement between the early Romantics and Fichte concerns their different understandings of the subject of reflection. Fichte's theoretical philosophy concerns the determination of an ‘I’ by a ‘not-I.’ The limitation of the ‘I’ occurs in relation to an unconscious function of the ‘I’ – the imagination’s representation...
of a 'not-I.'³⁶ For the early Romantics, on the other hand, the subject of reflection is a ‘self’ rather than an ‘I.’ Rather than restricting reflection to an ‘I,’ the early Romantics saw everything as a self, or ‘center of reflection.’ Moreover, unlike Fichte, the early Romantics did not countenance the unconscious limitation of the self, but saw limitation ultimately in terms of the relative self-limitation of the absolute.³⁷ According to their argument, the self can only be limited in relation to another self – a ‘thou.’ Such limitation is relative; that is, the self is only limited in relation to a higher self.³⁸

Whereas Fichte’s ‘I’ is fully determined, at least in the theoretical sphere, the Romantic ‘self’ is, on the one hand, never fully accomplished in any of its finite positions, but on the other hand, it is virtually grounded in the total unfolding of the absolute subject. Although no individual ‘self’ can immediately grasp its origins, or run through the entire context of reflections, each self is medially connected to the absolute subject as a stage in its unfolding. The finite self is a mode of the absolute subject. By

³⁶ According to Fichte, the formation of the theoretical consciousness is only possible when the infinity of reflection is curbed. Because infinitude seemed to Fichte to open into an endless regress, he saw the infinitude of reflection as destructive to the formation of consciousness. Accordingly, reflection must be led back into the unity of the ‘I,’ and should only be drawn forward into the infinite in the domain of practical philosophy (Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 123). The limitation of reflection is what enables the creation of a theoretical ‘sphere,’ which can be filled-out and successively determined by the representation [Vorstellung] of a ‘not-I.’ The complete determination of the theoretical subject is reached in the representation of representation itself (idem, 124).

³⁷ Benjamin writes, “The Romantics shudder at limitation through the unconscious; there should be nothing other than relative limitation, and this should occur only in conscious reflection itself” (idem, 132).

³⁸ Benjamin quotes from Friedrich Schlegel’s Windischmann lectures: “We cannot grasp that we ought to be infinite; at the same time, we have to admit that the ‘I,’ as the reservoir of everything, cannot be otherwise than infinite. If, upon careful consideration, we cannot deny that everything is in us, then we cannot explain the feeling of limitedness... except by assuming that we are only a part of ourselves. This leads straightaway to a belief in a ‘thou’ – not, as in life, as something opposing yet similar to the ‘I’... but altogether as a ‘counter-I’ – and bound up with this is necessarily the belief in an ‘ur-I’” (idem, 131).
intensifying reflection in a form, consciousness enlarges itself, and attains to its higher self – namely, the absolute.39

Benjamin argues that the most fruitful formulation of the medium of reflection can be found in the concept of art criticism. The work of art, rather than the ‘I,’ epitomizes the early Romantic ‘self.’ This is because of a peculiarity of reflection, which can only begin reflectively, or from a point of indifference.40 Reflection must reflectively produce its own material, and this *autopoeisis* is exemplified by art. Benjamin explains that, “[i]n the early Romantic sense, the midpoint of reflection is art, not the ‘I.’”41 In support of this idea, he quotes Schlegel’s Windischmann lectures: “This form of thinking is... poetry, which in a way creates its own material.”42 Art is the ‘germ-cell’ of reflection, which is capable of producing its self out of nothing. In the next subsection, I will elaborate how the concept of art criticism fulfills the epistemological presuppositions set out above.

§1.2 Romantic Art Criticism: The ‘Work’ and the ‘Idea’ of Art

Benjamin discerns that the early Romantics attained to an entirely new idea in the philosophy of art – namely, the ‘objective’ interpretation of a work of art, solely in terms

39 Citing Novalis, Benjamin shows that the Romantic method involves the qualitative potentiation of the self: “Romanticizing is nothing but a qualitative potentiation. The lower self becomes identified with a better self in this operation” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I, 133). Friedrich Schlegel confirms that the Romantic method involves a reflective *self*-elevation, or self-enlargement: “One is always thinking only oneself or the ‘I’ – not, to be sure, the common, derivative self,... but [the self] in a higher significance” (ibid.).

40 Idem, 134.

41 Ibid.

of its *inner structure*. In more familiar terms, the early Romantics developed the notion of ‘immanent critique.’ According to the Romantic procedure, the work of art is not subjected to general norms or principles, but is said to judge itself, since the idea of art is generated solely by reflecting on the form of an individual work. Reflection on a form, as discussed above, spontaneously produces a new form out of its reflective act. In this process, the original form becomes the content of a new, higher-order form. The method of reflection on a work of art leads *immediately* – by way of the medial transition between two forms – from the ‘presentational form’ of an individual work of art to the ‘absolute form,’ or *idea* of art.

The crucial feature of Romantic art criticism is that reflection does not take place in a vacuum, but rather within a *medium* that is determined relative to the formal moments of the work itself. This is what the early Romantics mean when they describe their method as reflection *in* a work of art, rather than reflection *on* a work of art. The work is not merely an object, which would remain inert and unchanged by reflection. Rather, it contains within itself the formal determinations that are taken up and continuously heightened in the process of reflection. The medium of art is just this continuum of forms, interpenetrating and coalescing into one another.

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43 As Benjamin writes, most modern authors have misunderstood Friedrich Schlegel by supposing that he made the work of art into a by-product of subjectivity. Benjamin’s argument goes against this tendency by focusing on the ‘objectivity’ of Romantic art criticism. By objectivity, he means that the early Romantics anchored criticism in the ‘work’ of art; rather than taking the rule or principle as a criterion, they found the criterion of criticism in the immanent structure of artworks (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I, 155).

44 Idem, 151.

45 The early Romantic notion of a *medium* of art, as Benjamin explores it in his doctoral dissertation, is echoed in Benjamin’s *Habilitation* thesis in the idea that, “[t]here takes place in every original phenomenon a determination of the form in which an idea will constantly confront the historical world,
The relationship between the individual work and the idea of art stems from a particular notion of form as the *self-limitation* of the absolute, rather than as the form or shape of a given content. The presentational form of an individual work, so understood, is medially connected to the absolute form, or idea of art. This is the presupposition that gives rise to the early Romantic concept of criticism as the *consummation* of a work. Criticism fulfills its task by absolving the relative self-limitation of a work’s presentational form in a higher reflective form, and subsequently dissolving this new form in an even higher stage of reflection, and so on. While the presentational form of an individual work is burdened by contingency, the method of reflection on a form generates the ‘absolute form’ – the idea of art – through a process of intensifying reflection in a work’s form.\(^{47}\) The formal moments of the work are ‘immersed’ in the

\(^{46}\) Benjamin describes the medium of art as follows: “In this medium all the presentational forms hang constantly together, interpenetrate one another, and merge into the unity of the absolute art form, which is identical with the idea of art” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I, 165).

\(^{47}\) In a densely argued passage, Benjamin describes how Romantic art criticism is criticism of a form, but that form is understood by the early Romantics in terms of a relative limitation within the medium of reflection: “The early Romantics identified the limiting nature of form with the limitedness of any finite reflection” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I, 155). Limitation is necessary for the presentation of a work of art, and for its attainment to self-comprehension: “The infinitude of art attains to reflection first of all in such a center, as in a limiting value; that is, it attains to self-comprehension and therewith to comprehension generally. This limit-value is the form of presentation of the individual work” (idem, 156). The limits of presentational form constitute a *relative unity*, and as such, this unity is burdened by *contingency*: “But since every single reflection in this medium can only be an isolated and fortuitous one, the unity of the work vis-à-vis the unity of art can be only a relative unity; the work remains burdened with a moment of contingency” (ibid). This moment of contingency is acknowledged through the rigorous *self-limitation* of reflection. As Benjamin clarifies, criticism rests on the moments of relative closure within the medium of reflection. These are the positive ‘germ-cells’ of reflection. By intensifying reflection in the presentational form of a work, the critic dissolves the original, contingent reflection in a higher stage of reflection, and thus, by means of successive intensifications, represents the relation of the individual work to the idea of art: “Criticism fulfills its task insofar as, with greater closure of reflection and more rigorous form in the work, it drives these the more manifoldly and intensively out of itself, dissolves the original reflection in one higher, and so continues. In this project, criticism depends on the germ cells of reflection,
medium of art, and resolved into universally formal moments. As Benjamin writes, "criticism in its central intention is not judgment but, on the one hand, the completion, consummation, and systematization of the work and, on the other hand, its resolution in the absolute."  

Criticism consummates the individual work of art by connecting it to all other forms within the medium of art. The method presupposes that the form of a work is immediately transformed into a new form, or critically awakened to self-consciousness. The presentational form of the work, conceived of as a relative unity, has its higher self in the absolute form, or the idea of art. The elevation of reflection in a form not only involves the dissolution of lower forms into a higher one, but also the merging of the objective form of a work with the critic's self-consciousness. By intensifying reflection in the work's form, the critic's consciousness is enlarged to the point where it engulfs the work. Ultimately, this merging is possible because both the work and its criticism are determined to be relatively limited selves, which pass over into one another in the absolute, or the idea of art.

The idea of art is identified with the continuum of forms, coalescing into one another, and ultimately converging on the absolute. As I showed in the first section, the medial character of reflection on a form effectively guarantees that it will converge on the absolute, or grasp all of the lower stages of reflection in a simple, fulfilled individual.

\[\text{positively formal moments. It thus represents the relation of the individual work to the idea of art and thereby to the idea of the individual work itself}\] (ibid.).

48 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I, 159.
In accordance with this presupposition, the early Romantics think of the idea of art as an individual that contains entire systems of individuals within itself.49

The intensification of form can only be brought to its highest fulfillment through the successive dissolution of presentational forms, and their sublimation in a single work, containing the continuum of art forms within itself.50 By understanding the idea of art as an infinitized individual, the early Romantics blurred the distinction between the finite and the infinite, or the profane and the absolute, and medially transformed the finite individual work (i.e. its ‘presentational form’) into the ‘absolute work’ of art. The early Romantics obtain the absolute on the sly, by “giving the finite the look of infinity,” to quote Novalis’ formulation.51

§1.3 Form and Self-Limitation: Opening the Windows of the Monad

Benjamin opens his dissertation by restricting the scope of his topic to an examination of two concepts: the idea of art, and individual works of art. But right away, Benjamin indicates that, for the Romantics, the works are dependent on the idea, as its formations:

“[t]he objective grounding of the concept of criticism provided by Friedrich Schlegel has

49 I am paraphrasing Schlegel, who writes: “Are there not individuals that contain within themselves entire systems of individuals?” (F. Schlegel, “Athenaeum Fragments,” no. 242, in Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 166).

50 By characterizing the idea of art as an individual, Schlegel thought that he would thereby attain the highest degree of determination, or the fulfillment of the absolute. But the notion of the highest form as an individual led to the notion of the absolute as a single work in which all forms of art coalesce into one another. This formula led to the paradoxical conclusion that the ‘poetry of poetry’ is in fact prose. Benjamin’s argument shows that the absolute work of art is the novel. The early Romantics took the novel to symbolize the absolute of art, because the novel dispenses with any extrinsic rules of form (i.e. there is no strict meter or rhythm), but is nonetheless an entirely inwardly determined totality, which takes up within itself all the other genres, from the epic to the lyric to the drama, to the poem. The novel surpasses each of these forms by dissolving them within the medium of art.

51 Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 153.
to do only with the objective structure of art as idea, and with its formations, its works.”52 In this concise way, Benjamin announces a certain ambiguity in the very notion of the individual work of art in early Romanticism. On the one hand, the form of art is described as immanent to the work itself, but on the other hand, the early Romantics describe formation as the degree of relative self-limitation of an absolute idea. In its latter meaning, form is an elastic concept that can expand and incorporate ever more connections, just as the absolute context of reflection can conceivably contract itself within an individual work. The formal limitations of the work are merely relative, and are capable of expansion or contraction, depending on the degree to which reflection is intensified in a form.

This dialectic of contraction and expansion allows for a curious oscillation between the objective grounding of criticism in the work itself, and the activation of the absolute self that lies dormant in the work. The objectivity of Romantic art criticism refers to the method of judging a work only according to its own inner structure, without dogmatic appeal to principles of judgment, or subjective criteria of taste. Benjamin explains what he means by the ‘objectivity’ of interpreting a work by drawing a parallel between the Romantic theory of criticism and Kant’s third Critique. If Kant had discovered the subjective autonomy of reflecting judgment by bracketing any interest in the existence of an object and looking only at the free-play of the faculties, the early Romantics seem to have discovered the objective autonomy of the work of art by bracketing any criterion of taste other than the “immanent structure specific to the work itself”:

52 Idem, 118.
For not only did Schlegel’s concept of criticism achieve freedom from heteronomous aesthetic doctrines, but it made this freedom possible in the first place by setting up for artworks a criterion other than the rule – namely, the criterion of an immanent structure specific to the work itself.... With this he secured, from the side of the object or structure, that very autonomy in the domain of art that Kant, in the third Critique, had lent to the power of judgment.53

Securing the autonomy of art from the side of the work demands a total transformation of the activity of judging, for this can no longer consist of subsuming the particular work under heteronomous rules or norms of taste. Instead, the criterion of judgment is to be found within the work of art itself. To judge a work of art, in the Romantic sense, is to raise the inner structure of the work to self-consciousness, such that the work can be said to criticize itself.

As Friedrich Schlegel writes in his review of Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister, the work of art can be said to judge itself on the basis of the ‘indwelling genius’ that is already implicit within the work:

For this book is absolutely new and unique. We can learn to understand it only on its own terms. To judge it according to an idea of genre drawn from custom and belief, accidental experiences and arbitrary demands, is as if a child tried to clutch the stars and the moon in his hand and pack them in his satchel.... Perhaps then we should judge it, and at the same time refrain from judging it; which does not seem to be at all an easy task. Fortunately it turns out to be one of those books which carries its own judgment within it, and spares the critic his labor.... [T]he reader who possesses a true instinct for system, who has a sense of totality or that anticipation of the world in its entirety which makes Wilhelm so interesting, will be aware throughout the work of what we might call its personality and living individuality. And the more deeply he probes, the more

53 Idem, I, 155; my emphasis.
inner connections and relations and the greater intellectual coherence he will discover in it. If there is any book with an indwelling genius, it is this.  

In this excerpt from Schlegel's review, one already sees signs of slippage between an objective interpretation of the work, based on its own terms, and the intensification of self-consciousness in the work, based on the reader's true instinct for the system. The notion of an 'indwelling genius' is invoked, in the first place, in order to establish the absolute uniqueness of the work, which cannot be subsumed under any genre, or criteria of taste. But almost without skipping a beat, Schlegel refers to the reader's 'sense of totality,' which discovers the work's 'intellectual coherence' by raising reflection in it to a greater degree. The work, which, at the beginning of this passage, was so singular and so complete in itself that it excluded the possibility of judgment except insofar as it judges itself, now becomes dependent on criticism to uncover its systematic scope, or its 'inner connections and relations'. What enables a work to be criticized, in the Romantic sense, is its connections to all other forms in the medium of art. These connections are immediately grasped in the absolute subject, and raised to self-consciousness by methodically intensifying reflection in a work.

In Novalis' theory of knowledge of nature, Benjamin finds even more evidence of this oscillation between objectivity and subjectivity. According to Novalis, simply by observing an object, the investigator can awaken the object to self-knowledge. The intensification of consciousness in an object coincides with the awakening of that object

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55 It is possible to compare the knowledge of nature to the criticism of art, since art criticism is knowledge of its object – the work – in the medium of art (Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 143, 149).
to self-consciousness. Benjamin describes this indeterminate play between object and subject – or, more precisely, between a self and an ‘other’ self – as suspending the boundaries between a knowing being and a being-known.56

In suspending the boundary between subject and object, the early Romantics render both as selves, which are connected to each other as forms of consciousness within the higher self-consciousness of the critic. On the one hand, the critic simply observes the work, thereby awakening it to self-consciousness. On the other hand, the critic is the work’s higher author.57 Since, according to the early Romantics, all selves are only relative unities, or self-limitations of the absolute, they can be merged in this way. Knowledge of an other is immediately self-knowledge, and intensifying one’s self-knowledge allows one to participate in the self-knowledge of other beings.58

Because Romantic art criticism absolves the boundaries between the work and its critical reception, Friedrich Schlegel writes that Romantic poetry can “more than any other, hover – on wings of poetic reflection, free from all interests – midway between that which is represented and him who represents it.”59 This hovering movement, activated by the intensification of consciousness in a work, enables the critic to occupy a

56 According to Benjamin, "the intensification of reflection in it [i.e. a 'being-known'] suspends the boundary that separates its being-known by itself from its being-known by another; in the medium of reflection... the thing and the knowing being merge into each other" (idem, I, 146).

57 Thus, Novalis writes: "The true reader must be the extended author. He is the higher tribunal who receives the case already worked up in advance by the lower authorities" (Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 153).

58 As Benjamin writes, “the thing, to the extent that it intensifies reflection within itself and includes other beings in its self-knowledge, radiates its original self-knowledge onto these other beings. In this way, too, the human being can participate in this self-knowledge of other beings" (Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 146; my emphasis).

59 "Athenaeum Fragments" 116, in Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 150.
midpoint between self and other. By hovering, moreover, Romantic criticism
approaches the absolute. Benjamin refers to this hovering as irresolute, because it
does not take a position, but oscillates between self and other.

Benjamin mentions Leibniz’s monads only once in his doctoral dissertation, and it
is in order to definitively point out that the Romantic self is not a monad. Even though
the Romantics conceive of the world as made up of selves without correlative objects,
these selves are not “locked up in themselves.” As Benjamin writes in “The Concept of
Criticism”:

[T]here is a subject, if you will, without a correlative object. In spite of this,
reality does not form an aggregate of monads locked up in themselves and unable
to enter into any real relations with one another. On the contrary, all unities in
reality, except for the absolute self, are only relative unities. They are so far from
being shut up in themselves and free of relations that through the intensification
of their reflection (potentiation, Romanticization) they can incorporate other
beings, other centers of reflection, more and more into their own self-
knowledge.61

The early Romantics ‘open the windows’ of the monad, in other words. The work of art
is neither object nor subject; it is a potential self, which is awakened to self-
consciousness by the intensification of reflection in it. The Romantic self engulfs what is
other to it, incorporating more and more ‘centers of reflection’ into its own sphere of

60 As Benjamin writes, “The grasping of the universal is conceived as ‘hovering’ because it is a matter of
infinitely rising reflection that never settled into an enduring point of view, according to Schlegel’s
indications in the 116th Athenaeum fragment” (idem, 153). In The Origin of German Tragic Drama,
Benjamin refers to this as “[t]he striving on the part of the Romantic aestheticians after a resplendent but
ultimately non-committal knowledge of an absolute” (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 159).

61 Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 145–46.
self-knowledge.\textsuperscript{62} The indifference between self and other, or the opening of windows, means that there is no object of knowledge that cannot be brought within the sphere of one’s higher self.

In contrast to the Romantic ‘centers of reflection,’ Benjamin’s monadic ideas are unapologetically ‘windowless.’ They are locked up in themselves, and they have no immediate access to exteriority. All of a monad’s relations to other monads are indirect, and involve the translation of exteriority into the intensive arrangement of a monad’s own perceptions. Likewise, Benjamin argues that art only has indirect access to the truth from within its own self-enclosed world. The critical task is not to intensify consciousness in a work, and to attain an irresolute knowledge of the absolute thereby. It is, rather, to interpret a work by submersion in its micrological details. The infinity of minute perceptions within a monad is not intentionally generated; it is a pre-reflective totality that exceeds what can be apperceived, or intended by consciousness. To anticipate my subsequent argument, an idea can only be named – not conceptualized – by recollecting this primordial form of perception.

The critical tone of Benjamin’s thesis has often been overlooked by scholars, who see Benjamin’s own method as Romantic in the very sense that he draws out of the early Schlegel.\textsuperscript{63} But Benjamin’s doctoral dissertation shows that the early Romantics erred,

\textsuperscript{62} Because all reality is a formation in the medium of reflection, objects within this medium are essentially ‘centers of reflection,’ or selves. Knowledge of objects is not a relationship to something known, but an intensification of self-knowledge. As Benjamin writes: “It is not only persons who can expand their knowledge through intensified self-knowledge in reflection; so-called natural things can do so as well” (idem, 146).

\textsuperscript{63} For instance, in their introduction to the critical anthology, \textit{Benjamin and Romanticism}, Andrew E. Benjamin and Beatrice Hanssen find that the interpenetration of subject and object, or the dissolution of the “rigid dichotomy” of these terms in the medium of reflection exerted a “lasting fascination” over
first, by hypostatizing the method of criticism within an *individual* idea of art, and second, by conceiving of the idea as an absolute self, in which all forms could be reflectively absorbed. In the next section, I will elaborate Benjamin’s criticisms of the Romantic idea of art. Most of Benjamin’s explicitly critical remarks are oblique, or buried in the footnotes. In order to fully develop Benjamin’s criticisms, it is necessary to extrapolate from the philosophical differences between his monadic theory of ideas and the ‘idea of art’ postulated by the early Romantics.

§2 Benjamin’s Criticisms of the Early Romantic Idea of Art

Benjamin raises three substantive criticisms of the early Romantic idea of art: First, the early Romantics failed to understand the discontinuous finitude of ideas. Second, they mistook the *linguistic* character of ideas by conceiving of the idea as the product of a

Benjamin and, indeed, was mirrored his own work. They write: “Using terms such as ‘experiment’ and ‘perception,’ Novalis’s philosophy of nature revealed a theory of knowledge that successfully dissolved the rigid subject-object correlation. In this near-magical process of reflection, humans and natural objects seemed to interpenetrate one another in Democritean fashion…. As these and similar observations indicate, then, it is not unlikely that Benjamin saw his own encounter with religious experience and a language-based mysticism, influenced by the Cabbala, mirrored in the Early Romantics’ theory of criticism and mystical formalism”; Andrew E. Benjamin and B. Hanssen, “Introduction” to *Benjamin and Romanticism* (eds. A. E. Benjamin and Beatrice Hanssen; New York: Continuum, 2002), 3. This reading misses the critical thrust of Benjamin’s doctoral dissertation. Far from seeing his own philosophical standpoint mirrored in the Romantic *interpenetration* between perceiver and perceived, Benjamin sees this interplay between subjective and objective poles of reflection as an irresolute ‘hovering’ between self and other. Admittedly, the full force of Benjamin’s criticism only becomes apparent when we examine his treatment of the Romantic ‘idea of art’ from the vantage point of his *monadic* theory of ideas.

64 Benjamin writes that the interpretation of the unity of art as an *individual* work gives “a false interpretation to a valuable and valid motive.” The valid motive was to determine the *idea* of art, and to distinguish it from the misunderstanding that it could be generated by abstracting from empirical works. According to Benjamin, F. Schlegel had “wanted to define this concept as an idea in the Platonic sense, as a *proteron te phusei*, as the real ground of all empirical works, and he committed the old error of confusing ‘abstract’ and ‘universal’ when he believed he had to make that ground into an individual. It is only with this in view that Schlegel repeatedly and emphatically designates the unity of art, the continuum of forms itself, as one work” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings* I, 167).
reflecting consciousness. And third, they intensified consciousness in a living work, rather than understanding criticism as the mortification of works. As Benjamin discerns, the Romantic attitude glorifies destruction by taking up each finite form as a transitory moment in the incessant unfolding of the absolute. I will discuss each of these criticisms in turn.

§2.1 Benjamin’s Monadology and the Discontinuous Finitude of Ideas

Benjamin’s remark about the ‘discontinuous finitude’ of ideas attests to the fact that no individual perspective is capable of engulfing the truth without remainder. It is true that each monad concentrates the whole universe within its individual point of view. But each monad remains an isolated totality, and only has indirect access to the universal, which it translates into its own perceptual medium. According to Benjamin, the truth refracts into a harmonious plurality of essences. The refraction, or multiplication of the universe from a plurality of perspectives is a testimony to the transcendence of the truth, which cannot be incorporated, but can only be indirectly represented in the internal arrangement of perceptions within a self-enclosed totality. This consonant multiplicity of essences is modeled on Leibniz’s monadology – a connection that Benjamin makes explicit in the ‘Prologue.’

Whereas Benjamin emphasizes the discontinuity of ideas, the early Romantics approach the idea of art as a continuum of forms that are interconnected within the

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65 Benjamin writes that the representation of an idea must virtually explore the whole range of possible extremes that it contains, and that this gives the idea its monadological structure: “This gives the idea its total scope. And its structure is a monadological one, imposed by totality in contrast to its own inalienable isolation. The idea is a monad” (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 47).
medium of art. The methodical transformation of an individual work into the absolute idea of art is generated by a procedure of intensifying consciousness within the work by reflecting on its form. Although the idea of art is implicit in an individual work, at least in germinal form, the Romantics consider the work to be incomplete in itself, and dependent on the critic to reveal its thoroughgoing interconnection to all other art forms. The idea of art is identical with this continuum of forms, each one passing over into the other. All individual works coalesce in the idea of art, which is conceived of as an engulfing individuality.

Rather than a continuum of interconnected moments that have their unity in the absolute, Benjamin’s monadology multiplies the truth by representing it from an irreducible plurality of points-of-view. Benjamin describes this plurality in terms of the ‘discontinuous finitude’ of ideas. Benjamin’s argument is not simply that there is an irreducible plurality of ideas. The discontinuity of ideas suggests a lack of mediation between the individual ideas. Each idea is like a world apart, which Benjamin conveys by comparing ideas to monads. Monads do not communicate with each other; they remain self-enclosed, driven into the infinite depths of their own perceptual content. No single perspective grasps the universal directly. Each monad translates the whole world into its own unique configuration of perceptions. It expresses the whole only intensively.

By contrast, the theory of ideas promulgated by the early Romantics cultivates the systematic interconnection between individual works, each of which is conceived of as a relative self-limitation of the absolute. The task of criticism is to reflectively absolve the limits of finite, presentational form by medially unfolding its interconnections to all
other art-forms. This medial transformation of forms opens onto the absolute by critically cultivating the totality of interconnections, or a context of forms, by intensifying reflection in a work of art.

Although Benjamin argues for the “discontinuous finitude” of a theory of ideas, he also notes, in his letter to Rang, that monadic ideas are characterized by their “intensive infinity.” It is because Leibniz’s monads contain an overwhelming mass of perceptual detail that Benjamin depicts the monads in terms of their ‘intensive infinity.’ This description does not contradict the ‘discontinuous finitude’ of a theory of ideas, but actually reinforces it by suggesting that every monad contains more than can be brought to consciousness. Apperception is preceded by a perceptual totality that cannot be cognized without remainder. The intensive infinity within a monad should not bring to mind an infinite task, or a regulative idea that can only be approached asymptotically. Rather, it invokes an original fullness, which remains obscure, and can only be partially represented when experience provides an appropriate occasion for its recollection.

Whereas Romantic art criticism infinitizes a work by reflectively overcoming the limits of its presentational form, Benjamin’s monadic ideas contain an original infinity of perceptual detail, which consciousness discovers only as a latecomer, in a process that

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66 As Benjamin writes to Rang, “the ideas are stars, in contrast to the sun of revelation. They do not appear in the daylight of history; they are at work in history only invisibly. They shine only into the night of nature.... In the context of these considerations, where criticism is identical with interpretation and in conflict with all current methods of looking at art, criticism becomes the representation of an idea. Its intensive infinitude characterizes ideas as monads” (Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 389).

67 In light of the obscure totality of ideas, which can only be recollected rather than reflectively generated, Benjamin describes the ideas as Faustian ‘Mothers’ (the fact that they are mothers indicates their primordial character): “They remain obscure so long as phenomena do not declare their faith to them and gather round them” (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 35).
Benjamin likens to *anamnesis*. As the partial recollection of an original perceptual infinitude, thinking always confronts the *loss* of its object. Infinity, according to Benjamin’s use of the term, enters thinking at the very point where consciousness loses its object – where the abyss gapes the widest between a subject’s finite concepts and the object that it attempts to grasp. Benjamin thus transforms the meaning of the Romantic ‘cult of infinity.’

The early Romantics think of the aesthetic idea in terms of the *over-determination* of a concept, or the *enlargement* of the understanding in the face of beauty. This enlargement is an extension won for the understanding by the presentation of the idea of art. But Benjamin points out the paradoxes that assail Romanticism when it comes to the *diminishment*, or self-limitation of reflection. According to Benjamin, the *primordial* form of reflection is especially problematic for the early Romantic theory of ideas. The early Romantic conception of a medial relationship between works and the idea of art presupposes that reflection can both expand and limit itself. But, as Benjamin argues, self-limitation can only be a breaking-off, or *discontinuity*.

Benjamin argues that consciousness can only be intensified and cannot be diminished. This problem is especially apparent in the early Romantic postulate of an *Ur-form* of reflection – that is, the simple, unfulfilled reflection – since, according to the

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68 On this point, my interpretation is similar to that of Fred Rush, although Rush finds a greater convergence between the early Romantic fragment and Leibniz’s monads than my argument supports. Rush writes: “Benjamin’s view might be called ‘retrogressive.’ It is ‘retrogressive’ in the sense that Benjamin thinks that ideas *qua* monads are all there *already* and what we need to do is excavate the names they urge us to recover through what Benjamin, adapting a line of thought present in [Ludwig] Klages, calls ‘Platonic unforgetting’ (*anamnesis*). By ‘retrogressing’ one does not attempt to reconstitute the work, of course; rather one allows the work to show that it is and always was but a ruin, and that it must be so for all time” (Fred Rush, “Jena Romanticism and Benjamin’s Critical Epistemology,” Benjamin and Hanssen, *Benjamin and Romanticism*, 136).
early Romantics, reflection always begins at the midpoint of reflection, or *from within*

the interconnection of all moments of thought. As Benjamin writes:

> In fact, where knowledge is concerned, it can be a question only of a heightening, a potentiation of reflection; a retrogressive moment appears inconceivable both for the thought-scheme of reflection, despite falsely schematizing statements which Schlegel and Novalis made in this connection. Besides, they never posit such a movement in the individual instance. For reflection may very well be intensified if not diminished again; neither a synthesis nor an analysis makes for diminution. Only a breaking off (i.e. discontinuity), never a lessening, or heightened reflection is thinkable.... The theory which was delineated according to circumscribed metaphysical concerns, and out of which several theorems were brought to peculiar fruition in the theory of art, leads in its totality to purely logical, unresolvable contradictions – *above all with the problem of primordial reflection.*

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The failure of early Romanticism to offer an account of primordial reflection provides the philosophical motivation for Benjamin’s appeal to Leibnizian monads. Unlike the Romantic fragment, which is dependent on the totality of relations and *incomplete* in itself, Leibniz’s monad is a *complete* individual concept that has all of its determinations *inwardly*. As Benjamin indicates, the essential problem of the *primordial form* of reflection is bound up with the problem of *anamnesis*:

> ...[T]he object is heightened, completed in knowledge; it can therefore be known only if it is incomplete. This perception belongs together with the problem of learning, of *anamnesis*, of knowledge not yet conscious, and with its mystical ventures at solution, according to which the object at issue is incomplete and indeed inwardly given.

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70 Idem, 193ff.
Benjamin’s argument suggests that the early Romantics have a particular problem with the beginning, or *origins* of reflection. This is indicated in the following quotation from Friedrich Schlegel, which Benjamin cites:

> Every part in this highest product of the human spirit wants at the same time to be the whole, and should this wish be in reality unattainable, as sophists... would make us believe, then the vain and perverted beginning might as well be abandoned completely.\(^7^1\)

The whole should be *attainable*, or else the beginning is vain, and should be abandoned. The early Romantics ensure that Absolute is attainable, since each finite self is medially interconnected to the Absolute subject. There is no conceivable rupture, or breaking-off of reflection. There is nothing that cannot be incorporated into Spirit by the intensification of consciousness in it. The only form of limitation that the early Romantics are willing to countenance is a *relative* self-limitation. But in this relativization of limitation, the early Romantics compromise any real sense of plurality. Each individual can be coalesced into the Absolute by the medial transition between forms of reflection.

Benjamin’s turn to Leibniz’ monads addresses his criticism of the early Romantics: the plurality of monads constitutes a harmonious *discontinuum*. Each monad is *original*. It contains all of its determinations from the moment of its inception, in a *pre-reflective* totality of perceptions. The intensive infinity contained within a monad cannot be generated reflectively, but is capable only of recollection.

\(^7^1\) Idem, 182.
§2.4 Linguistic Thinking: Concept and Name

Benjamin’s second major criticism in the ‘Prologue’ is that the early Romantics failed to understand the linguistic character of ideas, and that in their speculations, truth assumed the character of the reflective consciousness. Benjamin’s formulation of this criticism is potentially misleading, since he is not concerned with the difference between a linguistic medium and a ‘pure’ psychological consciousness. To be more precise, Benjamin points out the difference between two understandings of the linguistic. Whereas the Romantic theory of ideas is ‘absolutely conceptual,’ Benjamin likens ideas to names.72

Arguably, the extent to which the early Romantics influenced Benjamin’s thought is nowhere more apparent than in Benjamin’s contention that thinking is a linguistic medium. The early Romantic theory of ideas was, according to Benjamin, profoundly indifferent to the eidetic. Their development of a non-intuitive immediacy of thinking comes very close to what Benjamin means when he argues that ideas are linguistic in character. At the very least, the early Romantics are the key to understanding what ideas are not – namely, objects of a higher vision.73

72 In another twist of the argument, Benjamin suggests that names are not elements of an original language, if language is understood as ‘communication.’ Rather, names are given in a primordial form of perception. As Benjamin writes: “This determines the manner in which ideas are given. But they are not so much given in a primordial language as in a primordial form of perception, in which words possess their own nobility as names, unimpaired by cognitive meaning.... It is the task of the philosophy to restore, by representation, the primacy of the symbolic character of the word, in which the idea is given self-consciousness, and that is the opposite of all outwardly directed communication” (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 36, my emphasis).

73 In the ‘Prologue,’ Benjamin argues that ideas are not given to intellectual intuition: “The being of ideas simply cannot be conceived of as the object of vision, even intellectual vision” (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 36). Benjamin’s argument strongly suggests the influence of the early Romantics, whose own medial presentation of the idea was not given in vision, but rather in the symbolic depiction of experience as a continuum of forms, or a nexus of knowledge that ties together the most minute detail to
Unlike neo-Platonism, which grounded ideas in a kind of intellectual intuition, or Kantianism, which restricted immediacy to sensible intuition, the early Romantics sought to recover the immediacy of thinking without grounding it in intellectual intuition. As I showed in Section One, the early Romantics looked for the immediacy of thinking in the ‘medial’ character of reflection on a form. The immediacy in question is grounded in the connection between two forms of consciousness. In the fulfilled idea, each form of consciousness is medially interconnected to all the others within a reflectively generated continuum of forms. Benjamin describes this mediality as “linguistic thinking”:

Schlegel’s manner of thought, unlike that of many mystics, is distinguished by its indifference to the eidetic; he appeals neither to intellectual intuitions nor to ecstatic states. Rather (to put it in a summary formula) he searches for a noneidetic intuition of the system, and he finds this in language. Terminology is the sphere in which his thought moves beyond discursivity and demonstrability. For the term, the concept, contained for him the seed of the system; it was, at bottom, nothing other than a preformed system itself. Schlegel’s thinking is absolutely conceptual – that is, it is linguistic thinking.  

The early Romantics conceived of form as ‘absolutely conceptual,’ and therefore, as elastic. It is the concept that provides the early Romantics with the structure of an individuality that can expand and engulf more and more centers of reflection. Benjamin cites Friedrich Schlegel’s Windischmann lectures: “The very notion, in which one can comprehend the world as a unity and in which one can in turn expand into a world,... is what we call ‘concept.’” “Thus it would probably be much better to call a system an

the concept of the divine. Such a representation is, in Benjamin’s terms, linguistic. In the terms of Leibniz and Spinoza, it is expressive.

74 Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 139–40.
The concept can expand its scope by incorporating all lower concepts, until it has engulfed and comprehended the system in its entirety; it is thus the ‘preformed system’ itself. Accordingly, the concept is the vehicle that enables the reflection on a form to subsume all lower forms and retain its unity.

The idea of ‘pre-formation’ suggests the influence of Leibniz on the early Romantics. Yet, the Romantics identify pre-formation with the elasticity of a concept, whereas, according to Leibniz, it suggests the intrinsic denomination of an individual essence. A monad is a simple, intrinsically denominated unity, which contains all of its perceptions from the moment of its inception. A monad does not ‘engulf’ or subsume what it represents, and it does not acquire determinations by taking up others into itself. Leibniz characterizes monadic perception as the expression of multiplicity within a simple unity. The monad expresses difference intensively in the configuration of its perceptions.

The Romantics grasp the formal determinations of a work only by going beyond it. This very structure indicates the ‘absolute conceptuality’ of Romantic criticism. Rather than approaching the truth of art as inseparable from its presentational form, or the fragile and unique configuration of its content, the Romantics conceive of the individual work as a “preformed system,” or an elastic “center of reflection.” The work’s

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76 Leibniz discusses pre-formation in the “Principles of Nature and Grace”: “Modern investigations have taught us, and reason confirms it, that living things whose organs are known to us, that is, plants and animals, do not come from putrefaction or chaos, as the ancients believed, but from preformed seeds, and consequently, from the transformation of preexistent living beings” (*Principles of Nature and Grace*, §6; in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, eds. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber, Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1989, 209).

77 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I, 140.
form is identified with the self-limitation of thinking. On the one hand, whatever determinacy the early Romantics attain for their thinking comes from a work’s content, or contingent positivity. On the other hand, the early Romantics conceive of a work’s ‘presentational form’ as the merely relative self-limitation of reflection. In this dual characterization of a work’s presentational form, the early Romantics want to have their cake and eat it too: they take up the positive determinations of the individual work, without going outside of the self-enclosed medium of reflection. It is because of the limits of reflection that the concept is determined, but these limits are treated as merely relative and elastic. The Romantics do not acknowledge any limits imposed on thought by an other; they even refuse to acknowledge the unconscious self as a limit. However, because the relative self-limitation of reflection lacks content, the Romantics require the contingent work of art, which they take up as a midpoint of reflection.

Benjamin’s argument that ideas are names responds to the absolute conceptuality of Jena Romanticism. Benjamin qualifies what he means by the name in terms of the restoration of a primordial form of perception [Urvernehmen]. This restoration is the opposite of all outwardly directed communication. Unlike the concept, which expands its scope by incorporating other centers of reflection, the name is not comprehensive. It is individuated in terms of its original and intensive perceptions.

70 As Benjamin writes in the ‘Prologue’: “This determines the manner in which ideas are given. But they are not so much given in a primordial language as in a primordial form of perception, in which words possess their own nobility as names, unimpaired by cognitive meaning…. It is the task of the philosopher to restore, by representation, the primacy of the symbolic character of the word, in which the idea is given self-consciousness, and that is the opposite of all outwardly directed communication” (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 36; my emphasis).
Benjamin describes the role of the concept in Romanticism in terms of “liberal self-restriction,” using a fragment of Novalis’ to illustrate the point. Liberal self-restriction can be pictured as “the expression of the citizen in proximity to the king,” which is “an expression of the most reserved fullness of power, an expression of the liveliest stirrings of feeling governed by the most respectful consideration.” The relationship is described in terms of self-limitation, in relation to a higher self. Unlike the liberal self-restriction of the concept, which can expand and contract its power, relative to another power Benjamin describes the name as sovereign. The sovereign represents the body politic, bestowing unity on multiplicity. This multiplicity is not incorporated, but is rather expressed; the individuals who gather around the sovereign each reflect and multiply his glory. The structure of representation is ‘unity in plurality,’ as opposed to the conceptual ‘totality in singularity.’

The name is the invisible focal point for a constellation of conceptual elements. Just as each monad is represented by a ‘well-founded’ configuration of phenomenal elements, without which it would be a dimensionless metaphysical point, so too are names expressed in the determinate constellation of conceptual elements, by which thinking strives to express an idea that it cannot comprehend.

Although for the early Romantics thought is linguistic, in the sense of being ‘absolutely conceptual,’ their understanding of the linguistic nature of thought is opposed to what Benjamin means by the linguistic character of ideas, as names. The

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79 Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 157.

80 In the previous chapter I discussed the political-theological implications of representation at greater length.
extent of the difference between Benjamin and the early Romantics is in evidence in the following fragment from Novalis: “it is an advantage for an idea to have several names.”\(^81\) The purely intentional activity of inventing new names for the individual idea directly opposes Benjamin’s argument that names are original. According to Benjamin, it is a dubious process to invent new names. The names have their own authority, which cannot be bestowed on them by intentionality:

Ideas are displayed, without intention, in the act of naming, and they have to be renewed in philosophical contemplation. In this renewal, the primordial mode of apprehending words is restored. And so, in the course of its history, which has so often been an object of scorn, philosophy is – and rightly so – a struggle for the representation of a limited number of words which always remain the same – a struggle for the representation of ideas.\(^82\)

According to Benjamin, the truth of the name does not rest on a subjective intention, or an act of will, but is intrinsic to the name itself, which directly represents the essence of what it names in its own intensive structure.\(^83\) By contrast, Schlegel emphasizes the intentional act involved in naming. As Benjamin writes, “[r]eflection is the intentional act of the absolute comprehension of the system, and the adequate form of expression for this act is the concept. In this intuition lies the motive for Friedrich Schlegel’s

\(^81\) Idem, 140.

\(^82\) Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 37.

\(^83\) The ‘unintentional’ character of truth can be explained in reference to Leibniz’s philosophy. For Leibniz, the truth of a judgment is directly included in the idea, in the nexus of predicates in a logical subject (an idea), or in the configuration of its content. For Descartes, whom Leibniz was arguing against, judgment rests on the intentional attitude that a subject takes toward the content of a judgment; one either affirms a proposition, or suspends affirmation. This identification of judgment with intentionality, or an act of will, was taken up by Brentano in the nineteenth century and by Husserl in the twentieth. Notably, it was rejected by Benjamin, who argues that truth is an unintentional state, which is immediately evident in the name.
numerous terminological innovations and the deepest reason for the continually new names he devises for the absolute.”

§2.5 Life and Death

Benjamin describes the contrast between his notion of criticism and that of the early Romantics in terms of life and death: “Mortification of the works: not then – as the Romantics have it – awakening of the consciousness in living works, but the settlement of knowledge in dead ones.” The early Romantics awaken consciousness in a living work by intensifying reflection within it. The procedure of intensifying consciousness in a work incorporates whatever is dead or inert (i.e. whatever is without relation) into the living, incessantly unfolding, medium of reflection. The idea of life connotes the incessant transformation of a form, as it is taken up within the medium of reflection. The work’s essence is not a static being, but lies in perpetual becoming, or unfolding of the absolute.

In contrast to this undying life, Benjamin describes art criticism as the mortification of a work of art. Only the destruction of beautiful semblance can reveal the idea, or the truth content of a work of art. Yet, Benjamin approached this destruction differently from the Romantics. If the Romantics idealized destruction, the Baroque allegorists, whom Benjamin takes as the subject of his Habilitation, saw the destruction

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84 Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 140.
85 Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 182.
of the work's beautiful form as the inevitable passing away of natural life and the works
of spirit.\textsuperscript{86}

Benjamin approaches the \textit{ruin} of beautiful form according to a different temporal
index than the early Romantics. While Romantic criticism seeks to ‘awaken
consciousness’ in living works, Benjamin describes the work as a ruin that preserves its
arrangement of knowledge, long after the outward beauty of its form has decayed.\textsuperscript{87}
Benjamin’s distinction marks the difference between two approaches to the relationship
between ideas and history, eternity and transience.

The Romantics equate the \textit{idea} of art with the incessant \textit{transformation} of all
finite works in the medium of reflection. Romantic art criticism is modeled on the idea
of continuous revolution, in which each finite work could be perpetually un-worked and
re-worked. In the footnote in which Benjamin describes the ‘essence’ of Romanticism as
its messianism, he cites one of the “\textit{Athenaeum} Fragments”: “The revolutionary desire to
realize the kingdom of God on earth is the elastic point of progressive civilization and
the inception of modern history. Whatever has no relation to the kingdom of God is

\textsuperscript{86} As Benjamin writes, “Whereas in the [Romantic] symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured
face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with
the \textit{facies hippocratica} of history, as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from
the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather in a
death’s head. And although such a thing lacks all ‘symbolic’ freedom of expression, all classical proportion,
all humanity – nevertheless, this is the form in which man’s subjection to nature is most obvious” (idem,
166).

\textsuperscript{87} In Benjamin’s words: “What has survived [in the \textit{Trauerspiel}] is the extraordinary detail of the
allegorical references: an object of knowledge which has settled in the consciously constructed ruins.
Criticism means the mortification of the works. By their very essence these works confirm this more
readily than any others” (Benjamin, \textit{Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 182).
strictly of secondary importance in this history.” Strictly of secondary importance in this history. Romantic messianism is the absolution of all finite positivity in the incessant revolution of reflection.

Benjamin’s monadic theory of ideas, by contrast, establishes the significance of history as the ‘virtual content’ of a pre-stabilized being: “The tendency of all philosophical contemplation is thus redefined in the old sense: to establish the becoming of phenomena in their being.” History within the monad is “to be inferred from the state of completion and rest, from the essence.”

Benjamin suggests in the ‘Prologue’ that the critical task is to ‘redeem’ the phenomena by representing them under the aspect of eternity. If we can speak of ‘messianism’ here, it would involve the restoration of lost origins, rather than the absolution of finite presence in the incessant activity of reflection. In this vein, Benjamin invokes Adam as the exemplary figure of this restoration: “The task of philosophy is to name the idea, as Adam named nature, in order to overcome the works, which are to be seen as nature returned.” I will discuss the implications of Benjamin’s invocation of Adam in the next chapter.

In conclusion, I have shown that Benjamin’s discussion of art criticism focuses on two formal moments, or two poles of reflection: the ‘work’ of art, and the ‘idea’ of art. What is novel about the early Romantic concept of criticism is that the work itself contains the ‘formal’ moments, which criticism reflectively raises to self-consciousness. The work is not a composite of form and content, in which form is conceived of as the

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88 The “Athenaeum Fragments,” no. 222; cf. Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 185.
89 Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 47.
90 Benjamin, Selected Writings, 359, my emphasis.
shape of a given material content. Rather, the early Romantics think of form as a nexus of formal relations, or the inner structure of a work. The form of a work, so conceived, is criticizable, since the confused totality of its interrelations can be successively clarified and raised to self-consciousness in the absolute subject.  

On this basis, the early Romantics developed the notion of the idea of art, not as an abstraction from empirical works, but as the virtual fulfillment of a work’s inner form. As Benjamin writes, “To be sure, as a virtuality, even an absolute immediacy in the grasping of the context of reflection is thinkable; with this the context would grasp itself in absolute reflection.”  

What is criticizable in a work of art is the “context of reflection” contained within it. That is to say, each work virtually contains the idea, which criticism fulfills by grasping the formal moments in a work and raising these to self-consciousness. 

This formulation is, in some sense, similar to Benjamin’s monadic theory of ideas, as it is set out in the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue.’ For both the early Romantics and for Benjamin, the subject of the idea is not a psychological consciousness. For the Romantics, the idea is fulfilled only when the totality of interconnections is grasped immediately in the absolute subject. For Benjamin, who follows Leibniz on this point, an idea can be represented only when the whole range of possible extremes it contains has

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91 As Benjamin explains, the critical fulfillment of a work should be thought of as an advance in clarity, rather than an addition of content: “...one would have to assume that absolute reflection comprises the maximum of reality, whereas original reflection comprises the minimum of reality, in the sense that, though both enclose all the content of reality and all of thinking, that content is developed to its highest clarity in the former, while remaining undeveloped and unclear in the latter.... As Fichte located the whole of the real in acts of positing – though only by virtue of a telos that he introduced into these – so Schlegel saw, immediately and without holding this in need of a proof, the whole of the real unfolding in its full content, with increasing distinctness up to the highest clarity in the absolute, in the stages of reflection” (Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 130).

92 Ibid., my emphasis.
been virtually explored. According to Leibniz, an idea can only be known adequately – as a thoroughly determined individual – by the divine understanding. A finite consciousness only confusingly perceives the nexus of interrelations in an idea. Nevertheless, the archetype, or divine idea, is virtually included in each ‘complete individual concept.’

Yet the manner in which the Romantics describe the virtual fulfillment of an idea is at odds with Benjamin’s monadic theory of ideas. According to the early Romantics, consciousness expands itself by intensifying reflection on a form. This is a purely intentional attitude. Moreover, reflection occurs within circumscribed thinking, in which a finite consciousness is related to the absolute by a degree, or by the medial transition between forms of consciousness. By contrast, Benjamin argues, following Leibniz, that the totality of what is thinkable is already present within the monad from its inception. The monad is perfect, which means that it cannot be critically consummated by intensifying consciousness in it. Accordingly, the discovery of the idea of art cannot be attained by going beyond the finite form, and connecting it to other forms within a medium. Rather, the idea can only be recollected by immersing oneself in the minute details, or ‘petites perceptions’ of the work. The submersion in detail, far from being the intensification of consciousness in a work, signals the death of intentionality.

According to Benjamin, each work expresses an original idea, and these ideas cannot be coalesced into a medium but remain unbridgeable in their isolation. Ideas are

93 Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 47.

94 Idem, 36.
'windowless' totalities. Rather than conceiving of the idea as a continuum of interpenetrating forms converging on the absolute, the world of ideas refracts into a harmonic discontinuum: “The world of philosophical thought does not, however, evolve out of the continuum of conceptual deductions, but in a description of the world of ideas. To execute this description it is necessary to treat every idea as an original one. For ideas exist in irreducible multiplicity.” Benjamin appropriates Leibniz’s windowless monads to characterize this discontinuum of original ideas.

Beyond working out the epistemological presuppositions of the Romantic concept of art criticism, Benjamin remarks that the study will contribute valuable materials for determining the historical essence of early Romanticism, an essence that he locates in their concept of messianism. The task of thinking for the early Romantics is intertwined with the ‘revolutionary desire to bring about the kingdom of God on earth.’ The traces of this revolutionary, messianic desire are evident in the method of criticism itself, which both purifies the contingent work of all its ‘dead’ material by awakening the spiritual act of reflection within it, and on the other hand, overcomes the dualism between the contingent and the absolute, according to the theoretical presupposition that the singular work is a self-limitation of the idea, which contracts itself in the moment of an individual work.

The early Romantics overcome the difference between the finite and the infinite by rethinking both terms: the fragment, or finite work, is not an extensive part, or atom of a larger whole; it is rather the contraction, or self-limitation, of the infinite within a form. The infinite, by extension, is not a recursive but ultimately empty progress (an

95 Idem, 43.
endless task); it is rather full of content: it is a synthesis between the momentary and the totality of time, the virtual containment of all stages of reflection, from the lowest to the highest degree, enfolded within the singular work. It is the method of intensification within a medium of reflection that provides the theoretical basis for the Romantics to ‘present’ the absolute within the momentary.\(^96\) Although Benjamin restricts his dissertation primarily within the bounds of the epistemological presuppositions of early Romanticism, it is clear that he has their messianism within his sights, and that his critique of the early Romantic idea of art opens onto the broader question of their ‘irresolute grasping of the absolute’, their illusory and premature announcement of the fulfillment of time.

The early Romantics profane the absolute by bringing it within the circumscribed medium of reflection. Moreover, what they present as the self-limitation, or descent, of the absolute surreptitiously obtains its content from the contingent, ‘presentational form’ of individual works. Rather than attaining a maximum degree of determination and content within idea, the early Romantics ultimately do away with all materiality, which, by definition, is independent of thought. In the end, they present only the ‘intensification of consciousness’ in a form.

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\(^96\) The significance of the ‘moment’ in Romantic thought is reflected in the following quotation from Charlotte Pingoud, which Benjamin cites in his dissertation: “Roundly denied is an ideal of human fulfillment that would be realized in infinity; rather, what was demanded was the ‘kingdom of God’ at this very moment – in time and on earth…. Fulfillment at every point of existence, realized ideal on every level of life: this is the categorical imperative out of which Schlegel’s new religion emerges” (Charlotte Pingoud, *Grundlinien der ästhetischen Doktrin Fr. Schlegels*, Stuttgart: Greiner & Pfeiffer, 1914, 52ff; my emphasis).
Four: Benjamin, Leibniz, and the Language of Adam

[T]he excellence of God's works can be recognized by considering them in themselves....This is all the more true, since it is by considering his works that we can discover the creator. His works must carry his mark in themselves.¹

Benjamin appeals to an Adamic theory of language in the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue,’ as well as in his 1916 essay ‘On Language as Such and the Language of Man.’² These references have typically been interpreted as evidence of his allegiance to Jewish and Kabbalistic sources.³ While this genealogy is not patently false, it is possible to establish Benjamin’s theory of language on a broader base by showing its fundamental coherence with his appropriation of Leibniz’s monadology for a theory of ideas. The connection that Benjamin draws between ideas, names, and monads reveals the importance of


³ For instance, Eric Jacobson claims that Benjamin’s linguistic Adamicism is proof of the centrality of Jewish themes in his thought. Jacobson writes: “Judaism was at the center of his [Benjamin’s] speculation, his subject being the principle dimension of the Torah: the story of creation.... For Benjamin the link to the language of creation was not simply a halfhearted attempt to work theoretically with Judaic material but also an attempt to find a basis for his own philosophy – a philosophy in itself as much as it was a philosophy of Judaism” (Eric Jacobson, Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, 86). I do not argue that Jewish sources played no role in Benjamin’s thinking on language, but that it is historically and philosophically mistaken to limit linguistic Adamicism to Jewish thought; indeed, it was one of the dominant frameworks for thinking about language in the seventeenth century. In seventeenth-century German thought, Jacob Böhme was the main exponent of linguistic Adamicism, and, as I will argue, Leibniz adopted certain key features of linguistic Adamicism in his philosophy of language and in his theory of innate ideas. Benjamin’s monadic theory of ideas is thus historically and conceptually linked to an Adamic theory of language.
expressionism in his early work (i.e. from the 1916 essay on ‘Language as Such’ to *The Origin of German Trauerspiel*).

In the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue,’ Benjamin argues that a theory of ideas should properly be understood as linguistic in character.\(^4\) The first part of this chapter makes sense of this claim, by showing the connections between Benjamin’s monadic theory of ideas and his linguistic Adamicism, as it is set out in ‘On Language as Such’ (§1).

The second part of this chapter is devoted to Benjamin’s discussion of a ‘Baroque’ philosophy of language in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. I argue that Baroque allegory remains within the framework of an Adamic language, and that it is the linguistic expression of *fallen* nature. The Baroque allegorist reads profane things as ciphers in the script of creation. The pictorial language of allegory keeps faith with mute expression of things, which communicate in a ‘material community,’ or constellation (§2).

Finally, I show that what Benjamin means by the Baroque philosophy of language was crystallized in Leibniz’s approach to language. Leibniz’s ‘universal characteristic’ is a figurative language, which represents the order of ideas by combining elements into a complex character. On the other hand, in the *New Essays*, Leibniz describes a creaturely language of onomatopoetic noises, resembling the animal voice.\(^5\) Language, divided into the sensualistic elements of graphic character and sound, is re-configured to express the higher unity of ideas, rather than conventionally meaningful words (§3).

\(^4\) Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 38.

§1 Adam’s Names, and the Creaturely Language of Art

Linguistic Adamicism refers to the interpretation of Genesis chapters 1–2 in terms of a natural theology of language.⁶ According to the patristic interpretation of Genesis, Adam’s names express the essences of creatures, since Adam is made ‘in the image’ of God, and shares in the power of God’s creative word.⁷ Adam’s names are not creative, as is the word of God, but they endow Adam with perfect knowledge of nature. To name the creatures is to know them according to their essences: “whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.”⁸ The power of knowledge is also that of mastery; Adam is made sovereign over all the other creatures.⁹ Although the other

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⁶ The Biblical passages that received particular attention in seventeenth-century linguistic Adamicism were Genesis 1:27 and 2:19-20: “God created man in His own image” and “whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.” Added to this is the opening verse of Genesis, in the beginning God said “Let there be light” (1:3), and the description of the word being made into flesh from the Gospel of John (“in the beginning was the word,” “and the word was made flesh,” verses 1.1 and 14).


⁸ Genesis 2.19 (New Revised Standard Version). Leibniz makes the similar argument that minds are endowed with a weak power that resembles the creative power of God on a smaller scale. The mind is, accordingly, “not only a mirror of the universe of created things, but also an image of divinity. The mind not only has a perception of God’s works, but it is even capable of producing something that resembles them, although on a small scale. For to say nothing of the wonders of dreams, in which we effortlessly (but also involuntarily) invent things which we would have to ponder long to come upon when awake, our soul is also like an architect in its voluntary actions; and in discovering the sciences according to which God has regulated things (by weight, measure, number, etc.), it imitates in its realm and in the small world in which it is allowed to work, what God does in the large world” (Principles of Nature and Grace, §14; in Leibniz, Philosophical Essays, 211–12).

⁹ Benjamin writes: “All nature, insofar as it communicates itself, communicates itself in language, and so finally in man. Hence, he is the lord of nature and can give names to things.” (Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 65)
creatures are not endowed with speech, they are receptive to being named, and this receptivity is the residue of the divine word in created nature.10

Jacob Böhme’s adaptation of this tradition set the tone for seventeenth-century natural language philosophy, and had a notable impact on Leibniz as well as on Benjamin.11 According to Böhme, created nature was itself linguistic, since things bear the imprint, or signature, of the divine creator. Adam’s names were a second order of language, which translated the mute language of things into an acoustic medium.12

10 Benjamin describes the receptivity of things to being named as the ‘communicating muteness’ of things toward the ‘word-language’ of man; see Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 70. Benjamin gives various metaphors for this communicating muteness, which is indicative of the linguistic communion between God’s creative word and the mute communication of creatures. First, taking up the Stoic tradition of the logos spermatikos, Benjamin describes the word of God as ‘fertilizing’ things: thus, the residue of the word in things is “the germ of the cognizing name”; idem I, 69–70. Second, following Paracelsus and Jacob Böhme, Benjamin describes the nameability of things in terms of the sign (signature) in created things: “God gives each beast in turn a sign, whereupon they step before man to be named. In an almost sublime way, the linguistic community of mute creation with God is thus conveyed in the image of the sign” (idem, 70).

11 Jacob Böhme was the most influential of linguistic Adamicists in the seventeenth century. It is clear that Benjamin read Böhme, since citations to Böhme are scattered throughout The Origin of German Tragic Drama, 201–3, 204–5. As Hans Aarsleff writes: “In the seventeenth century it was especially the German mystic Jacob Boehme who carried the torch for Adam”; see Hans Aarsleff, “The Rise and Decline of Adam and his Ursprache in Seventeenth-Century Thought,” in The Language of Adam / Die Sprache Adams (ed. Allison Pierce Coudert; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, Wolfenbütteler Forschungen, Band 84, 1999), 277–95, esp. 282. For more on the connection between Leibniz and Jacob Boehme on the topic of an Adamic language, or Natursprache, see Susanne Edel, “Ideenmetaphysik und Buchstabenmystik: Leibniz, Böhme und die prophetische Kabbala”; in The Language of Adam / Die Sprache Adams, 171–91.

12 Böhme described a language of nature itself, or a Natursprache, which secularized the theological interpretation of Genesis within the sphere of profane creation. Böhme took up Paracelsus’ notion of divine signatures and synthesized it with an interpretation of Genesis. According to Paracelsus, the inner, animating spirit of things could be read from the traces visible in their external texture: “It is the exterior thing alone that gives knowledge of the interior; otherwise no inner thing could be known” (Theophrast von Hohenheim Paracelsus, Paragranum (1529–30); in idem, Samtliche Werke, ed. Karl Sudhoff, Munich: Otto Wilhelm Barth, 1924, VIII, 97, cf., James J. Bono, The Word of God and the Languages of Man: Interpreting Nature in Early Modern Science and Medicine, vol. 1, Ficino to Descartes, Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1995, 134). Böhme argued that the silent language of nature, evident in its material texture, or signature, was translated into the medium of sound in Adam’s names. Olga Pombo describes the naming language of Adam as a transposition of the Natursprache to a higher power: “Hence, the Adamic language constitutes a second level, a human transposition (into the domain of the audible) of the Language of Nature, seen as an immediate and mute signification of the real” (Olga Pombo, Leibniz and the Problem of a Universal Language, Münster, Nodus Publikationen: 1987, 44–46).
Benjamin describes it in ‘On Language as Such,’ names can thus be understood as the ‘language of language.’

Adam’s language upholds the ideal of a perfectly adequate system of nomenclature. Because of the adequacy of Adam’s language, it is also unique. The naturalness and universality of Adam’s language are features of a one-to-one correspondence between name and thing. Words do not derive their meaning from a system, or in relation to other words, but from their direct representation of individual essences. Because the name is an adequate expression of the essence of a thing, perfect knowledge of the name would also endow one with knowledge of the thing itself. The name could thus be regarded as an archetype.

Linguistic Adamicism plays a crucial role in Benjamin’s theory of ideas. In the first place, as I have shown, there is a conceptual connection between Adam’s names and the essences of things. But Benjamin has specific reasons for defining ideas as names, 

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13 Benjamin writes: “God’s creation is completed when things receive their names from man, from whom in name language alone speaks. Man can call name the language of language (if the genitive refers to the relationship not of a means but of a medium), and in this sense certainly, because he speaks in names, man is the speaker of language, and for this very reason, its only speaker. In terming man the speaker (which, however, according to the Bible, for example, clearly means the name giver: ‘As man should name all kinds of living creatures, so should they be called’), many languages imply this metaphysical truth” (Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 65).

14 Renaissance Neo-Platonism synthesized the Platonic theory of ideas with a Judeo-Christian theory of divine names. According to Ficino, God instantiates the divine ideas in nature by the creative act of his word. The divine word – like Plato’s sun – is a source of unity, and each of the divine names (i.e., the essences of individual things) derive their power and unity from the word, as sunbeams derive their unity from the sun: “Gods names are like images or sunbeams of God Himself, penetrating through the heavenly beings, the heroes, the souls of men. However, whoever admires the sun venerates the sun’s light too. So you must worship both God and God’s sunbeams, the powers, the images lying concealed in the significance of names” (Marsilio Ficino, The Philebus Commentary, trans. Michael J. B. Allen; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975, 138–41, c.f. Bono, The Word of God and the Languages of Man, 31). Because divine names immediately represent the essences of things, knowledge of the true names of things is power. Benjamin alludes to the neo-Platonic philosophy of language when he refers to language’s “magic” (Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 64). For more on Ficino’s philosophy of language, see James J. Bono, The Word of God and the Languages of Man.
rather than in terms of the Platonic forms. According to Neo-Platonism, the forms are *ineffable*, and are accessible only to a higher form of vision, or intellectual intuition. By contrast, Adam’s names are the perfect expression of an individual essence.¹⁵ By articulating his theory of ideas within the framework of linguistic Adamicism, Benjamin argues that ideas are not devoid of linguistic determination; not only are they *in* language, but ideas are its most fulfilled form of expression.

In the second place, Benjamin developed his theory of ideas in the context of art criticism. Linguistic Adamicism supports Benjamin’s argument that works of art communicate their content in a *material language* which is not reducible to concepts. Artworks express an idea, or their truth-content, in a ‘material community’ of concrete detail.¹⁶ The implications of this point for Benjamin’s theory of art criticism are twofold: First, if works of art are (linguistic) expressions, then the interpretation of works is an act of *translation* from the material language of the work into the naming language of the interpreter. In the second place, the criticism of art should not *judge* works, but should rather *name* them, as Adam named nature.¹⁷ The task of art criticism is to give voice to

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¹⁵ Benjamin distinguishes his Adamic theory of ideas from Neo-Platonism: “The weakness which esotericism invariably imparts to philosophy is nowhere more overwhelmingly apparent than in that approach required of the adepts of all the theories of Neo-Platonic paganism. The being of ideas simply cannot be conceived of as the object of vision, even intellectual vision. For even in its most paradoxical periphrasis, as *intellectus archetypus*, vision does not enter into the form of existence which is peculiar to truth, which is devoid of all intention, and certainly does not itself appear as intention” (Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 35).

¹⁶ Benjamin describes the natural language of things as a feature of their ‘material community.’ In ‘On Language as Such,’ Benjamin writes, “We are concerned here with nameless, non-acoustic languages, languages issuing from matter; here we should recall the material community of things in their communication. Moreover, the communication of things is certainly communal in a way that grasps the world as such as an undivided whole” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, I, 73).

¹⁷ In this connection, Benjamin’s letter to Rang (1923) provides important evidence. In the letter, Benjamin refers to works of art as belonging to the ‘taciturn’ (mute) world of nature, as opposed to the revealed world of human history: “The same forces that become explosively and extensively temporal in
the work’s mute expression by representing the configuration of its material content in an idea.

§1.1 Ideas and Names

As I showed in Chapter Two, Benjamin’s Leibnizian theory of ideas anticipates his linguistic Adamicism. I will briefly review what Leibniz means by ideas, in order to bring out the conceptual connections between Benjamin’s ‘monadic’ ideas and his ‘Adamic’ philosophy of language.

Ideas, for Leibniz, are not subjective notions; they are the complete expression of an individual essence. In Leibniz’s terms, ideas express our union with God, much like Adam’s names express the union of human knowledge and God’s creative word.\(^{18}\) Although the finite human understanding is unable to attain the absolute perfection of divine ideas, our ideas still maintain the same logical relationships as God’s ideas.\(^{19}\) In Leibniz’s terms, “all ideas of the intellect have their *archetypes* in the eternal possibility of things," or in the divine understanding.\(^{20}\) Furthermore, our ideas *represent* the order of the world and the archetypes of the divine understanding insofar as they adequately *express* the intensive totality of their contents.\(^{21}\) In ‘On Language as Such,’ Benjamin

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\(^{19}\) Leibniz, *New Essays*, 397.

\(^{20}\) Idem, 392.

\(^{21}\) As Leibniz writes, an idea is “an immediate inner object, and... this object expresses the nature or qualities of things,” idem, 109.
declares this to be the essential law of language, which stipulates that, “to express oneself and to address everything else amounts to the same thing.”  

According to Leibniz, the real definition of an essence is nothing less than a complete representation of an individual substance. This means that the truth of an idea is given in the configuration of its content, or in the interconnection of predicates in a ‘complete individual concept.’ In the ‘Discourse on Metaphysics,’ Leibniz appeals to the first chapter of Genesis to clarify his argument that the truth can be recognized in the marks inherent in individual substances:

Thus I am far removed from the opinion of those who maintain that there are no rules of goodness and perfection in the nature of things or in the ideas God has of them and who say that the works of God are good solely for the formal reason that God has made them. For if this were so, God knowing that he is their author, would not have had to consider them afterwards and find them good, as is testified by the Sacred Scriptures – which seems to have used such anthropomorphic expressions only to make us understand that the excellence of God’s works can be recognized by considering them in themselves, even when we do not reflect on this empty external denomination which relates them to their cause. This is all the more true, since it is by considering his works that we can discover the creator. His works must therefore carry his mark in themselves.

For Leibniz, God’s understanding, rather than his will, is the source of truth. The eternal ideas are imprinted on created substances, in the ‘marks’ within their essences. The full

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23 As Leibniz argues in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, an adequate understanding of the nexus of predicates and their interconnection within a logical subject is the ‘real definition’ of its essence: “when the property makes known the possibility of a thing, it constitutes a real definition. As long as we have only a nominal definition, we cannot be certain of the consequences we derive, for if it concealed some contradiction or impossibility, the opposite conclusions could be derived from it. That is why truths... are not arbitrary, as some new philosophers have believed” (Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, §24; in idem, *Philosophical Essays*, 57).

significance of this point for Benjamin’s argument becomes clear when we contrast Leibniz’s understanding of truth with Descartes’. For Descartes, whose position Leibniz rejected because it sanctioned arbitrariness in the order of things, truth rests on the \textit{intentional attitude} that a subject takes toward the content of a judgment. One either affirms a proposition, or suspends affirmation, which means that truth rests on an act of will. Benjamin argues, in accordance with Leibniz, that truth is not an intentional attitude toward reality, but is immediately evident in the essence of things: “Truth is not an intent which realizes itself in empirical reality; it is the power which determines the essence of this empirical reality. The state of being, beyond all phenomenality, to which alone this power belongs, is that of the name.”\textsuperscript{25}

Benjamin argues in the ‘Prologue’ that the task of philosophy is the representation of ideas.\textsuperscript{26} By ideas, he means the \textit{essences} of things. The truth of ideas is not bestowed on them intentionally; rather truth is immanent in ideas as their expression, or ‘\textit{self-representation}’\textsuperscript{27}. To represent an idea adequately is to name it.\textsuperscript{28}

\begin{itemize}
  \item[25] Benjamin, \textit{Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 36.
  \item[26] Idem, 29.
  \item[27] Idem, 30.
  \item[28] Because individuation is infinite, according to Leibniz, only God can know things as individuals, or by their proper names. Human languages do not pick out individual essences, but are at most, \textit{confused} concepts. Benjamin expresses a similar point, albeit within the narrative context of the Fall. Benjamin writes that, for fallen humanity, “[t]hings have no proper names except in God” (Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings}, I, 73). Leibniz writes in the \textit{New Essays}: “You see, paradoxical as it may seem, it is impossible for us to know individuals or to find any way of precisely determining the individuality of any thing except by keeping hold of the thing itself…. The most important point in this is that individuality involves infinity, and only someone who is capable of grasping the infinite could know the principle of individuation of a given thing” (Leibniz, \textit{New Essays}, III. iii, 289–90). Despite the inability of human languages to name individuals, Leibniz thinks it is possible to construct a universal language, in which characters would be assigned to each simple idea, and in their configuration, these would express complex thoughts. I will discuss Leibniz’s philosophy of language further in section three of this chapter.
\end{itemize}
But ideas are "not so much given in a primordial language as in a primordial form of perception." Accordingly, the adequate expression of an idea involves representing the virtual totality of perceptions contained in a monad. In the terms of Benjamin's essay 'On Language as Such,' to which I will now turn, Benjamin describes this perceptual totality as the 'material community' in which a thing expresses the 'contents of mind,' or its idea.

Benjamin's argument that ideas are names is presaged in his essay 'On Language as Such.' The vocabulary in the 1916 essay is different from that of the 'Prologue': instead of 'idea' and 'name,' Benjamin uses the terms 'mental being' [geistige Wesen] and 'linguistic being' [sprachliche Wesen]. Nevertheless, Benjamin considered his theory of ideas in the 'Prologue' to be a second stage of his argument in 'On Language as Such.'

§1.2 The Medium of Language

In the dense opening section of 'On Language as Such,' Benjamin argues that all things, animate and inanimate, have a language, and that this language is the tendency of all things to express the contents of mind. The argument that all things have a tendency to express mental contents anticipates Benjamin's subsequent appeal to Leibniz. For

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29 Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 36.

30 Benjamin wrote to Scholem, describing the 'Prologue' as, "unmitigated chutzpah – that is to say, neither more not less than the prolegomena to epistemology, a kind of second stage of my early work on language (I don't know whether it is any better), with which you are familiar, dressed up as a theory of ideas" (February 19, 1925), in Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940* (eds. Gershom G. Scholem, and Theodor W. Adorno; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 261.

Leibniz, all simple substances are structured as minds.\textsuperscript{32} Benjamin does not restrict what he means by the ‘contents of mind’ and the ‘mental being’ of things to determinations of consciousness; the mental being of a thing is the complete expression of its essence.

To begin, Benjamin disambiguates the ‘mental being’ of a thing from its ‘linguistic being.’\textsuperscript{33} Subsequently, however, Benjamin argues that the mental being of a thing is identical to its linguistic being, and that this identity is not a tautology, but consists in the unfolding of the implications contained in an essence, by degree of clarity, within a linguistic medium.\textsuperscript{34}

Benjamin’s initial distinction between the mental being of a thing and its linguistic being conforms to Aristotelian logic: according to Aristotle, there is a distinction between a subject and what can be ‘said of’ it. The subject (or ‘mental being’) receives predicates, but cannot be predicated of anything else. In the ‘Discourse on Metaphysics,’ Leibniz supplements this ‘nominal’ definition of a substance with a ‘real’ definition: all true predication has some basis in the nature of things, and this means that the perfect understanding of a substance is identical with its adequate expression,

\textsuperscript{32} According to Leibniz, all substances are simple individuals, which have no extension, and are differentiated only by their perceptions. Unlike Descartes, Leibniz does not restrict perception to conscious beings. See, for example, Leibniz, \textit{Principles of Nature and Grace}, §4, in idem, \textit{Philosophical Essays}.

\textsuperscript{33} Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings}, I, 63.

\textsuperscript{34} The reason that Benjamin does not begin with this identity is because it would be an insoluble paradox at the outset, but, if it is placed at the heart of linguistic theory, it will appear as a solution. Benjamin writes: “The distinction between a mental entity and the linguistic entity... seems so unquestionable that it is rather, the frequently asserted identity between mental and linguistic being that constitutes a deep and incomprehensible paradox, the expression of which is found in the ambiguity of the word ‘logos.’ Nevertheless, this paradox has a place, as a solution, at the center of linguistic theory, but remains a paradox, and insoluble, if placed at the beginning”; ibid.
or the representation of the totality of predicates, and their interconnection within a logical subject ('in-esse').

In Benjamin's terms, the mental entity of a thing communicates itself in language: “This ‘itself’ is a mental entity.” The linguistic being of a thing, on the other hand, is its capacity for communication, or its communicability. Benjamin now re-defines the terms ‘mental being’ and ‘linguistic being’ as that which communicates itself (by naming), and that which is communicable (in name). Although these two spheres can be distinguished, they do not designate a subjective means of communication and an extra-linguistic content: both are in the medium of language. Benjamin writes: “There is no such thing as a content of language; as communication, language communicates a mental entity – something communicable per se.”

Benjamin draws the inference, “already familiar to Scholasticism,” that all of reality can be understood as a linguistic medium, ranging by degree from the most obscure to the most adequate expression of the “contents of mind.” The argument that language is a medium resonates with Benjamin's later account of the early romantic

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35 In a passage from the 'Discourse on Metaphysics,' which I discussed at greater length in Chapter Two, Leibniz defines an individual substance in terms of the logical principle of ‘in-esse’: “Thus the subject term must always contain the predicate term, so that one who understands perfectly the notion of the subject would also know that the predicate belongs to it. Since this is so, we can say that the nature of an individual substance or of a complete being is to have a notion so complete that it is sufficient to contain and to allow us to deduce from it all the predicates of the subject to which this notion is attributed. An accident, on the other hand, is a being whose notion does not include everything that can be attributed to the subject to which the notion is attributed” (Leibniz, Discourse on Metaphysics, §8; in idem, Philosophical Essays, 41).

36 Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 63.

37 Idem, 64.

38 Idem, 66.

39 Ibid.
medium of reflection. Just as the early Romantics characterized reflection as medial in order to attain the immediacy and infinity of thought, so too is the medium of language characterized by its immediacy and its infinity. Communication in the medium of language is immediate because what is communicated is in the medium of language itself. As Benjamin writes: “all language communicates itself in itself; it is in the purest sense the ‘medium’ of the communication.” To communicate in this medium means to raise what is indistinct and obscure to a higher degree of clarity and distinction. The infinity of language is a feature of this qualitative increase in adequacy, or exactitude. Thus, as Benjamin writes, “all language contains its own incommensurable, uniquely constituted infinity. Its linguistic being, not its verbal contents, defines its frontier.”

According to Benjamin’s formulation, the medium of language is gradated by degrees of density. This characterization prepares the way for Benjamin’s argument that things communicate in a ‘dense’ material language. Human beings, on the other hand, communicate in the ‘spiritual’ medium of sound. Each language can be medially transposed, or translated, into a higher stage of language. This means that the material

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40 Idem, 64.

41 Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 64.

42 Ibid.

43 Benjamin writes: “The differences between languages are those of media that are distinguished as it were by their density – that is, gradually; and this with regard to the density both of the communicating (naming) and of the communicable (name) aspects of communication” (Idem, 66).

44 The different degrees of density reflect the contrast between the earth that Adam is made out of and the breath that God breathes into him: “The incomparable feature of human language is that its magical community with things is immaterial and purely mental, and the symbol of this is sound. The Bible expresses this symbolic fact when it says that God breathes his breath into man: this is at once life and mind and language.” In contrast to the immaterial language of human beings, the language of things communicates only through a material community (Idem, 67; my emphasis).
language of things can be translated into a verbal language: “By the fact that... languages relate to one another as do media of varying densities, the translatability of languages into one another is established. Translation is removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations.”

The language of things is “denied the pure formal principle of language – namely sound.” Nevertheless, the mute language of things is expressed in the community of their perceptions. As Benjamin writes, things “communicate to one another only through a more or less material community”; this language is “communal” because it “grasps the world as such as an undivided whole.” I suggest that what Benjamin means by the expressive language of things is equivalent to Leibnizian perception, which is not an attribute of consciousness, but applies to all created substances, including ’bare’ monads, or inanimate things. Things express themselves and their relationship to the world in the community of their perceptions.

By naming things, human language translates the material communication of things into sounds. This explains the uniqueness of human language, which is the only language that speaks in words, in contrast to the fulfilled silence of God’s ideas and the mute community of things. Things communicate themselves to Adam by being named, and in naming things, the language of Adam communicates itself to God.

45 Benjamin, Selected Writings, I. 70.
46 Idem, 67.
47 Idem, 67, 73.
48 Benjamin writes: “To whom does the lamp communicate itself? The mountain? The fox? ... the answer is: to man. This is not anthropomorphism. The truth of this answer is shown in human language and perhaps also in art. Furthermore, if the lamp and the mountain and the fox did not communicate
On the basis of the foregoing theoretical presuppositions, Benjamin argues that there is a non-arbitrary, intrinsic relationship between names and what they designate. Language does not simply classify ‘contents’ that are external to it. If things themselves have language, or express their inner being in language, then the language that we use to describe things is not just a system of conventional signs; it is rather the expression of the essential content of things. Language translates the material relationships inherent in the order of nature into the spiritual medium of sound.

Benjamin sets aside two alternative theories of language, both of which he deems superficial. He refers to the first as the ‘bourgeois’ theory of language, in which language is merely the means for communicating information. According to the bourgeois theory, there is no intrinsic and necessary connection between language and things, but language is only an arbitrary system of signs. Benjamin refers to the second superficial theory as the ‘mystical’ theory of language, according to which an essence is simply identical to the word. According to Benjamin, an essence is not simply identical with language; the expression of identity between things and language involves a process of continuous translation, or the medial transformation from the mute, and therefore imperfect, language of things into the naming language of human beings. The naming language of human beings is also less perfect than God’s immediately creative word, and this explains the need to translate between a multiplicity of human languages.

themselves to man, how should he be able to name them? And he names them; he communicates himself by naming them. To whom does he communicate himself?” (Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 64). The answer: ”...[I]n the name, the mental being of man communicates itself to God” (Idem, 65).

49 Ibid.

50 Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 69.
The translation between human languages points to the original perfection of God’s word. As Benjamin writes, “the harmony originally created by those spoken languages was of incomparably greater power than any of the individual languages could possibly possess.”

§1.3 Art and the Material Language of Creatures

Benjamin hints at the implications of an Adamic theory of language for the philosophy of religion and the philosophy of art. In this connection, he suggests a linguistic interpretation of the concepts of revelation and creation. The philosophy of religion overlaps with the philosophy of language when it asks about the relationship between the inexpressible and the expressible. Mysticism typically holds that the highest being is ineffable. According to Benjamin’s paraphrase of the mystical position, “the deeper (that is, the more existent and real) the mind, the more it is inexpressible and unexpressed.”

Benjamin’s argument that mental being is identical with linguistic being implies, on the contrary, that the most real being is also the most expressible being:

51 Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 273; my emphasis. As Benjamin argues, the multiplicity of languages, and the need for translation, is not the result of the confusion that followed the destruction of the tower of Babel, but is already anticipated in the differentiation of linguistic media, according to the different degrees of their perfection. Thus, Benjamin writes: “Since the unspoken word in the existence of things falls infinitely short of the naming word in the knowledge of man, and since the latter in turn must fall short of the creative word of God, there is a reason for the multiplicity of languages. The language of things can pass into the language of knowledge and name only through translation – so many translations, so many languages – once man has fallen from the paradisiacal state that knew only one language. (According to the Bible this consequence of the expulsion from Paradise admittedly came about only later.)” (Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 71). In the fragment ‘Language and Logic’ (1920–21), Benjamin goes even further in denouncing the simple, immediate identity of human language and the Word. He argues that the mystical theory of language is on false grounds if it attributes the multiplicity of languages to the dissolution of a primordial and unique language. Rather, the multiplicity of languages is an expression of the plurality of essences (idem 273).

52 Idem, 66–67.
It is consistent with the equation proposed above to make the relation between mind and language thoroughly unambiguous, so that the expression that is linguistically most existent (that is, most fixed) is linguistically the most rounded and definitive; in a word, the most expressed is at the same time the purely mental. This, however, is precisely what is meant by the concept of revelation. The highest mental region of religion is (in the concept of revelation) at the same time the only one that does not know the inexpressible.\textsuperscript{53}

Revelation, according to Benjamin, means the identity of the highest mental being and its absolute expression. The language in which this identity is expressed rests solely on the name. In the name alone, language communicates \textit{without residue}.\textsuperscript{54} Revelation has its linguistic meaning in the \textit{address}, in which human beings communicate themselves to God in the act of naming. According to Benjamin, “in this [address]... notice is given that only the highest mental being, as it appears in religion, rests solely on man and on the language in him.”\textsuperscript{55}

Unlike revelation, which rests on a purely spiritual language, art shares in the material language of things. Benjamin writes:

\begin{quote}
[T]he language of sculpture or painting is founded on certain kinds of thing-languages... in them we find a translation of the language of things into an infinitely higher language, which may still be of the same sphere. We are concerned here with nameless, non-acoustic languages, languages issuing from matter; here we should recall the material community of things in their communication.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{53} Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings}, I, 67.

\textsuperscript{54} Idem, 65.

\textsuperscript{55} Idem, 67.

\textsuperscript{56} Idem, 73.
Even poetry, according to Benjamin, rests on the “spirit of language in things.”

Although not a material thing-language, like painting and sculpture, poetry transposes the community of things into the spiritual medium of words. Poetry does not communicate its contents discursively, but it expresses itself in a figurative language, in which its truth content is bound up with the configuration of its sensualistic elements – sounds and graphic characters.

In the letter to Rang (1923), Benjamin characterizes nature and art as belonging to the ‘taciturn’ world. Benjamin’s description of art and nature in linguistic terms is now understandable. Both art and nature express themselves in a mute, material language, rather than in concepts. Artworks have a share in the mute language of creation. The communion of works of art with the creaturely language of things also explains why, according to Benjamin, works of art only have an indirect historical significance: the creaturely expression of artworks is primordial, rather than ‘in history.’

Benjamin distinguishes between the name and the fallen word of judgment.

According to Benjamin, language in paradise is perfectly cognizant in the name. This is

57 Idem, 67.

58 Benjamin writes to Rang that, “the specific historicity of works of art is... one that can be unlocked only in interpretations, not in ‘art history.’ For the process of interpretation brings to light connections between works of art that are timeless, yet not without a historical dimension. The same forces that become explosively and extensively temporal in the revealed world (that is, in history) emerge intensively in the taciturn world (that is, in the world of nature and art)... the ideas are stars, in contrast to the sun of revelation. They do not appear in the daylight of history; they are at work in history only invisibly. They shine only into the night of nature” (Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 389).

59 In the letter to Rang, Benjamin describes art as the model of nature that awaits no Judgment Day: “Works of art, then, may be defined as the models of a nature that awaits no day, and thus no Judgment Day; they are models of a nature that is neither the theatre of history nor the dwelling place of mankind. The redeemed night”; ibid. The ‘redeemed night’ suggests the primordial being of creation, which has not
established in the Bible when God recognizes each thing after creating it (‘and he saw that is was good’). By recognizing things as good, God makes each thing knowable in its name. The knowledge of good and evil, on the other hand, is nameless. Human beings first acquire knowledge of good and evil through sin, by eating of the Tree of Knowledge. Evil has no objective correlate in paradise; it is knowledge in the abyss of fallen subjectivity. The judgment of good and evil is knowledge in the context of guilt. Its higher form is God’s judgment, or the punishing word, which expels human beings from paradise.

yet emerged into history, and has not yet suffered the Fall. Because it has not yet entered history, the primordial being of creation ‘awaits no Judgment Day.’

According to Benjamin’s analysis: “In God, name is creative because it is word, and God’s word is cognizant because it is name. ‘And he saw that it was good’ – that is, he had cognized it through name. The absolute relation of name to knowledge exists only in God; only there is name, because it is inwardly identical with the creative word, the pure medium of knowledge. This means that God made things knowable in their names. Man, however, names them according to knowledge” (idem, 68).

Benjamin makes this argument more clearly in The Origin of German Tragic Drama. Knowledge in paradise is practical; it does not involve the judgment of extrinsic objects, but is rather the immediate communion with God. Theoretical knowledge is knowledge in the context of guilt; this explains the endlessness of theoretical knowledge, which has fallen nature as its object, rather than taking God as its model. Benjamin writes: “The Bible introduces evil in the concept of knowledge. The serpent’s promise to the first men was to make them ‘knowing both good and evil’. But it is said of God after the creation: ‘And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold it was very good.’ Knowledge of evil therefore has no object. There is no evil in the world. It arises in man himself, with the desire for knowledge, or rather for judgment. Knowledge of good, as knowledge, is secondary. It ensues from practice. Knowledge of evil – as knowledge this is primary. It ensues from contemplation” (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 233).

Leibniz also identifies judgment as the source of error. Since our perceptions are God-given, they are always true. Judgment comes from ourselves, and it is the source of deception: “since God’s view is always true, our perceptions are always true; it is our judgments, which come from ourselves, that deceive us.” (Leibniz, Discourse on Metaphysics, §14; in idem, Philosophical Essays, 47) Moreover, Leibniz identifies evil with privation, or error, rather than a positive object: “...one sees clearly that God is not the cause of evil... And it is to this, in my view, that we must reduce the opinion of Saint Augustine and other authors, the opinion that the root of evil is in nothingness, that is to say, in the privation or limitation of creatures, which God graciously remedies by the degree of perfection it pleases him to give” (Leibniz, Discourse on Metaphysics, §30; in idem, Philosophical Essays, 62).

Benjamin writes: “The knowledge of things resides in the name, whereas that of good and evil is, in the profound sense in which Kierkegaard uses the word, ‘prattle,’ and knows only one purification and
Art criticism misses its object when it concerns itself with the judgment of works. According to Benjamin, if criticism is to achieve an ‘objective interpretation’ of art, rather than the subjection of works to judgment, it should name the work, as Adam named nature. Adam’s names are not imposed on nature arbitrarily; they are translations of the natural language of things. Likewise, according to Benjamin, art criticism should interpret art by translating the ‘creaturely’ language in which it expresses itself – i.e. in the configuration of its sensual elements – into a philosophical representation of the idea.

The translation of a work’s material language into the idea presupposes a linguistic medium, in which the language of things can gradually be ‘concentrated,’ or intensified, into a higher, spiritual language. As Benjamin explains to Rang, “The task of interpreting art is to concentrate creaturely life in ideas.”64 Art criticism has a precisely determined relationship to philosophy, since the philosopher’s task is to name the idea: “The task of philosophy is to name the idea, as Adam named nature, in order to overcome the works, which are to be seen as nature returned.”65

In the next section, I will elaborate on the meaning of Benjamin’s phrase, ‘nature returned.’ To put it simply, for now, Benjamin argues that the material content of the work of art decays with the passing of time. Works take on the enciphered character of elevation, to which the prattling man, the sinner, was therefore submitted: judgment…. This judging word expels the first human beings from Paradise; they themselves have aroused it in accordance with the immutable law by which this judging word punishes – and expects – its own awakening as the sole and deepest guilt. In the Fall, since the eternal purity of names was violated, the sterner purity of the judging word arose” (Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 71).

64 Idem, 389.

65 Ibid.
second-nature when the spiritual world that they represent has passed away. Although
the material content breaks down, the idea, or the truth content of a work is timeless.
The idea is manifest in the arrangement of a work’s detail. After the decay of its
beautiful outward form, this arrangement of detail confronts the interpreter as a
hieroglyph, or cipher, to be decoded.66

§2 Allegory and the Language of Things

According to Benjamin, Baroque allegory is a linguistic expression of the Fall: “In the
very fall of man the unity of guilt and signifying emerges as an abstraction. The
allegorical has its existence in abstractions; as an abstraction, as a faculty of the spirit of
language itself, it is at home in the Fall.”67 As opposed to the perfect match between
Adam’s names and the creatures (the true call of nature), allegory reads an emblematic

66 In his essay on ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities,’ Benjamin describes the relationship between the ‘material
content’ and the ‘truth content’ of a work of art. Accordingly, the unity between a work and its idea is a
fragile one, which breaks down, or decays with the passing of time. At the moment of a work’s inception,
its ‘material content’ forms a dense web, which does not allow the idea (i.e. a work’s ‘truth content’) to be
discerned. Only once a work’s impenetrable aura has broken down, can the idea be discovered in the
configuration of knowledge that has settled in the ruin. Benjamin begins the essay by affirming that he
views the work of art as an intellectual-perceptual nexus, in which the truth content of the work is bound-
up intimately with the minute details of a work’s material content: “The relation between the two [i.e.
truth content and material content] 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” (Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 297). Because of this law of literature, criticism which
seeks the truth content of a work – its idea, that is – must occupy itself with the most minute details of a
work’s material content. Benjamin describes how the tightly woven nexus of material and idea breaks
down and reveals itself more clearly with the passage of time: “If, therefore, the works that prove
enduring are precisely those whose truth is most deeply sunken into 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” (Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 297).

67 Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 234.
world of things, which are mute because they are nameless. The sign language of allegory is not merely conventional. It is a form of expression, in which language *laments* the lost concretion of Adam’s names. The ciphers of allegory are subject to an infinity of interpretations, but this infinite analyzability should not be confused with the symbolic re-enchantment of nature. It is rather an expression of profound mourning: having lost direct access to revelation, the Baroque allegorists vainly search for the traces of divine providence in contingent things.

§2.1 Luther and the Language of Nature

Benjamin argues in his *Habilitation* thesis that the Baroque authors *secularized* history in creation, and that this process, rather than religious conviction, explains the importance of Adam and the Book of Genesis, for seventeenth-century philosophy. According to Benjamin, the significance of the ‘book of creation’ for the Counter-Reformation was in an attempt to stabilize history by predicting its course in the essential nature of things: historical events were seen as the unfolding of what had been ‘pre-established’ at creation. The Adamic ideal rendered nature legible according to

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68 Benjamin argues that, in the Baroque, history is secularized in the state of creation. This is Benjamin’s explanation, both for the predominance of Old Testament themes, and for the explanation of moral and historical themes in terms of stock examples from natural history: “For the decisive factor in the escapism of the Baroque is not the antithesis of history and nature but the comprehensive secularization of the historical in the state of creation. It is not eternity that is opposed to the disconsolate chronicle of world-history, but the restoration of the timelessness of paradise” (Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 92).

69 Benjamin writes that, for the Counter-Reformation, the goal was complete political stabilization: “Nothing was more foreign to it than the expectation of the end of the world, or even a revolution.... In philosophical-historical terms its ideal was the acme: a golden age of peace and culture, free of any apocalyptic features, constituted *in aeternum* by the authority of the Church.... Thus the Jesuits ‘no longer [take] the whole of the life of Christ as their theme, and more and more infrequently do they take the Passion; instead they prefer subjects from the Old Testament...” (idem, 80, c.f. Willi Flemming, *Geschichte*...
the signature inscribed by God in all created things. If one could but read all of the marks, one could predict the entire course of events, and even have access to divine providence. The idea that one could derive the contingent events of history from a perfect understanding of the essences of nature shows Adam’s importance for ‘natural history’ in the seventeenth century.\footnote{In the seventeenth century, the Adamic ideal was dislocated from theology, and was taken up by secular philosophers, such as Bacon, Hobbes, Mersenne, and Leibniz, as an account of language in the ‘state of nature.’ Seventeenth-century philosophers retained the medieval notion that nature was one of three books in which God’s word was inscribed (of which the other two were scripture, and the writing in the soul, or heart). The Book of Nature was increasingly ‘de-verbalized,’ however. According to Arnold Williams, Adam was the embodiment of the ideal knower for seventeenth-century philosophers: “The exact nature and extent of Adam’s knowledge occupies considerable space in several of the commentaries. Mersenne’s discussion includes a table of the sciences and arts with a brief description of each, not unlike similar tables in Bacon’s De Augmentis… It was commonly held that Adam was created with perfect knowledge…. Among the subjects specifically suggested as comprehended in Adam’s knowledge astronomy leads the list, followed by natural history” (Williams, The Common Expositor, 81–82).}

As Benjamin notes, the great authors of the German\textit{ Trauerspiel} were Lutherans.\footnote{I will discuss the significance of Lutheranism for the Baroque \textit{Trauerspiel} at greater length in the appendix to this dissertation.} According to Luther, fallen humanity could no longer understand the meaning of God’s revealed word (scripture). After the fall, the univocal relationship between God’s Word and human languages was definitively lost. Cut off from revelation, the intense longing for redemption was redirected toward the \textit{saeculum}, and the contingent order of things.\footnote{Benjamin describes the displacement of religious longing onto the immanent world of nature as the ‘keystone’ of Baroque expression: “religious aspirations did not lose their importance: it was just that this century denied them a religious fulfillment, demanding of them, or imposing upon them, a secular solution instead” (Benjamin, \textit{Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 79).}
In face of the unbridgeable abyss separating human languages from the revealed word, Lutherans re-evaluated the significance of the ‘Book of Nature.’ Created nature, by virtue of its divine origin, was thought to have retained a trace of the divine word. If one could only decipher the natural language of creatures, one might be able to read the ordination divina, or providence, in the details of nature itself, and thereby bypass the mediation of scripture, and the corrupt knowledge inherited from tradition.

In the Tischreden, Luther describes a newly discovered link between creaturely life and the word of God:

We are now living in the dawn of the future life. For we are now again beginning to have the knowledge of the creatures which we lost in Adam’s fall.... We, however, by God’s grace are beginning to see his glorious work and wonder even in the flower, how almighty and good God is: therefore we shall praise and thank him. We see the power of his word in the creatures. As he spoke, then it was, even in a peach-stone; for though its shell is hard, still it must in time give way to the tender kernel that is in it.

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73 In Benjamin’s words, the formal language of the Baroque Trauerspiel can be interpreted as “the attempt to find, in a revision to a bare state of creation, consolation for the renunciation of a state of grace” (idem, 81).

74 The idea that providence could be read in the order of nature was particularly evident in the Lutheran understanding of astrological constellations. As Jane Newman has shown, constellations, to the Reformation natural historians, seemed to be the signs by which God’s providence was expressed in the creaturely realm. Writes Newman: “Beginning already in the 1520’s, for example, when Luther and his learned friend, Philip Melancthon,... began formulating their ideas, insight into astral patterns functioned as one of the ways in which an ‘ordinatio divina’... that transcended human understanding could in fact be discerned by denizens of the earthly realm. In Melanchthon’s mind in particular, the two kingdoms were actually linked via the stars; astrology could thus help ‘reveal, by decoding signs, the original design of God’s providence’” (Jane Newman “Enchantment in Times of War: Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin, and the Secularization Thesis,” Representations 105/1 (2009): 133–67, esp. 140). Newman quotes above from Stefano Caroti, “Melanchthon’s Astrology,” in “Astrologi hallucinati: Stars and the End of the World in Luther’s Time” (ed. Paola Zambelli; Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1986), 109–21; see also Sachiko Kusukawa, The Transformation of Natural Philosophy: The Case of Melanchthon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 113.

Luther’s metaphor of the shell and the kernel is noteworthy because it links the *significance* of obdurate things to the *decay* of their material husks. The passage of time, which shows itself in the creaturely world as the withering of matter’s exterior form, is heralded as the dawning of the future, in which God’s word will become visible, as a ‘seed’ of meaning.76

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76 Benjamin picks up on the play between *semina* and sign, seed and significance, which is suggested by Luther’s metaphor of the kernel and the shell. Benjamin writes that “significance and death both come to fruition in historical development, just as they are closely linked as seeds in the creature’s graceless state of sin” (Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166). As Benjamin argues, the profane state of creation is cut off from revelation, and even if it retains a trace of the divine Word, its meaning is not legible to fallen humanity. The significance of nature is enciphered, buried, and scattered. Knowledge gleaned from nature is only the knowledge of a creaturely netherworld. Benjamin emphasizes the earthly meaning of the ‘seed,’ which is planted in the depths of the ground: “[S]ecured by immersion in the life of creaturely things... it hears nothing of the voice of revelation. Everything saturnine points down into the depths of the earth; and so the nature of the ancient god of agriculture is preserved. According to Agrippa of Nettesheim ‘the seed of the depths and... the treasures of the earth’ are gifts of Saturn” (idem, 152). Significance is scattered, like seeds, throughout the manifold regions of profane creation. The Baroque allegorist learns to read nature by gathering things into a material community, in which the context of significance matters more than the content of what is arranged. What is brought together in this way can easily be dispersed again, since the configurations are only held together by the imposition of a subjective order on contingent things. Benjamin quotes a line from the Nuremburg dramatist, Sigmund von Birken, which serves as a motto for the dispersal of meaning in the profane state of creation: “*Mit Weinen streuten wir den Samen in die Brachen und giegen traurig aus*” [“Weeping we scattered the seed on the fallow ground and sadly we went away”] (idem, 233). The ‘seed’ makes another appearance, this time in connection with the monad, in Benjamin’s Thesis XVII, ‘On the Concept of History’: “The historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad.... He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history; thus, he blasts a specific life out of the era, a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method, the lifework is both preserved and sublated in the work, the era in the lifework, and the entire course of history in the era. The nourishing fruit of what is historically understood contains time in its interior as a precious but tasteless seed” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, IV, 396). Leibniz uses the ‘seed’ both as a ‘seed’ of meaning, and as the preformed ‘seed’ out of which creaturely life unfolds, and into which it enfolds itself again upon dying. Leibniz’s references to the ‘seed of reason’ have their origin in the stoic notion of the *logos spermatikos*. God ‘fertilizes’ nature and souls, and the ‘seeds’ he implants therein are *eternal sources*, or the divine essences. The seed is thus both the eternal form of a thing, and it contains the prediction for all of its future growth. In effect, the seed is the concise figure of what Benjamin means by the concept of natural history, as the absorption of the totality of history within an eternal, primordial essence. In the Preface to the *New Essays*, Leibniz refers to Scaliger’s ‘seeds of eternity’ as an expression of what he means by innate ideas: “The stoics call these sources Prolepses... Mathematicians call them common notions of *Koinai ennoiai*. Modern philosophers give them other fine names and Julius Scaliger, in particular, used to call them ‘seeds of eternity’...” (Leibniz, *New Essays*, “Preface”).
The trope of the ‘sacred text’ was thus absorbed and secularized in nature. Textual strategies developed to glean meaning from scripture were applied directly to the ‘natural characters’ of creaturely life. The text of nature is not verbal but is mute. It is not commensurable with extant or archaic human languages, but it must be pieced together from a ‘rebus’ of things. Things were seen to express the order of creation, not so much in their content, which remains profane, but in their configuration, or pattern, which was read as an esoteric script. Unlike the letters of the alphabet, which are themselves meaningless atoms that can be combined to spell out pronounceable words, the ‘natural characters’ or emblems of allegory are configured into complexes, which, in their geometric composition, are seen to express the order and fixity of divine ideas.\textsuperscript{77}

\textbf{§2.2 The ‘Emblematic’ Age}

Baroque emblem-books and allegories treated the artefacts of natural history as ciphers in the text of creation.\textsuperscript{78} The term ‘emblem’ means ‘engraved work’ \textit{[emblema]}, and the

\textsuperscript{77} Benjamin writes: “The sanctity of what is written is inextricably bound up with the idea of its strict codification. For sacred script always takes the form of certain complexes of words which ultimately constitute, or aspire to become, one single and inalterable complex. So it is that alphabetical script, as a combination of atoms of writing, is the farthest removed from the script of sacred complexes. These latter take the form of hieroglyphics. The desire to guarantee the sacred character of any script – there will always be a conflict between sacred standing and profane comprehensibility – leads to complexes, to hieroglyphics” (Benjamin, \textit{Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 175).

\textsuperscript{78} For a more detailed discussion of the use of emblems in natural history, see William B. Ashworth Jr., “Natural History and the Emblematic World View,” in \textit{Reappraisals of the Scientific Revolution} (eds. David C. Lindberg and Robert S. Westman Ashworth; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 303-32. As James Bono writes, glossing Ashworth’s argument: “For natural historians, then, animals became more than natural kinds, more than the rudimentary, spare objects of scientific inquiry and analysis. They were ciphers, bearers of meaning, and elements of a divine text” (Bono, \textit{The Word of God and the Languages of Man}, 176). Ashworth corroborates this point: “Weasels, cranes, and lions became part of a visual language; they were symbols, but even more, they were Platonic ideas, whose meaning the mind could immediately perceive. Animals were living characters in the language of the Creator, and the naturalist who did not appreciate or understand this had failed to comprehend the pattern of the natural world”
expression is apt, since, as Benjamin explains, history seemed to the Baroque to be inscribed on nature. Nature was understood to be emblematic because of its status as a creature. Objects of natural history were the sign-language of God’s creative word. In this context, Benjamin quotes Piero Valeriano, who described the natural world as the external manifestation of God’s majesty, and as worthy therefore of study, like a sacred text:

Not even a consideration of trees or of vegetation is gratuitous for our purposes, since Blessed Paul and David before him record that the majesty and awesomeness of God is understood by means of a knowledge of the created universe. Since this is how matters stand, who among us is possessed of a mind so slothful, a mind so immersed in things which perish and decay, that he is unable to confess that God surround him with benefits without number...79

Valeriano warns against becoming immersed in things which perish. Matter may deteriorate, but the emblematic significance is fixed, expressing the eternity of divine ideas.

After the Fall, things are not named, but are only read. Allegory keeps faith with profane things. Precisely because things are fallen, and profane, they are not named, but are subject to an infinity of interpretations (which Benjamin refers to as ‘over-naming’ in the essay ‘On Language as Such’).80 And yet, because things are created, they can be read


79 Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 170.

80 As Benjamin writes: “Things have no proper names except in God. For in his creative word, God called them into being, calling them by their proper names. In the language of men, however, they are overnamed. There is, in the relation of human languages to that of things, something that can be approximately described as ‘overnaming’ – the deepest linguistic meaning for all melancholy and (from the point of view of the thing) for all deliberate muteness (Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 389).
as the characters of a sacred script. This attitude towards nature is evident in the emblem-books of natural history: no thing stands alone, directly meaningful in itself. A web of interpretive commentary and contextual connections threaten to engulf the thing that is supposed to be explained. For instance, Konrad Gesner, the author of the *Historiae Animalium* (1551–1587), devoted eight pages to explaining the significance of peacocks.81 Benjamin quotes Karl Giehlow to make a similar point:

The many obscurities in the connection between meaning and sign... did not deter, they rather encouraged the exploitation of ever remoter characteristics of the representative object as symbols.... In addition to this there was the dogmatic power of the meanings handed down from the ancients, so that one and the same object can just as easily signify a virtue as a vice, and therefore more or less anything.82

Each emblematic thing is associated with an infinity of meanings, and this is a testament to its character as a cipher.83

81 Konrad Gesner, *Conradi Gesneri Medici Tigurini Historiae Animalium Lib. I.-V.* (eds. Jacob Carronus, Hans K. Wolf, Guillaume Rondelet, Pierre Belon, and Christoph Froschauer; Tigvri: Apvd Christ, Froschovervm, 1551). Writes Ashworth: “The essence of this view is the belief that every kind of thing in the cosmos has myriad hidden meanings and that knowledge consists of an attempt to comprehend as many of these as possible. To know a peacock, as Gesner wanted to know it, one must know not only what the peacock looks like but what its name means, in every language; what kind of proverbial associations it has; what it symbolized to both pagans and Christians; what other animals it has sympathies or affinities with; and any other possible connection it might have with stars, plants, minerals, numbers, coins, or whatever” (Ashworth, “Natural History and the Emblematic World View,” 312; cf. Bono, *The Word of God and the Languages of Man*, 177–78).


83 Benjamin describes the antinomy of allegory, as the expression of convention: “Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else. With this possibility a destructive, but just verdict is passed on the profane world: it is characterized as a world in which the detail is of no great importance. But it will be unmistakably apparent, especially to anyone who is familiar with allegorical textual exegesis, that all of the things which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them onto a higher plane, and which can indeed, sanctify them. [...] allegory in particular, although a convention, like every kind of writing, is regarded as created, like holy scripture” (idem, 175).
Things are piled up in a deliberately constructed manner. By arranging things into contexts of significance, the Baroque emblematist sought to uncover the divine order. But the source of order is imposed on things from outside. As Benjamin puts it, the constructive principle of the Baroque is motivated by the unremitting expectation of a miracle: namely, that the riddle of nature would be solved, and the pristine meaning of God’s word would be unlocked.

§2.3 Hieroglyphs and Allegory: The Expression of Convention

Allegory, according to Benjamin, is a form of expression. This assessment of allegory went against the mainstream interpretation, inherited from Romanticism. The latter understood allegory in negative terms, as the dark background against which the Romantic symbol shone resplendently. Allegory was, accordingly, devalued, as the mere illustration of an abstract concept. At the heart of this assessment was the idea that writing is merely conventional. What this position failed to grasp is that, for the Baroque, the typographical character of writing was a non-verbal, pictorial form of expression. It is worth emphasizing that Benjamin means ‘expression’ in the Leibnizian sense. Accordingly, writing was understood as the isomorphic representation of the order of things. The importance of the graphic character is clearly indicated in Jacob Böhme’s idea of the signatures in all creatures, which he saw as the external manifestation of their intrinsic being. As Benjamin perceives, the language of allegory

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84 Benjamin writes: “For it is common practice in the literature of the Baroque to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal, and, in the unremitting expectation of a miracle, to take the repetition of stereotypes for a process of intensification” (idem, 178).
should be understood as a silent, pictorial language, which keeps faith with the mute expression of things.

Benjamin’s interpretation of allegory draws on Karl Giehlow’s historical study of the Renaissance discovery of Egyptian hieroglyphs. Hieroglyphs were understood as a representational language, which mirrored the configuration of things in their internal composition. According to the Renaissance Neo-Platonists, hieroglyphs were an esoteric system of symbols, which immediately represented the ideas of God, without the mediation of conventional signs. By virtue of their ancient origin, hieroglyphs were also thought to contain a hereditary wisdom.

The hieroglyphs seemed to resemble sacred script, especially in their rigid fixity. Benjamin quotes Ficino, whose interpretation of the hieroglyph captures this point (in Benjamin paraphrase): "In his commentary on The Enneads of Plotinus, Marsilius Ficino observes that in hieroglyphics the Egyptian priests ‘must have wanted to create something corresponding to divine thought, since divinity surely possesses knowledge of all things, not as a changing idea, but as the simple and fixed form of the thing itself, so to speak. Hieroglyphs, then, are an image of divine ideas!’"

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86 As Benjamin explains: “Nothing less than the theological conviction that the hieroglyphs of the Egyptians contain a hereditary wisdom, which illuminates every obscurity of nature, is expressed” in the Renaissance attitude (Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 170).

87 Idem, 169.
By the seventeenth century, the hieratic spirit gained predominance over the symbolic. Benjamin shows how, in the Baroque, the fixed, thing-like character of hieroglyphs became more important than their symbolic meaning. Hieroglyphs were seen to be a figurative, silent, thing-like language. The composition of the hieroglyph was seen as the graphic representation of the relationships between things.

§2.4 The Fragmentation of Language

If there is a characteristic ‘Baroque’ attitude towards language, Benjamin discerns it in the sheer tension between the expressive language of nature and human spoken languages. The gap between spoken languages and the expressive language of nature is enhanced by the fragmentation of the linguistic medium into its sensuous elements: brute sounds and graphic characters. Words are not the most basic unit of this language, since its purpose is not primarily the communication of contents. The relationship between ideas is represented, or expressed – either pictorially, as a hieroglyph, or else musically, in a sequence of consonants and vowels. As Benjamin puts it, language is

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88 Benjamin writes: “In the works of the mature Baroque the distance from the beginnings of emblematics in the previous century becomes progressively more apparent, the similarity to the symbol becomes more fleeting, and the hieratic ostentation more assertive” (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 169).

89 This tension is exemplified throughout the works of Francis Bacon, for instance, who exultingly invokes the alphabet of nature, on the one hand, while, on the other hand, railing against the ‘idols’ of mere words. Bacon’s iconoclastic approach to acquired language is evident in the following passage from Parasceve: “First then, away with antiquities, and citations or testimonies of authors; also, with disputes and controversies and differing opinions; everything in short which is philological... And for all that concerns ornaments of speech, similitudes, treasury of eloquence, and such like emptiness, let it be utterly dismissed” (Bono, The Word of God and the Languages of Man, 199; my emphasis). On the written character of the ‘Book of Nature,’ however, Bacon writes: “For God forbid that we should give out a dream of our own imagination for a pattern of the world; rather may he graciously grant to us to write an apocalypse or true vision of the footsteps of the Creator imprinted on his creatures” (Bacon, The Great Instauration, c.f. Bono, 199; my emphasis).
'emancipated' from meaning, and divided into sensualistic elements, which provide allegory with a stock of thing-like elements: “word, syllable, and sound are emancipated from any context of traditional meaning and are flaunted as objects which can be exploited for allegorical purposes.”90

Language is divided into its component parts in order to emphasize the sanctity of the elements, each of which is observed to express a higher meaning in its exact, analogical correspondence with divine archetypes. Benjamin writes: “In its individual parts fragmented language has ceased merely to serve the process of communication, and as a new-born object acquires a dignity equal to that of gods, rivers, virtues and similar natural forms which fuse into the allegorical.”91 There is a two-world hypothesis underlying this division of language into its component parts: the profane, communicative meaning of words must be destroyed in order to be redeemed in its elements. It is only by breaking language down into elements, each meaningless in itself, that the simple adequacy of Adam’s names can be restored. The nonsensical parts derive their significance from their resemblance to what is essential, and not from conventional meaning. Detached from the conventional meaning of words, the sensual elements of language are reconfigured, so that, in their relationships to one another, they can express the higher unity of the divine word.92

90 Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 207.

91 Idem, 208.

92 Benjamin describes how the authors of the Baroque Trauerspiel sought to harness the expressive power of language by coining new words out of complexes of terms: “The practice of contracting adjectives, which have no adverbial usage, and substantives into a single block, is not a modern invention... Neologisms abound... Writers were attempting personally to gain a mastery of that innermost formative power from which the precise but delicate language of metaphor derives. Glory was sought in devising
The Baroque philosophy of language polarizes meaning and sound, writing and voice: Language is split into a profusion of creaturely noises, on the one hand, and a fixed, written character, on the other hand. Benjamin argues that the Baroque exploits the tension between written characters and the animal voice in order to express the gulf between a creaturely language of things, and the arbitrary rule of meaning. The Baroque allegorist expressed the dualism of the subject – divided into creaturely passions, and the cold calculations of reason – by combining exacting technique with a “veritable eruption” of interpretive possibilities, and “chaotic mass of metaphors,” corresponding to the dammed up feelings of creaturely life.

Meaning corresponds to the construction of written complexes, which are pictorial, and hieroglyphic. Such complexes express the idea in the arrangement and order of their component parts. The sound-language, on the other hand, is purely sensuous. It is seen as creaturely, and exalted because of its origin. Benjamin describes the sensual language of nature as being ‘afflicted by meaning’: “For the Baroque sound is and remains something purely sensuous; meaning has its home in written language.

Benjamin describes the ‘Baroque’ philosophy of language in the following terms: “In the Baroque the tension between the spoken and the written word is immeasurable. The spoken word, it might be said, is the ecstasy of the creature, it is exposure, rashness, powerlessness before God; the written word is the composure of the creature, dignity, superiority, omnipotence over the objects of the world” (idem, 201).

Idem, 173.
And the spoken word is only afflicted by meaning, so to speak, as if by an inescapable disease.⁹⁵ Sound is atomized into consonants and vowels, which expresses the suffering of the creature, subjected to convention.

The fragmentation of language into sensuous elements is particularly evident in Böhme’s *Natursprache*, which is broken down into the signatures inscribed in created things, and a creaturely language of sounds and noises. According to Benjamin, Böhme provides a number of “clear leads” to the Baroque philosophy of language.⁹⁶ In particular, Benjamin points to what Böhme referred to as a ‘sensual’ or natural language. The sensual language is not a language of words, but a language of sounds. Benjamin describes it as an onomatopoeic structure.⁹⁷ Böhme saw the sounds of creatures to be closer to the divine word than the fallen languages of human beings.

The following passage from Böhme’s *Aurora*, which Benjamin cites, clearly shows the pronounced tension between the written language of signatures and the creaturely voice. Writes Böhme: “everything hath its *mouth* to manifestation, and this is the language of nature, whence everything *speaks* out of its property.”⁹⁸ But after the Fall, God retracted his words, leaving half of creation dumb and void of understanding:

⁹⁵ Idem, 209.

⁹⁶ Idem, 201.

⁹⁷ Idem, 204.

All whatever is spoken, written, or taught of God, without the knowledge of the signature is *dumb* and void of understanding; for it proceeds only from an historical conjecture, from the mouth of another, wherein the spirit without knowledge is dumb; but if the spirit opens to him the *signature*, then he understands the speech of another; and further he understands how the spirit has manifested and revealed itself... in the sound with the *voice.*"^99

After the Fall, humanity could no longer read the language of nature directly in things themselves. The possibility of direct illumination from nature was lost, and the original Adamic language was scattered and dispersed amongst the multiplicity of human tongues after the episode at Babel. But Böhme thought it possible to retrieve traces of the *Natursprache* from the sensuous elements of language. Although this sensualistic language is fallen and profane, it retains an expressive correlation to the divine *Natursprache*.

In the next section, I will draw out the conceptual and historical connections between Leibniz’s notion of expression and linguistic Adamicism.\textsuperscript{100} Unlike Boehme, Leibniz did not think that it was possible to discover the original language in which

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\textsuperscript{99} Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 202, my emphasis.

Adam named all creatures.\textsuperscript{101} Even though Leibniz does not argue for the factual existence of a paradisiacal *Ursprache*, he maintains that there is nothing arbitrary or merely conventional about our languages. Leibniz upholds the ideal of a philosophical language, which would adequately express the relationships between ideas and the order of created substances. Like Böhme, Leibniz views language as expressive of the order and essences of things. The basic unit of such expression is not the meaningful word, but the sensual elements of language: graphic characters and phonetic sounds.

\section*{§3: Leibniz and the ‘Baroque’ Philosophy of Language}

Although Leibniz held out no hope that Adam’s *Ursprache* could be rediscovered, he did think it was possible to construct an artificial language that would adequately express the relationships between ideas, if not the essences of things themselves. The key to Leibniz’s Adamicism is in his argument against (Cartesian) voluntarism. Because the ‘author’ of nature does nothing without reason, the ‘marks’ of divine perfection can be read in His ‘works,’ the creatures.\textsuperscript{102} The innate ideas ‘inscribed’ in our souls are also expressions of the divine understanding, and sources of the truths of nature.\textsuperscript{103}

\textsuperscript{101} Leibniz writes: “The Adamic language or at least a language equivalent to it, which some claim to have known and to be able thereby to grasp (intueri) the essence of things through the names given to them by Adam, is certainly unknown to us….Up to now, such admirable benefits are assured only by the symbols of Arithmetic and Algebra, where all reasoning consists in the use of characters, and an error of the mind is identical with an error of calculation” (Leibniz, “Thought, Signs, and the Foundation of Logic,” cf. Marcelo Dascal, *Leibniz, Language, Signs, and Thought: A Collection of Essays*, Amsterdam: J. Benjamins Pub. Co, 1987, 182).

\textsuperscript{102} References to divine authorship, the Book of the Soul, and the Book of Nature, and the inscriptions therein, abound in Leibniz’s work. For instance, in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, he writes that God can be compared to a "learned author who includes the greatest number of truths in the smallest possible volume” (Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, §5; in idem, *Philosophical Essays*, 38).
Leibniz sought a *Lingua Philosophica* that would express the order of ideas and nature, rather than the arbitrary meanings of conventional signs. Leibniz’s philosophical works on language can be divided into two main approaches – *a priori* and *a posteriori*.¹⁰⁴ On the *a priori* side, Leibniz pursued various projects to construct an artificial language. These projects – notably, the art of combinations, and the project to discover a universal and numerical characteristic – are attempts to construct a pure language on the basis of the relationships between simple ideas.

On the *a posteriori* side, Leibniz applies the principles of continuity and sufficient reason to the various existing languages. His underlying presuppositions are that there is a continuum between languages, and that an original harmony obtains between different linguistic forms. As Leibniz argues in the *New Essays*, empirical languages contain certain ‘root words,’ which demonstrate their relationship to a primordial

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¹⁰³ Leibniz argues that the entire cause is ‘expressed’ in its effects: “...if we include in our nature everything that it expresses, nothing is supernatural to it, for our nature extends everywhere, since an effect always expresses its cause and God is the true cause of substances.... We could call that which includes everything we express our essence or idea; since this expresses our union with God himself, it has no limits and nothing surpassed it” (Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, §16; in idem, *Philosophical Essays*, 49). On this basis, he thinks it is possible to read the marks of divine perfection, both in our ideas, and in nature, or in God’s works.

¹⁰⁴ As Daniel Rutherford writes, “It is helpful at the outset to distinguish two primary focal points of Leibniz’s interest in language. Within his writings these are represented, on the one hand, by the many sketches and plans associated with the notion of an ideal, artificial language – the ‘universal characteristic’; and, on the other, by numerous historical and philological investigations of natural languages, many of them directed towards uncovering the common roots of a multitude of human languages. On the face of it, there seems to be a tension between the aims and assumptions of these two very different approaches to the subject of language” (Donald Rutherford, *Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, 224). Rutherford resolves the apparent contradiction by arguing that Leibniz supplements his work to develop an *a priori* ‘universal language,’ with an *a posteriori* analysis of existing languages. This argument rings true, and resonates with other aspects of Leibniz’s methodology – for instance, Leibniz had two basic principles, reflecting the *a priori* and *a posteriori* approaches to philosophy. The ‘universal characteristic’ can be constructed *a priori* and turns on the principle of non-contradiction, whereas the discovery of the primordial roots in spoken languages is *a posteriori*, and presupposes the principles of continuity and sufficient reason.
natural language, resembling Böhme’s *Natursprache*. These primordial ‘root words’ are typically onomatopoeic, or expressive of animal noises.

The unity of these approaches should be sought in Leibniz’s concept of expression. According to Leibniz, a philosophical language is not an inter-subjective means of communication, but is rather a medium for representing the order and relationships between ideas. The universality of such a language derives from its expressive correlation to the essences of things. The price that Leibniz paid for this representational language was that it bore little resemblance to communicative speech. Leibniz notes, for instance, that the ‘universal character’ lacked any rules for pronunciation. Likewise, according to Leibniz’s argument, the root-words of empirical languages were typically meaningless sounds, like ‘croak’ and ‘quack.’

Leibniz scholars have been puzzled by the seemingly contradictory tendencies in Leibniz’s philosophy of language. Scholarly debate has been polarized over the question of whether or not Leibniz upholds a natural or a conventional theory of language. ‘Natural’ language, in the seventeenth-century context, refers to a language in which there are non-arbitrary, expressive links between words and the *natural* order of things.¹⁰⁵ A conventional theory of language, on the other hand, sees words as mere

¹⁰⁵ Thomas C. Singer clarifies that a ‘natural language’ in the seventeenth century had nothing to do with ordinary languages, but with adequacy to the order of nature: “[A] natural language was a language that could best express the nature of things. The actual spoken languages were considered to be the artificial and corrupt products of the misuse of words by the common people. These everyday languages were ‘unnatural,’ for they obscured the order of things” (Thomas C. Singer, “Hieroglyphs, Real Characters, and the Idea of Natural Language in English Seventeenth-Century Thought,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50/1 (1989): 49–70). Leibniz, according to this definition, sought a natural language, which would reflect the order of ideas, as well as the order of the created world. In this vein, scholars like Michael Losonsky and Hans Aarsleff have argued that Leibniz upholds a natural, or Adamic theory of language, since Leibniz maintains an expressive analogy between characters, ideas, and the order of creation. Language, according to Leibniz, is representational, and therefore not merely arbitrary. It is possible, by studying languages, to recover knowledge about the essences of things.
signs, which have no intrinsic connection to what they signify.\textsuperscript{106} In the case of Leibniz's philosophy of language, the dichotomy between conventional and natural theories of language breaks down. Leibniz constructs an expressive, or natural language. The characters, although themselves conventional, are expressive in their configuration, which mirrors the relationship between essences.

Leibniz sought to construct a universal language of thought, based on the expressive correlations between the sensuous elements of language, on the one hand, and eternal ideas, on the other. The expressive correspondences between sound and script are not found in the communicative significance of 'mere' words, but are to be read as patterns reflecting the order of ideas. Burdened with the task of expressing the essences of things and their relationships to one another, language becomes primarily a system of writing, rather than speech. That is to say, its primary significance is not as an instrument of communication; as a structure or arrangement of characters, its purpose is to fix the relationships between things according to their natural (created) order. The expressive meaning of language, and its sheer distance from communicative speech,

\footnote{Ernst Cassirer makes this argument. Drawing primarily on Leibniz’s work on the art of combinations and the universal and numerical characteristic, he maintains that, for Leibniz, language was merely a conventional symbolism that could be manipulated, independently of the contents of things. According to Cassirer, the very advantage of such a formal symbolism was its liberation from contents; symbols could be substituted for things, aiding in the performance of difficult calculations and the symbolic representation of relations that could not otherwise be represented to the finite intelligence. Cassirer argues that Leibniz viewed language “purely as a means of cognition, an instrument of logical analysis,” in which “the specific character of language as a language of sounds and words seems not so much acknowledged and explained, as ultimately negated” (Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, vol. 1, Language (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 130, 132, cf. Rutherford, Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature, 248).}
explains why Leibniz’s philosophy of language breaks down into a language of creaturely sounds and pictorial characters.107

§3.1 The Language of Thought and the Universal Characteristic

Leibniz’s hope for constructing a universal language is predicated on what Michael Losonsky has referred to as a ‘natural language of thought.’108 Leibniz argues for the existence of ‘innate ideas,’ which are inscribed in the soul. These ideas are not subjective notions, but are logical essences. Our ideas express the divine understanding, albeit to a lesser degree of clarity and distinction. Because God does nothing without reason, our ideas also express the order of things in the world.

The constructed universal language is a language of substitutable characters, or symbols, which would be arbitrary in themselves, but which would bear an expressive relationship to meaning, in terms of the internal relationships of their structure. Leibniz proposes a universal schema of writing. It is worth underlining that this language tends toward the visual, rather than spoken or pronounced communication.

107 Leibniz saw his work less in terms of facilitating communication than in terms of the representation of relationships in reality: a universal language is universal because it reflects the order of things in the world and leads to the discovery of truth. It is not universal because it aids inter-subjective communication. In this vein, Leibniz criticizes the schemas for a universal character that were produced by his predecessors, Dalgarno and Wilkins. Leibniz writes: “For their language or writing achieves only this: convenient communication between those sundered by language; but the true real characteristic, such as I conceive it, must be thought one of the most apt instruments of the human mind, with an invincible power for discovery, memory and judgment” (Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Die philosophischen Schriften, ed. C.I. Gerhardt; 7 vols. Berlin, 1875–1890, VII, 7; cf. Rutherford, Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature, 231).

108 Losonsky argues that Böhme’s ‘sensualistic’ language of external signatures corresponds to a ‘mental’ language, comprised of ideas: “In other words, the sensible Adamic language is made possible because there is a nonsensible, mental language of thought which has crucial Adamic qualities: it is a causally powerful language that is natural, innate, universal and accurate” (Michael Losonsky, “Leibniz’s Adamic Language of Thought,” Journal of the History of Philosophy 30:4 (1992): 523–543, esp. 526).
Leibniz’s project to construct a philosophical language of thought proceeded by assigning a character to each simple idea, and by combining these characters to represent complex ideas. Leibniz defined the term ‘character’ broadly, as including: “Words, letters; chemical, astronomical, and Chinese figures; hieroglyphs; musical, cryptographic, algebraic notations; and all other symbols which in our thoughts we use for the signified things. When the signs are written, drawn, or carved, they are called characters.”

As we see from this definition, the ‘characteristic’ is a pictorial system of writing, or signs. A full-fledged ‘language’ would also require some indication of the pronunciation of characters.

There are two stages to Leibniz’s proposal. First, each simple idea is assigned a character: a geometric figure that will exactly express its content. Second, each of these pictorial symbols is treated as a letter in an alphabet. Along with rules regulating the combinations of characters, Leibniz’s project was to make a genuinely universal writing possible. Leibniz compares the project to determine a ‘universal characteristic’ to a system of hieroglyphs, or an alphabet of pictorial signs:

Let the first terms, of the combination of which all others consist, be designated by signs; these signs will be a kind of alphabet.... If these are correctly and ingeniously established, this universal writing will be as easy as it is common, and will be capable of being read without any dictionary; at the same time, a fundamental knowledge of all things will be obtained. The whole of such a writing will be made of geometrical figures, as it were, and of a kind of pictures – just as the ancient Egyptians did, and the Chinese do today.

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Leibniz’s universal language is concerned to preserve a non-arbitrary expressive relationship between an idea and a character, grounded in the real properties of what is represented. Although the characters themselves are arbitrary or artificial counters, the relationships between them is intended to mirror the structure of nature. This is why even the artificial symbols of Leibniz’s characteristic should still be considered a ‘natural’ language. The crucial point is that the characteristic serves to represent or express the order of nature, which presents itself to the mind naturally, and is not a product of mere convention.\footnote{As Thomas C. Singer writes, “The linguistic signs of a real character can be artificial or conventional without being ‘at Random’ because the order of their composition mirrors the structure of nature. Their linguistic value is insured because they serve as symbols for the order of things, and this order presents itself naturally to the mind” (Singer, “Hieroglyphs, Real Characters, and the Idea of Natural Language,” 57).}

§3.2 Natural Language and Primordial Roots

Because God does nothing without reason, even creaturely life is expressive of the divine plan: one can interpret even the rustling of leaves and the croaking of frogs as expressive. The language of nature, according to which God’s word can be detected in his works of creation, is more clearly visible in primitive sounds than in meaningful discourse, which has become confused by history.

In the \textit{New Essays}, Leibniz examines existing languages for evidence of their continuity with each other, and for traces of primordial ‘roots.’ According to Leibniz, German contains a large number of such roots, due to the concrete nature of the language. Leibniz does not trace these root words to an Adamic \textit{Ur-Sprache}, but to a sensuous \textit{language of nature}, which he sees especially in onomatopoeic words, or words
that express animal sounds. The \textit{harmony} of languages can be demonstrated, less by the meanings of concepts, than by the expressive musicality of sounds. Whereas Locke had argued that the meanings of words are merely arbitrary, or conventional, Leibniz defends a version of Böhme's \textit{Natursprache}. He even suggests the possibility that there is an expressive relationship between the essential nature of things and the sounds and motions of the vocal organs.\textsuperscript{112}

Leibniz agrees with Locke that language is not immediately and straightforwardly natural, but there is reason to it – it is not just arbitrary. He writes that etymology can reveal the common origin of several languages, and that Germanic has retained a certain 'naturalness' as is evidenced in words signifying the sounds of animals:

But granted that our languages are derivative so far as origins are concerned, nevertheless considered in themselves they have something primitive about them. This has come to them along the way, in connection with new root words created in our languages by chance but for reasons which are grounded in reality. Examples of this are provided by words which signify the sounds of animals or are derived from them. Thus the Latin \textit{coaxare}, applied to frogs, corresponds to the German \textit{couaquen} or \textit{quaken}. It would seem that the noise these animals make is the primordial root of other words in the Germanic language.\textsuperscript{113}

The primordial language is primarily based on a sound language of nature, and has nothing to do with the meanings of words. Apart from his primary examples taken from animal noises, Leibniz used other examples involving atomizing conventional language into its component letters, which are not meaningful in themselves, but which

\textsuperscript{112} Leibniz, \textit{New Essays}, III.ii.i.

\textsuperscript{113} Idem, III.ii, 281–82.
nonetheless display a natural, non-arbitrary connection with certain actions and
gestures. As Leibniz writes:

> It seems that by natural instinct the ancient Germanic peoples... have used the
letter R to signify violent motion and a noise like the sound of this letter.... Now
just as R naturally signifies a violent motion, the letter L signifies a gentler one.

What becomes evident from this examination of Leibniz's philosophical approaches to
language is that language, understood as a medium of expression, is atomized into
sensuous, or material elements: the graphic character and the sound of language are
pulled apart, in order to be recombined in the expression of ideas. The word, or concept,
is not the most basic unit of expression. The idea can only be represented in a
configuration of linguistic elements, whether a complex character or in the
onomatopoeic sound language of primordial 'roots.'

As I have argued, the connection between Benjamin's 'monadic' theory of ideas
and the Baroque philosophy of language is not simply the result of their common link to

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114 Leibniz argues against the idea that words are merely arbitrary. The natural character of language is
identified with the primordial in history: according to Leibniz, it subsists only in 'ruins.' However, it is still
evident in the harmony of sounds, especially in onomatopoeic expressions: "It is impossible to say that
there is a sure and determinate connection between things and words. But neither is the connection
purely arbitrary. There ought to be a reason why certain words are assigned to certain things. It cannot
be said that this was a result of design, except for some artificial languages, such as Golius thought Chinese
to be, and such as Dalgarno, Wilkins and others have constructed. As for the primitive language used by
the first man, some think it was a result of God's design, others, that it was invented by Adam, a man
illuminated by divine inspiration, at the moment he gave names to the animals. But such a language either
was entirely mutilated, or necessarily subsists only in ruins, where it is difficult to recognize any wit.
Nevertheless, languages have a certain natural source, namely the harmony between sounds and
affections which the sight of things excites in the mind. And I think that such a source is not to be found
only in the primitive language, but also in later languages, born partly out of the primitive language and
partly out of the new needs of men dispersed all over the world. And of course, an onomatopoeia
manifestly imitates nature, as when we attribute 'croaking' to frogs... (Leibniz, “On the Connection
Between Things and Words or rather on the Origin of Languages,” in idem, Leibniz, Opuscules et fragments
Dascal, Leibniz, Language, Signs, and Thought, 189).

115 Leibniz, New Essays, III. ii, 283.
seventeenth-century philosophy. Benjamin's theory of ideas is predicated on an expressive language, which represents the essences of things in the configuration of phenomenal elements. This expressive language, according to Benjamin's argument, is maximally distanced from the ‘bourgeois’ theory, which reduces language to an instrumental means of communication.¹¹⁶ The language of expression betrays the world of meaning in order to remain faithful to things.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ In ‘On Language as Such,’ Benjamin describes the “invalidity and emptiness” of the bourgeois conception of language, which “holds that the means of communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being. The other conception of language, in contrast, knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication. It means: in the name, the mental being of man communicates itself to God” (Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 65).

¹¹⁷ Benjamin describes the courtier in the Trauerspiel in this way: “His unfaithfulness to man is matched by a loyalty to things to the point of being absorbed in contemplative devotion to them” (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 156). This attitude of loyalty to things, at the expense of meaning, is crystallized in the Baroque allegories and emblem books, and it has its explanation as much in Lutheran theology as in the ‘secularization’ of history in the creaturely estate.
Five: Benjamin’s Monadic Political Theology

Esteemed Professor Schmitt,

You will receive any day now from the publisher my book, The Origin of the German Mourning Play. With these lines I would like not merely to announce its arrival, but also to express my joy at being able to send it to you, at the suggestion of Mr. Albert Salomon. You will very quickly recognize how much my book is indebted to you for its presentation of the doctrine of sovereignty in the seventeenth century. Perhaps I may also say, in addition, that I have also derived from your later works, especially the ‘Diktatur,’ a confirmation of my modes of research in the philosophy of art from yours in the philosophy of the state. If the reading of my book allows this feeling to emerge in an intelligible fashion, then the purpose of my sending it to you will be achieved. With my expression of special admiration;

Your very humble; Walter Benjamin.¹

In this chapter, I discuss Benjamin’s engagement with Carl Schmitt’s concept of sovereignty in Political Theology.² Although both Schmitt and Benjamin derive the concept of political-theology from seventeenth-century metaphysics, Schmitt takes Descartes to be the clearest philosophical expression of his position, whereas Benjamin invokes Leibniz’s Monadology as the closest philosophical sibling of the Baroque Trauerspiel. I argue that the differences between Schmitt’s and Benjamin’s accounts of sovereignty can be traced to these distinct metaphysical systems.


The discovery of Walter Benjamin’s intellectual debt to Carl Schmitt has been described as explosive. In Jacob Taubes’ words, Benjamin’s 1930 letter to Schmitt is a mine that “explodes our conception of the intellectual history of the Weimar period.”\(^3\) The letter in question is a single paragraph in which Benjamin professes his intellectual debt to Schmitt (it is cited in the epigraph).\(^4\) Benjamin’s editors, Adorno and Scholem, handled this letter as though it were toxic, excluding it from the edition of the collected correspondence. Arguably, such extreme reactions to Benjamin’s letter make of it both too much and too little; too much, because it would seem that there is something secret and dangerous in this short note, when actually, there is nothing in the letter that is not amply demonstrated in Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* book, in which he cites Schmitt’s *Political Theology* on multiple occasions. On the other hand, Taubes’ explosive metaphor makes too little of the intellectual debt described in the letter. By focusing on the shock of its discovery, it detracts from the substantive and complex interpenetration of Schmitt’s ideas in Benjamin’s text. The causal language of influence is in no way adequate to capture the relationship between ideas. If an idea’s ‘influence’ is gauged by how deeply it is submerged in a text, and how inextricably its meaning is bound-up with the minute


\(^4\) See the reference to the letter in question, above, in footnote 1. Benjamin’s profession of esteem, debt, admiration, and humility to Schmitt – one of the main jurists of National Socialism – has become one of the most widely publicized ‘dirty secrets’ of Weimar history. Amidst the scholarly gossip occasioned by Benjamin’s letter, as well as some truly insightful articles on the subtle affinities between their ideas, I have not come across any work that has recognized Benjamin’s Leibnizianism as the metaphysical basis for his divergence from Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty.
details of its content, then whatever explosive impact it might have will not be found in obvious and superficial facts, but will require excavation.

Since the discovery of Benjamin’s letter, critics have scrambled to distance Benjamin from Schmitt, despite his own claim to have learned from the author of Political Theology. While I agree that Benjamin differed from Schmitt, even profoundly so, these differences need to be traced to their roots in metaphysics. Righteous insistence that a left-leaning Jewish intellectual could have nothing in common with the Nazi legal theorist will only lead us astray. It cannot be denied that Benjamin took Schmitt’s project of Political Theology seriously. In particular, he learned from Schmitt how to overcome the conceptual distinctions between the specialized sciences, and to read the political and theological characteristics of an age directly from its expression in metaphysics. Schmitt approvingly quotes Edward Caird’s claim that “metaphysics is the most intensive and the clearest expression of an epoch.”\(^5\) The very structure of Political Theology is an attempt to bear out Caird’s remark. Schmitt, who refers to his method as the ‘sociology’ of juridical concepts, shows the substantial identity between the metaphysics, politics and theology of an age.\(^6\)

In terms similar to Schmitt’s, Benjamin describes how substantive ideas express the integral identity between ‘the religious, metaphysical, political and economic

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5 Schmitt, Political Theology, 46.

6 Schmitt describes how his method aims at discovering “spiritual but at the same time substantial identities” between the metaphysics of a certain epoch and its conceptually represented socio-political structure; see Political Theology, 45. The relationship between metaphysical and juridical concepts can be both spiritual and substantial because of the ‘radically systematic’ nature of ideas, in which the minutest details find a place within an intensively organized totality. Schmitt distinguishes the discovery of substantial ideas from a superficial play with concepts, which yield only “colorful symbols and pictures” (idem, 37).
tendencies’ of a given historical period. In his 1928 *Curriculum Vitae*, Benjamin credits this insight to Schmitt, as well as to the art historian, Alois Riegl:

> Such an analysis would regard the work of art as an integral expression of the religious, metaphysical, political and economic tendencies of its age, unconstrained in any way by territorial concepts [or the division into specific disciplines]. This task... was linked on the one hand to the methodological ideas of Alois Riegl, especially his doctrine of the *Kunstwollen*, and on the other hand to the contemporary work done by Carl Schmitt, who in his analysis of political phenomena has made a similar attempt to integrate phenomena whose apparent territorial distinctness is an illusion.⁷

The detailed and systematic analogy between theology and politics shows these to be different facets of a *singular idea*, rather than separable concepts with overlapping contents.

> Despite his agreement with Schmitt that the religious, political and economic tendencies of an age cannot be studied apart from the substantial *idea* (or metaphysics) of an age, Benjamin disagrees with Schmitt’s characterization of the *identity* between theological concepts and secular structures of political power. Benjamin argues that theological concepts are perforce *distorted* when they are translated into secular terms. According to Benjamin’s argument, early modern secularization has its origins in a theology of divine withdrawal. The profane world, vacated by God, is not merely natural and mundane, but fallen and demonic. Theological categories cannot be transposed, unscathed, into the language of secular politics, since secularization is itself premised on the view that the profane world is not the true world, but is subject to a curious *reversal*

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of values – the telling mark of its fall from grace. This reversal can be detected in the philosophical productions of the seventeenth century, albeit in a secular form. For instance, in Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the naïve attitude of sense perception is radically called into doubt as a phantasm put into our minds by an ‘evil genius’.⁸ Things in their simple immediacy are demonic illusions of a tangible, *material* world. They slip our grasp when we try to possess them as knowledge, which Descartes’ example of the protean ball of wax demonstrates. Although Descartes’ philosophy has a rigorously secularizing program, namely, to establish all knowledge on the foundation of the *cogito*, his argument for the dualism of thought and matter has roots in a more fundamental dualism between the profane world and the pure *otherness* of spirit. The material world carries the stigma of the abyssal gulf between the hidden God and the phantasmagorical immediacy of things.

Although Schmitt’s *Political Theology* points to the historical and conceptual origins of absolute sovereignty in the theological concept of a unique transcendent God, he does not recognize the extent to which the profane, secular world was represented in the context of a theology of evil during the turbulent period of religious wars in the seventeenth century. If Schmitt had recognized the allegorical strain in early modern thought, he might have paid more attention to the demonic face of the radiantly secular symbols of sovereign power – such as Thomas Hobbes’ Leviathan – which he holds up as examples in *Political Theology*. Schmitt came to recognize the demonic face of these symbols only later; in his 1938 book, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas*

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Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Symbol, he argues that, far from being an unassailable symbol of sovereign power, the Leviathan was “infused with a new demonic force by the biblical religiosity of the Protestant movement”.9

A second profound difference between Schmitt and Benjamin has scarcely been observed by critics. While Schmitt and Benjamin both derive the concept of political theology from seventeenth-century metaphysics, Schmitt takes Descartes to be the clearest philosophical expression of his position, whereas Benjamin invokes Leibniz’s Monadology as the closest philosophical sibling of the Baroque Trauerspiel. In this chapter, I argue that Leibnizian metaphysics provides the most crystallized expression of Benjamin’s theory of sovereignty. If I am correct in my hypothesis, then Benjamin’s interpretation of Leibniz should also provide his most detailed (and most buried) response to Schmitt’s Political Theology.

§2 Leibniz and Political Theology

Leibniz never achieved the same recognition as Hobbes and Spinoza for his contribution to modern political theory. On the contrary, his political thought was dismissed as moribund. Carl J. Friedrich – a one-time student of Schmitt’s – devoted an entire essay to demonstrating Leibniz’s utter lack of originality as a political thinker. As Friedrich writes:

It would seem that the extraordinary imaginative originality which characterizes his work as a metaphysician and mathematician is lacking in the field with which we here are concerned. Recurrent claims to the contrary have not succeeded in establishing Leibniz as a thinker of the first rank on law and politics; no basically novel insight can be attributed to him.¹⁰

According to Friedrich, Leibniz’s political philosophy remains mired in scholasticism, and therefore does not advance beyond a medieval conceptualization of the social order. In contrast to other early modern political thinkers, such as Hobbes, who see external coercion as necessary for the enforcement of law, Leibniz grounds his conception of natural law in divine understanding, in which each rational being participates to a certain degree. God’s communion with minds is fulfilled in the ‘City of God,’ in which each mind freely imitates and expresses the decrees of the most just and enlightened monarch.¹¹ Friedrich points out that there is nothing novel in Leibniz’s City of God; it remains essentially Thomistic: “…[L]et us remember that [Leibniz’s] City of God is essentially the same as that envisioned by the Great Spanish neo-Thomists, if not by Thomas Aquinas himself…. It is medieval rationalism in its unitary radicalism.”¹²

What political insights, if any, could Benjamin have gleaned from this quasi-medieval metaphysician, as Leibniz is here described? Rather than focusing on the scholasticism that infused Leibniz’s political writings, Benjamin discovers the political


¹² Friedrich, “Philosophical Reflections of Leibniz,” esp. 51.
ferment at the core of Leibniz’s metaphysics, in which the world of ideas has been so intensively described that it “automatically includes and absorbs the empirical world.”

Following Schmitt, Benjamin denies the territorial distinctness of political science, treating metaphysics as the most crystallized expression of the socio-political order. Benjamin would therefore reject Friedrich’s division between Leibniz’s “extraordinary imaginative originality” as a metaphysician, and his conservatism as a political thinker. The very aspects of Leibniz’s metaphysics that strike us as ‘extraordinary,' even bizarre, are, for Benjamin, the clues to the socio-political organization of the Baroque age.

Benjamin reads the recurrence of medieval themes in Baroque literary production as an indirect expression of theological aspirations in a world that denied these aspirations any religious fulfillment. This interpretation of the Baroque provides an insight into how the scholastic aspects of Leibnizian rationalism could simultaneously conserve and alter medieval forms, since these forms were transposed, like authoritative

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13 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (trans. J. Osborne; London: Verso, 1998), 32. According to Benjamin’s formulation in the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’ of the *Trauerspiel* book, philosophical systems retain their truth-value despite the decay of their conceptual frameworks, since, the more intensively they attempt to describe the empirical world, the more they succeed in describing the world of ideas. The arrangement of concrete elements within an idea thus accomplishes two things: on the one hand, it ‘absorbs’ a historical sequence within the intensive arrangement of conceptual elements (that is, it represents historical life, indirectly, within an essence), and on the other hand, it gives the idea world a concrete representation, which persists beyond the decay of its conceptual framework: “In the great philosophies the world is seen in terms of the order of ideas. But the conceptual frameworks within which this took place have, for the most part, long since become fragile. Nevertheless, these systems, such as Plato’s theory of ideas, Leibniz’s Monadology, or Hegel’s dialectic, still remain valid as attempts at a description of the world. It is peculiar to all of these attempts that they still preserve their meaning, indeed they often reveal it more fully, even when they are applied to the world of ideas instead of empirical reality. For it was as descriptions of an order of ideas that these systems of thought originated. The more intensely the respective thinkers strove to outline the image of reality, the more they were bound to develop a conceptual order which, for the later interpreter, would be seen as serving the original depiction of the world of ideas which was really intended. If it is the task of the philosopher to practice the kind of description of the world of ideas which automatically includes and absorbs the empirical world, then he occupies an elevated position between that of the scientist and the artist” (Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 32).
quotations, into secular philosophy. More fundamentally, however, Leibniz’s metaphysics provides the philosophical structure for Benjamin’s understanding of the secularization of history. According to Benjamin, Leibniz’s ‘monadology’ accomplishes the transition from an eschatological conception of historical time into an abbreviation of the historical process within a new anti-historical creation – ‘nature’. The seventeenth-century concept of nature is not yet the stable, law-governed totality of ‘possible experience’ that it becomes in the eighteenth century. It retains its immediate connection with God, in the form of creaturely life. Each individual monad confusedly expresses the infinite perfection of divine ideas. But, for this secular age, the horizon of representable experience was forcibly confined within the immanence of creation. The telos of Leibnizian philosophy is no longer set beyond creation in the world to come, but is inherent in monads themselves, in the entelechy contained within each individual substance. An analysis that could capture all of the infinite complexity virtually contained within a confused perception would reveal the entire scope and sequence of the world’s unfolding. To put this point another way, Leibniz’s monadology accomplishes the transition from a temporal conception of infinity as sequential (i.e. as something always on the horizon, yet to be fulfilled) into the totality of knowledge that is always present, although incapable of complete analysis by finite minds.

Leibnizian rationalism remains within a scholastic framework, since it ties the contingent details of experience directly to the concept of God, but the restriction of this experience within the bounds of creaturely life transforms the meaning of both the supernatural and the natural. The dislocation of medieval rationalism into a secular context produces a minute, yet total, transformation of its content. Strict adherence to
tradition, rather than its abrupt negation is, in this case, the most radical form of its
placement.14

Benjamin’s adherence to Schmitt’s Political Theology performs a similar minute
transformation – more evident in the details than in the whole. Far from challenging
Schmitt’s position, Benjamin quotes him on several occasions in The Origin of German
Trauerspiel. Moreover, in private correspondence with Schmitt, Benjamin professes his
‘special admiration’ and humility before the author of Politische Theologie. But
Benjamin’s Leibnizianism – innocuously relegated to a point of ‘epistemo-criticism,’ and
isolated from the main text in a prologue – disturbs Schmitt’s argument in a most
indirect, non-polemical way. The suppressed challenge, which spreads out and
overturns each aspect of Schmitt’s theory, has its center in Leibniz’s rejection of
Cartesian voluntarism.15 Unlike Descartes, Leibniz denies the possibility of the

14 Benjamin describes the concept of a radical, but at the same time non-polemical, or non-disruptive
gesture. On the one hand, “...all the energy of the [Baroque] age was concentrated on a complete
revolution of the content of life, while orthodox ecclesiastical forms were preserved” (Benjamin, Origin of
German Tragic Drama, 79). On the other hand, “Nothing was more foreign to [the Baroque] than the
expectation of the end of the world, or even a revolution... (idem, 80). Complete stabilization, the Counter-
Reformation ideal, was anything but conservative. The Baroque authors of Benjamin’s study manipulated
tradition as a prop, stripping it of any authority, except the authority of quotation, which depends on the
arranging activity of the authorial subject.

15 Unlike the Cartesian notion that natural law depends on divine will alone (such that, if God decided it, 2
+ 2 could equal 5), Leibniz’s concept of natural law depends on the immutable decrees of divine
understanding. Leibniz’s rejection of voluntarism has a profound impact on his political theory. In the
first place, he upholds that natural law is inherent in divine being, which each individual’s understanding
shares in, to a degree. This means that natural law is not law because it is enforced by external agency,
but because it is rationally persuasive. In the second place, whereas Hobbes argues that anarchy would
result if sovereignty were less than absolute (invoking a stark ‘either/or’), Leibniz argues for a relative or
divided notion of sovereignty, maintaining that justice would still prevail because of the share of each
individual in divine justice and wisdom. Accordingly, Leibniz rejects the fundamental premise of the
Bodinian concept of sovereignty, which Schmitt endorses in Political Theology – namely the indivisibility
of the sovereign, who exercises the sole right of decision on the state of exception (Schmitt, Political
Theology, 8). Leibniz’s rejection of indivisibility, and his countenancing of multiple sovereigns within a
state, is directly connected to his rejection of the arbitrary voluntarism of the sovereign. The sovereign,
like the various estates, remains bound by the rational harmony of natural laws. Unity is expressed in this
rational order, rather than in the voluntary decision of the sovereign.
exception: any appearance of exceptionality stems from our limited understanding of the infinite complexity of divine providence. Leibniz’s response to the apparent exception (unlike Descartes’ or Schmitt’s) is not a decisive interruption of the natural order, but a deepened attention to the endless complexities of the natural world.

§3 Schmitt’s Cartesianism

According to Schmitt, political concepts have their substantive basis in theology, not only historically, but also systematically. The example that he uses to demonstrate his claim is the parallel between the Cartesian voluntaristic God, who intervenes in the order of nature, and the personalism of the sovereign. Cartesian metaphysics is consistently singled out in Schmitt’s Political Theology. For instance, Schmitt cites Frédéric Atger as saying that “The Prince is the Cartesian god transposed to the political world.” Schmitt’s Cartesian metaphysics has two outstanding features: first, (according to Schmitt), “it is a document of the new rationalist spirit. In the depth of doubt, it finds consolation by using reason unswervingly,” and second, the “mind suddenly forced to reason” discovers that “the works created by several masters are not as perfect as those created by one.”

Hobbes translates the Cartesian revolution into political philosophy proper. According to Schmitt’s reading, the ‘Leviathan’ reflects the same characteristics of a


17 Schmitt, Political Theology, 47.
personalistic sovereign, whose outstanding features are modeled on the will and intellect of the Cartesian subject. The Leviathan is “an immense person”: “The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were dominated by this idea of the sole sovereign, which is one of the reasons why, in addition to the decisionist cast of his thinking, Hobbes remained personalistic and postulated an ultimate concrete deciding instance, and why he also heightened his state, the Leviathan, into an immense person...”  

Personalism is relevant for Schmitt not as anthropomorphism, but insofar as it entails the moment of decision in juristic reasoning, which is concentrated in the sovereign individual.

Schmitt develops a systematic connection between the concept of sovereignty and the decision on the exceptional case. He begins by showing the inconclusiveness of general norms: “Because a general norm, as represented by an ordinary legal prescription, can never encompass a total exception, the decision that a real exception exists cannot therefore be entirely derived from this norm.” The incompetence of general norms indicates a failure of liberal jurisprudence, which confuses juristic law with natural-scientific laws. Whereas laws of nature are universally and necessarily valid – that is, they apply without exception – juridical law cannot eliminate the contribution of subjectivity, namely the decision as to whether the situation is normal, or exceptional. Liberalism does not completely eliminate the subjective moment from legal thinking, but it masks and neutralizes it, according to Schmitt’s criticism, by

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18 Ibid.

19 Idem, 6.
identifying the subject with the immanent ‘general will,’ and dividing political representation into a multiplicity of functions and offices.

By contrast, Schmitt grounds the normal functioning of the law in the moment of pure decision – namely, the decision to suspend the law in the exceptional case. The fact that the state of exception is not a return to the state of nature, but that it remains an ‘order’ insofar as it is grounded in the decision of the sovereign, indicates to Schmitt that the juristic extends beyond the legal, and this extension is won by the ‘pure decision’. The decision is the transcendental condition of normative law, because it secures the ‘situation’ in which the law applies. “All law is situational law” writes Schmitt. Norms do not apply directly to the chaos of experience; rather the application of law is predicated upon the creation of a homogeneous medium. The sovereign produces and guarantees the situation, or this immanent totality in which experience may be constituted as lawful.

The extension of juristic order beyond the normative is grounded in the unlimited will, or decision, of the sovereign. Schmitt’s ‘personalism’ reflects the Cartesian rational subject in two respects: first, the Cartesian solution to the uncertainty of experience is to fortify the subject, in order to ground in it (i.e. the rational subject) the construction of an ordered experience. Second, the Cartesian subject is characterized by both intellect and an unlimited will. Descartes argues that the will is perfect and unlimited, in contrast to our finite understanding. It is our absolute will which shows that we are made in the image and likeness of God: “There is only volition

\textsuperscript{20} Idem, 13.
alone, or the liberty of the free will, which I experience to be so great in myself that I cannot conceive the idea of any other more ample and extended, so this is what principally indicates to me that I am made in the image and likeness of God.”

Descartes’ description of the rational subject is an exact analogy to the voluntaristic God, whose free will, rather than his understanding, is responsible for the exception from the order of natural law. Descartes makes the existence of error – the equivalent of the exception, amongst finite beings – dependent on the unlimited condition of the will, which exceeds the finite understanding.

I have shown how Schmitt’s *Political Theology* owes its systematic structure to Descartes. In this context, it comes as a surprise that Schmitt finds the clearest philosophical expression of the analogy between theology and jurisprudence in Leibniz. Schmitt’s reference to Leibniz seems to throw a wrench into his sequence of analogies. Unlike the Cartesian voluntaristic God, who intervenes constantly in experience, Leibniz denounces such voluntarism by comparing it to political despotism. He writes, against Descartes, in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*:

> Where will [divine] justice and wisdom reside if there remains only a certain despotic power, if will holds the place of reason, and if, according to the definition of tyrants, justice consists in whatever pleases the most powerful? Besides, it seems that all acts of will presuppose a reason for willing and that this reason is naturally prior to the act of will.

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21 Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 4, §57; in Descartes, *Discourse on Method. Meditations on First Philosophy*.


23 *Discourse on Metaphysics*, §6, in Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*. 
Along with his denial of the ‘extra-ordinary’ will of God, Leibniz also rules out the possibility of the exception. Even the most random sequence of events can be rationally explained, although this explanation may not be accessible to finite minds. Leibniz writes, again in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*:

> The volitions or acts of God are commonly divided into ordinary or extraordinary. But it is good to consider that God does nothing which is not orderly. Thus, what passes for extraordinary is extraordinary only with some particular order which is established among creatures; for everything is in conformity with respect to the universal order. This is true to such an extent that not only does nothing completely irregular occur in the world, but we would not even be able to imagine such a thing. Thus, let us assume, for example, that someone jots down a number of points at random on a piece of paper, as do those who practice the ridiculous art of geomancy. I maintain that it is possible to find a geometric line whose notion is constant and uniform, following a certain rule, such that this line passes through all the points in the same order in which the hand jotted them down.\(^{24}\)

In contrast to Descartes, who explains the exception by relegating it to an unlimited condition of the will, Leibniz explains the appearance of exceptionality as an indication of the extreme complexity of divine providence, which requires infinite analysis in order to detect its lawful structure. God’s providence is capable of ‘anticipating’ experience down to its most finely grained details. The appearance of an exception therefore requires a deepening of attention, or interpretation, rather than an executive decision.

Leibniz’s example of the ‘ridiculous art of geomancy’ shows how the total exclusion of exceptionality is conceptually linked to an infinite task of analysis. Leibniz’s uniquely radical rationalism, which seeks to determine an order for even the most random sequence of points, has the –perhaps unintended– result of re-inscribing

\(^{24}\) Ibid.
indeterminacy at a higher level. Note Leibniz’s language: for any random jotting of points, “it is possible to find... a certain rule.” But, in the first place, this rule is so complex that its results pass for irregular, and, in the second place, even determining what this rule is becomes a matter of endless possible combinations. The example inseparably welds together two strong impressions: there is a law governing every aspect of life, but this law is unknown. While nothing could be a clearer statement of Absolute power than an indeterminate law that regulates the minutest details of experience, it is worth emphasizing how different this is from the simple ‘either/or’ of Schmitt’s decisionism. The appearance of randomness serves to re-enforce the idea of a supreme order that dwarfs the finite understanding. But this is only the case because Leibniz holds to the principle of sufficient reason, in which every apparently random detail can be judged to have an explanation in God’s selection of the best possible world. Accordingly, even the most ‘ridiculous art’ is treated as a source of possible instruction, or as an extract from an infinitely complex system.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{25} Benjamin’s description of the allegorical as a dialectic between convention and expression bears a remarkable similarity to the Leibnizian argument that any arbitrary jottings can be lawfully interpreted. The allegorist, according to Benjamin’s description, simultaneously devalues and sanctifies things, by showing that any arbitrarily chosen thing can mean anything else: “Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else. With this possibility a destructive, but just verdict is passed on the profane world: it is characterized as a world in which the detail is of no importance. But it will be unmistakably apparent, especially to anyone who is familiar with allegorical textual exegesis, that all of the things which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them onto a higher plane, and which can, indeed sanctify them. Considered in allegorical terms, then, the profane world is both elevated and devalued. The religious dialectic of content has its formal correlative in the dialectic of convention and expression. For allegory is both: convention and expression; and both are inherently contradictory” (Benjamin, \textit{Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 175). In the example of the ‘ridiculous art of geomancy,’ we see that there is no distinction between the utterly random and the orderly, since even random jottings are to be interpreted, according to the principle of sufficient reason, as pointing to an extremely complex, but rational order.
The requirement of infinite interpretation is illuminating, especially when we return to the passage in which Schmitt names Leibniz as the clearest thinker of the analogy between jurisprudence and theology. Schmitt goes on to substantiate his observation with the following quotation from Leibniz: “We have deservedly transferred the model of our division from theology to jurisprudence because the similarity of these two disciplines is astonishing.” Schmitt continues to paraphrase Leibniz: “Both have a double principle, reason (hence there is a natural theology and a natural jurisprudence) and scripture, which means a book with positive revelations and directives.”

I want to underline the contrast between Schmitt and Leibniz on this point: whereas Schmitt describes the dual principle of juristic thinking in terms of the norm and the decision, Leibniz invokes the duality between natural norms of reason and scripture, or text. The relationship between the norm and the decision is one of abrogation or rupture, since the pure decision only exists in the space where law is suspended (i.e. in the exception). By contrast, the relationship between the norm and the text is one of accordance, or fit. Leibniz describes how interpretation of the text, no matter how occult its meaning, will ultimately discover the harmony between the revealed, positive law and the directives of natural reason.

26 Schmitt, Political Theology, 37–38; my emphasis.

27 Leibniz uses the expression ‘principle of fitness’ to describe how contingent truths are not arbitrary, but follow from divine wisdom, in creating the best of all possible worlds. Leibniz brings this up, against Descartes’ argument that divine will, rather than understanding, is the source of truth (an argument that, according to Leibniz, leads to arbitrariness). In the Monadology, Leibniz describes the principle of contingent truths as one of ‘fitness,’ rather than arbitratiness, “as Descartes appears to have held” (Monadology, §46, Leibniz, Philosophical Essays, 219). See also the Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason, §11, Leibniz, Philosophical Essays, 211.
There are two related points deserving of our attention here. In the first place, the significance of the ‘text’ is not limited to jurisprudential or theological thinking. The ‘Book of Nature’ and the ‘Book of the Times’ were common Baroque metaphors, according to Benjamin. In other words, all of nature takes on the characteristic of a text, to be read and interpreted. The emphasis on text and context stands in direct contrast to Schmitt’s appeal to the simplistic ‘either/or’ of the sovereign decision. The individual is submerged in a context, in which each detail can be ‘read,’ and interpreted. The second point to underscore is that the principle of ‘fit’ in the interpretation of texts exemplifies what Benjamin refers to as the ‘non-polemical’ attitude of the Baroque, which adheres to the authority of scholastic and classical texts, while radically transforming the meaning of their content. Benjamin describes the submissive attitude of the Baroque, quite in contrast to Schmitt’s decisionistic rupture with any inherited order. Benjamin brings these two points together in the following quotation: “The ‘Book of Nature’ and the ‘Book of the Times’ are objects of Baroque meditation… It is a consequence of this same mixture of complacency and contemplativeness that ‘Baroque nationalism’ ‘never took the form of political action…”

Benjamin draws a systematic and rigorous analogy between divine providence, which is immutable, but interpreted in minute detail in the ‘Book of Nature,’ and the non-polemical attitude of the Baroque authors, who adhered to the letter of the text while transforming the meaning of its details. This set of analogies is no less systematic than Schmitt’s identification of the Cartesian voluntaristic God with the decisionist sovereign.

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28 Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 141.
Unlike Schmitt, who uses the threat of the exception to grant the sovereign extraordinary power to interrupt the natural order, Benjamin shows that the Baroque concept of sovereignty gives rise to the creation of a new kind of order, one in which the sovereign is granted the ability to rule over life itself – that is, to have power over that which cannot be ‘anticipated’ by merely general norms. A new kind of legitimacy is introduced, which ushers in the concept of law that applies without exception. The sovereign transforms the unpredictable state of history into a new, anti-historical construct: ‘nature.’ Benjamin shows how the ideal of complete stabilization is at the center of the seventeenth-century concept of sovereignty: “The ruler is designated from the outset as the holder of dictatorial power if war, revolt, or other catastrophes should lead to a state of emergency. This is typical of the Counter-Reformation. With the release of the worldly and despotic aspects of the rich feeling for life, which is characteristic of the Renaissance, the ideal of a complete stabilization, an ecclesiastical and political restoration, unfolds in all its consequences.”

The sovereign, who is endowed with absolute powers, is charged with the task of creating a totally immanent secular sphere. The ideal of total stabilization is haunted by, even grounded in, the threat of emergency. Stabilization is forcibly imposed, and issues in a violent deformation of history. This distortion of history, and its absorption into the state of creation, is what Benjamin refers to as ‘natural history.’ Natural history is, in its detail and in its totality, a Leibnizian concept. Indeed, Benjamin’s attention to

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29 Idem, 65.
the concept of ‘natural history’ illuminates just how much the Leibnizian idea of stability (evident in his emphasis on ‘pre-established harmony’) is tempered by the threat of permanent disaster. Leibniz, who uses the term ‘natural history’ in his 1702 letter to Bayle, has a marked tendency to naturalize historical crisis by comparing it to the permanent rise and fall of nature. As Leibniz writes in “Ermahnung an die Teutschen”:

For as regards maintenance, it is well known that the security of everyone is founded upon the common peace, the disruption of which is like a great earthquake or hurricane, in which all is confounded and no-one knows wither to turn for succour or advice. There are but a few who can escape this turmoil. But the many who cannot escape it give themselves up to it helplessly, awaiting in resignation the immanent disaster; all of which has, during the present wars, been again and again our own experience.30

In this text, which is ostensibly about securing total stability founded on the common peace, Leibniz turns almost immediately to the threat of its disruption, which he describes in terms of the eruption of a natural disaster. There is no moral or social rank that is spared this turmoil – everyone is destroyed, regardless of his station in life. Leibniz further emphasizes the permanence of catastrophe, which has ‘again and again’ been his experience during the present wars.

The concept of ‘natural-history’ has its provenance in the war-torn battlefield of Europe during the Thirty Years War. The division of Christendom into a number of European provinces ensured that historical actions could no longer be integrated in the process of redemption.31 According to Benjamin, “The Baroque knows no eschatology;


31 Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 78.
and for that very reason it possesses no mechanism by which all earthly things are
gathered in together and exulted before being consigned to their end."32 Whereas the
Middle Ages presented the suffering of creaturely life as a station on the road to
salvation, the German Trauerspiel is concentrated entirely with the hopelessness of the
earthly condition. This truncation is not merely an abbreviation of history. It is a violent
distortion of time. History is circumscribed within the permanent repetition of natural
law. As such, it is de-temporalized, absorbed within the ‘pre-historical’ state of creation.

Benjamin draws on Leibniz’s infinitesimal calculus to describe the
transformation of the infinite from a recursive, or successive infinity, into the infinitely
minute perceptions that constitute extension (a spatial, rather than a temporal concept):
“If history is secularized in the setting, this is an expression of the same metaphysical
tendency which simultaneously led, in the exact sciences, to the infinitesimal method. In
both cases chronological movement is grasped and analyzed in a spatial image.”33

Benjamin’s invocation of the infinitesimal calculus, as the forcible re-direction of infinite
succession within a finite space, indicates the structural core of ‘natural-history.’
Because of the infinity of minute perceptions that make up our experience, Leibniz
argues that the entire sequence of development can be grasped by an intensification of
attention to the infinity contained in each ‘confused perception.’ Accordingly, the
present is filled with the future and laden with the past, and “eyes as piercing as those of

32 Idem, 66.
33 Idem, 92.
God could read the whole sequence of the universe in the smallest of substances.”

Monads contain the traces of the past as well as the marks of the future. The future is not described, in other words, in temporal terms, as something yet to come; rather its unknown quality resides in the complexity of the detail which can be read by the deepening of attention to minutiae of experience.

The creaturely state, cut-off from eschatology and deprived of grace, nonetheless expresses theological aspirations *indirectly*. Everything that happens in the creaturely sphere is already foretold in divine providence, which gives nature a dim illumination. The indirect expression of divine providence in the creaturely state is expressed in the idea of perception as reading, or interpretation of the ‘Book of Nature.’ The eternal laws of reason can be read in the contingent details of nature. In Leibniz’s words: “It is true that we must not imagine that we can read these eternal laws of reason in the soul from an open book, as the edict of the praetor can be read from his tablet without effort and scrutiny. But it is enough that they can be discovered in us by dint of attention.”

Benjamin draws the analogy between the state of nature in the soul and the constitution of ‘natural-history’. Just as the ideal of total stabilization manifests itself in the deformation of history, and its likening to the permanent state of nature, so too is the Baroque ideal of a new ‘anti-historical’ nature reflected in detail in the constitution of a new anti-historical *human-nature*. The result is the constitution of a quasi-stoic subject, which is also thoroughly haunted by the ‘state of emergency of the soul.’ We are


35 Ibid.
reminded that Descartes’ discovery of the conscious ’I’ is tormented by the threat of insanity, the deception by an evil genius, and total isolation from the world and other men alike. Descartes describes, in the course of the meditations, how he must withdraw into himself, forcibly blocking the influence of his senses – closing his eyes, stopping his ears, and so on. Benjamin underlines the parallel between the concept of ‘natural history’ and the creation of an anti-historical ‘psychology’ of the subject:

The function of the tyrant is the restoration of order in the state of emergency: a dictatorship whose utopian goal will always be to replace the unpredictability of historical accident with the iron constitution of the laws of nature. But the stoic technique also aims to establish a corresponding fortification against the state of emergency in the soul, the rule of the emotions. It too seeks to set up a new, anti-historical creation.36

Parallel to the stabilization of history in the state of creation, the Baroque Trauerspiel truncates the plot by focusing on the inner-world of the soul and its vicissitudes. The dramatic action is subordinated to the play of emotions within the individual. The irony of this ‘intensive psychology’ is that the individual soul becomes an object of knowledge, capable of being studied and manipulated. The cost of stabilizing the soul is the depersonalization of the subject. As Benjamin writes: "Human emotions as the predictable driving mechanism of the creature – that is the final item in the inventory of knowledge which had to transform the dynamism of world-history into political action."37

36 Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 74.

37 Idem, 96.
The stoic fortification against the passions is not a triumph for the transcendent individual, whose ‘will and reason’ prevail over nature. Rather, the spirit is totally reduced to its immanent expression in the will to power, and ultimately, the moral individual is subsumed within what Benjamin refers to as ‘the entelechy of fate.’ In other words, the individual is subsumed within the totality of natural laws, and the mere fact of physical isolation serves precisely to heighten the subjection of moral individuality to the impersonal rule of destiny. This is the paradox of the deepening of attention to the immanent sphere of the soul: whereas, on the one hand, “the real purpose of drama was to communicate knowledge of the life of the soul,”\textsuperscript{38} on the other hand, “the Trauerspiel... has no individual hero, only constellations of heroes.”\textsuperscript{39} Worse still: the individual itself becomes a constellation, or nexus of forces, divided into conflicting passions and dismembered parts. Rather than firmly defined characters, the life of the soul is described in terms of the perpetual clash of passions. Little wonder that the Trauerspiel’s hero, the sovereign representative of history, can never arrive at a decision; this stands, however, in sharp contrast to Schmitt’s description of the sovereign as he who decides on the exception.

The soul cannot be individuated on moral grounds, but is an element extracted from the total context, or text. Benjamin draws on Leibniz’s monad to characterize a shift in the concept of individuality, from a transcendent voluntaristic self to a nexus of forces that depends on a total context of relations. Rather than Schmitt’s portrayal of the Baroque sovereign, Benjamin draws this description from the work Alois Riegl – the

\textsuperscript{38} Idem, 99.

\textsuperscript{39} Idem, 132.
other of the two sources that Benjamin referred to, in his *Curriculum Vitae*, as formative influences for his project in the *Trauerspiel* book. Unlike Schmitt, whose analysis of the political-theological complex uncannily erases Lutheranism, Riegl describes the monumental impact of Luther on the awareness of the ‘individual’ as a creature, lodged within the immanent context of the natural world. Riegl writes:

We can speak of a distinct natural-scientific world-view only after 1520. This took shape specifically among groups of purely German heritage... Why 1520? Because this worldview was first articulated during the Reformation. The errors into which the Catholic monothesism had fallen in Renaissance Italy convinced Germanic people that this worldview was no longer acceptable in its current form. One aspect in particular conflicted deeply with their own sensibilities, and it was Martin Luther who defined more precisely what was so objectionable: the individualism of classical and Roman people, the doctrine of free will. As Luther argued, man has no free will. What he does and how he acts – all this unfolds according to an irrevocably fixed predestination. This predestination, determined by God and eternally valid, is nothing less than a law. It defeats anything individual. Man possesses no individual volition, and no other individual stands above him, no God directing his course at will – only a law. The law, however, comes from God.40

The implication of the Lutheran philosophy in aesthetic terms is also worth briefly describing, since it shows how the individual became embedded in a naturalist setting, as one element in a totality:

Our senses deceive us by showing us individuals where there are no individuals. Three-dimensionality must therefore be merely illusory; natural-scientific art must be anti-sculptural. It communicates the will of things most faithfully with optical vision; hence the predominance of painting (which does not isolate objects but rather shows them within their surroundings; not as isolated phenomena in nature, but extracts from nature). What differentiates such art from nature? The relations among objects come more clearly into view in the image than in nature; herein lies the improvement. To create harmony, the

painter portrays the impact of naturalistic causal interactions on the objects in his picture. The causal relationship is the purpose of art.41

In literary prose, this transformation in the representation of the individual is reflected in the absorption of the ethical persona into the ‘context’ of relations, in which the connections between characteristic ‘types’ and their environment become more important than the moral qualities of ‘character.’ (Benjamin elaborates this point in his analysis of Goethe’s ‘Elective Affinities’). We can see how Leibniz’s monadology is in the background of this description: the individual is an isolated ‘point of view’ – it is windowless, but it mirrors and intensifies the total context of nature internally, in the sequence of its perceptions.

§5 Stabilization and Isolation

Having devoted so much theoretical attention to the significance of detail in the substantial configuration of ideas, I would be remiss if I did not conclude with an examination of the details of Benjamin’s text. I would like to draw attention to the political-theological implications of Benjamin’s language in the short passage wherein he describes the monadological structure of ideas. The description is not exclusively epistemological, but describes the intensive world-order of the German Baroque.

This gives the idea its total scope. And its structure is a monadological one, imposed by totality in contrast to its own inalienable isolation. The idea is a monad. The being that enters into it, with its past and subsequent history, brings – concealed in its own form – an indistinct abbreviation of the rest of the world of

41 Idem, 339.
ideas, just as, according to Leibniz’s *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686), every single monad contains, in an indistinct way, all the others. The idea is a monad – the pre-stabilized representation of phenomena resides within it, as in their objective interpretation.42

The primary features of Benjamin’s political-theology are indicated in this short text. In the first place, Benjamin refers to the pre-stabilized representation of phenomena within the monad. Benjamin emphasizes the complete stabilization of the phenomenal world in Leibnizian metaphysics, reflecting a perhaps unintended meaning of Leibniz’s expression, ‘pre-established harmony’ (the German is *prästabiliert*). In the monad, historical life is represented under the aspect of complete stabilization. This is the significance, in historical terms, of representing becoming in its state of being, or rest. Within the monad, historical life is distorted as the ‘virtual arrangement’ of detail, requiring intensive interpretation. The minute shift from pre-established to pre-stabilized conveys the precise meaning of Benjamin’s ‘natural history’.

In the second place, Benjamin describes the monad’s inalienable isolation [*unveräußerlichen Isolierung*], in contrast to its totality. Once again, there is a barely noticeable shift in language – this time from Schmitt’s ‘sole’ sovereignty of reason to Leibniz’s ‘isolated’ monad. Whereas Schmitt celebrated the perfection of the singular architect and legislator of the world, Benjamin invokes Leibniz to underscore the ‘isolated,’ windowless point-of-view of the sovereign who rules over a self-enclosed world. The isolation of the monad contrasts with the totality that is mirrored within it, but the contrast is no contradiction – it describes a point-of-view that is cut off from any direct access to the universal, but remains submerged within the total, immanent

context. In Adorno’s words, “each monad ‘represents’ the universe, but it has no windows; it represents the universal within its own walls. That is to say, its own structure is objectively the same as that of the universal. It may be conscious of this to different degrees. But it has no immediate access to universality, it does not look at it, as it were…. Only by reaching the acme of genuine individualization, only by obstinately following up the desiderata of its concretion, does the work become truly the bearer of the universal.”

In so far as the universal is dimly reflected within the totally immanent context of the monad, it is bound-up with the most minute, transient details of experience. Rather than the decisive gesture of Schmitt’s sovereign, which is nothing more than an abstract negation, individuality only has content in the pursuit of the opaque and quasi-blind details of creaturely life.

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Epilogue: *Hamlet* and the Redemption of Melancholy

For Walter Benjamin, *Hamlet* is the Baroque *Trauerspiel*, or ‘mourning play,’ par excellence. If the German plays were hobbled by an ‘awkward form’ and a narrow earnestness (which Benjamin credits to a national particularity), Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was the fulfilled ideal, a virtuoso masterwork that gave precise meaning to the ‘mourning play’ by bringing play, in all its forms (dissemblance, comedy, theatricality) into the heart of the mournful. *Hamlet* simultaneously established the genre of the Baroque *Trauerspiel* and overcame its rigid form. Benjamin goes so far as to suggest that, “...for *Hamlet*... the theory of *Trauerspiel* is predestined to contain the prolegomena of [its] interpretation.”¹ But Benjamin’s language of ‘pre-destination’ is somewhat disingenuous, since *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* was written with *Hamlet* chiefly in mind.

Benjamin’s stated intention in his *Habilitation* on the German *Trauerspiel* was to find a historical resonance for the Baroque plays, which had been neglected and misunderstood by literary historians. By a historical resonance, Benjamin did not mean a historicist understanding of the genre, which would explain away its admitted awkwardness by reference to historical events, blaming the ‘age of bombast’ and religious wars for its formal irregularities. Instead, Benjamin sought a Platonic idea of *Trauerspiel*, or the fulfilled ideal form, as the true critical standard. If the German

Trauerspiel was like the ruin of a great building, the idea of Trauerspiel would be its ‘virtual’ completion.²

Hamlet provided the closest approximation of this ideal. Benjamin looked to Hamlet, not only in order to provide a ‘historical resonance’ for the inferior German plays. He also shows how Shakespeare was misunderstood by German Romanticism, with the result that the allegorical and Baroque features of the play were misconstrued. The Romantic revival of Shakespeare in Germany was bound to miss its mark: Romanticism came into explicit conflict with Christianity, whereas the Baroque Trauerspiel had its center of gravity in a Christian world, albeit in its decline. Benjamin writes: “Of all the profoundly disturbed and divided periods of European history, the Baroque is the only one which occurred at a time when the authority of Christianity was unshaken.”³

To counteract the Romantic reception of Shakespeare, Benjamin’s interpretation of Hamlet shows that the play was pre-occupied with the question of salvation in a world deprived of grace (in other words, Benjamin gives us a Lutheran, dare we say Germanic, reading of Hamlet). To wit, Benjamin locates the dramatic tension in Hamlet in the reversal from profound mourning, trapped in a world of infinite hopelessness, to the acceptance of Christian providence, which ultimately transforms melancholy into blessed existence:

²“The powerful design of this form should be thought through to its conclusion; only under this condition is it possible to discuss the idea of the German Trauerspiel. In the ruins of great building the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in lesser buildings, however well preserved they are; and for this reason the German Trauerspiel merits interpretation” (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 235).

³Idem, 79.
The age succeeded (at least once) in conjuring up the human figure who corresponded to this dichotomy between the neo-antique and the mediaeval light in which the Baroque saw the melancholic. But Germany was not the country which was able to do this. The figure is Hamlet. The secret of his person is contained within the playful, but for that very reason firmly circumscribed, passage through all the stages in this complex of intentions... For the *Trauerspiel* Hamlet alone is a spectator by the grace of God; but he cannot find satisfaction in what he sees enacted, only in his own fate. His life, the exemplary object of his mourning, points, before its extinction, to the Christian providence in whose bosom his mournful images are transformed into a blessed existence. Only in a princely life such as this is melancholy redeemed, by being confronted with itself. The rest is silence.⁴

Let us follow the course from Hamlet’s self-absorbed melancholy to Christian providence. As Benjamin notes, the mourning play is essentially a study of feeling in transition; this is what is playful about the whole business.⁵ For even when the mourner would dearly wish to remain fixated on the object of his loss, the passage of time breeds forgetting. Indeed, the very reality of the melancholic’s world passes into oblivion. The ‘mourning play’ goes through these feelings in order to work them out. The profound descent, quite literally beneath the earth, into the most vile and reviled aspects of profane life, suddenly reverses its course. The very images drawn from that ‘rubbish heap of inauthentic existence’ are shown to be phantasms, mere ‘toys’ of the mind. They disappear into thin air when melancholy becomes self-conscious, and the allegorist awakens in God’s world. The rest is silence. But now we have leapt ahead of ourselves to the redemptive ending. Let us go back, and work through the stages of mourning.

⁴Idem, 157–58.

⁵“Sorrow conjures up itself in the mourning play, but it also redeems itself. This tension and release of feeling in its own realm is a form of play. In it sorrow is nothing more than a single tone on the scale of feelings, and so we may say that there is no mourning play pure and simple...” (Walter Benjamin, “Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy,” in idem, *Selected Writings*, eds. Marcus Bullock, Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith; 4 vols. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1996–2003, I, 61).
§1 *Hamlet* as Mourning Play

The play of mourning comes onto the stage of world history with the origins of modernity. Its distinctive problems emerge between the disintegration of the mediaeval order, and the establishment of the secular sovereign state. Benjamin criticizes literary historians for reading the Baroque drama as ‘transitional,’ in a bad sense; that is, as the formless dross of an evolutionary process. But historical transition was, in another sense, the metaphysical ferment of the Baroque period. The profound lament of *Trauerspiel* was an expression of the confrontation between eternity and transience. As Benjamin writes: “…it is worth noting that the most obvious catastrophes did not... impress this experience on men any more bitterly than the changes in legal norms, with their claims to eternal validity, which were particularly evident at those historical turning-points.”

Hegel offers a vivid account of this clash between eternity and transience, and the mood of lamentation that it provoked. It is worth quoting this passage in full, since Hegel alights on the same ‘dialectical image’ that Benjamin uses in his discussion of allegory: the juxtaposition of Greek idols with the bones of Christian martyrs:

The heathen Orators of the time cannot sufficiently express their wonder at the monstrous contrast between the days of their forefathers and their own. ‘Our temples have become tombs. The places which were formerly adorned with the holy statues of Gods are now covered with sacred bones (relics of the martyrs); men who have suffered a shameful death for their crimes, whose bodies are covered with stripes and whose heads have been embalmed are the object of veneration.’ All that was condemned is exalted; all that was formerly revered, is

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6 Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 224.
trodden to dust. The last of the pagans express this enormous contrast with profound lamentation.\textsuperscript{7}

In the topsy-turvy world of \textit{Trauerspiel}, all values are reversed: not only is the eternal shown to be transient, but the transient sets itself up as permanent. Not only is virtue reduced to vice, and piety to sin, but what was previously deemed criminal is now enshrined as the martyrdom of the just.

\textit{Hamlet} throws us into the middle of these reversals, stemming from the usurpation of the King and the coronation of his murderer. What was ‘natural’ in the old order, the passing of the crown from father to son, has been de-natured: Prince Hamlet ‘lacks advancement,’ and the villain who has robbed him of the throne demands to be called ‘father.’\textsuperscript{8} Throughout the play, terms like ‘piety,’ and ‘duty’ are inverted: for instance, Claudius tells Hamlet that mourning his father’s death is “impious stubbornness... [and] shows a will most incorrect to heaven.”\textsuperscript{9} A more concise inversion is found in Polonius’s insistence that “[he] will find where the truth is hid, though it were hid indeed within the center.”\textsuperscript{10} In this inverted world, those who make a show of seeking truth are the most false in their actions, literally hiding in order to ‘catch the

\textsuperscript{7} G.W.F. Hegel, \textit{The Philosophy of History} (trans. J. Sibree, New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 354. Benjamin uses the same figure as Hegel: “As can be seen, allegorical exegesis tended above all in two directions: it was designed to establish, from a Christian point of view, the true, demonic nature of the ancient gods, and it also served the pious mortification of the flesh. It is therefore no accident that the Middle Ages and the Baroque took pleasure in the meaningful juxtaposition of statues of idols and the bones of the dead” (Benjamin, \textit{Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 222).


\textsuperscript{9} Shakespeare, \textit{Hamlet} 1.2.

\textsuperscript{10} Shakespeare, \textit{Hamlet}, 2.2.
carp of truth’ with the ‘bait of falsehood’; while those who are honest must dissemble and hide what they know.\(^{11}\)

The starting point for Benjamin’s analysis is the political-theological debate provoked by usurpation.\(^{12}\) As Benjamin recounts, the juridical discussion in the seventeenth century circled around the question of who was authorized to depose the tyrant. Representatives of Protestantism had rejected the right of the Church to disarm the offending tyrant, with the consequence that Henry IV of France was assassinated in 1610. The publication of the Gallican articles in 1682 cemented the absolute right of the monarch before the Curia, bringing an end to theocracy. Although it might seem that this ran contrary to the interests of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, the establishment of the ‘divine right of kings’ was in fact wholly in conformity with the restoration, which was designed to bring about complete political stabilization.\(^{13}\)

\(^{11}\) Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 2.1.

\(^{12}\) “A new concept of sovereignty emerged in the seventeenth century from a final discussion of the juridical doctrines of the Middle Ages. The old exemplary problem of tyrannicide became the focal point in this debate. Among the various kinds of tyrant defined in earlier constitutional doctrine, the usurper had always been the subject of particular controversy. The Church had abandoned him, but beyond that it was a question of whether the people, the anti-king, or the Curia alone could give the signal to depose him. The attitude of the Church had not lost its relevance; for in this century of religious conflicts the clergy clung firmly to a doctrine which armed them against hostile princes. Protestantism rejected the theocratic claims of this doctrine; and in the assassination of Henry IV of France its consequences were exposed. The publication of the Gallican articles in 1682 marked the final collapse of the theocratic doctrine of the state: the absolute right of the monarch had been established before the Curia. Despite the alignment of the respective parties, this extreme doctrine of princely power had its origins in the Counter-Reformation, and was more intelligent and more profound than its modern version” (Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 65).

\(^{13}\) “This is typical of the Counter-Reformation. With the release of the worldly and despotic aspects of the rich feeling for life which is characteristic of the Renaissance, the ideal of a complete stabilization, an ecclesiastical and political restoration, unfolds in all its consequences. And one of these consequences is the demand for a principedom whose constitutional position guarantees the continuity of the community, flourishing in feats of arms and in the sciences, in the arts and in its Church” (idem, 65).
Benjamin sharply distinguishes between the Baroque ideal of stabilization and the Enlightenment assumption of a stable, rule-governed order. If the Enlightenment considered nature to be identical with the totality of natural laws, the Baroque period first constituted the idea of an immanent totality, from which it evacuated all that was not measurable within its scope. Unlike the Enlightenment idea of nature, the Baroque totality stands opposed to an exteriority, or absolute otherness, which threatens “as a vacuum, one day to destroy the world with catastrophic violence.” The Reformation ideal of stability was *haunted* by catastrophe.

Benjamin describes how the catastrophic course of history was curbed, and brought under the jurisdiction of laws that apply without exception. This resulted in a deformation of historical time, or the translation of originally temporal phenomena into spatial terms. The *via recta*, the medieval representation of time, was forcibly turned back in order to create a new spatially enclosed figure: the globe (this explains the significance of contemporary cosmological arguments which compared the king to the sun; such comparisons not only re-enforce the idea of world-domination, but they also emphasize that any such deification of the king remains pagan, or ‘worldly’).

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14 “The religious man of the Baroque clings so tightly to the world because of the feeling that he is being driven along to a cataract with it. The Baroque knows no eschatology; and for that very reason it possesses no mechanism by which all earthly things can be gathered in together and exalted before being consigned to their end. The hereafter is emptied of everything which contains the slightest breath of this world, and from it the Baroque extracts a profusion of things which customarily escaped the grasp of artistic formulation and, at a high point, brings them violently into the light of day, in order to clear an ultimate heaven, enabling it, as a vacuum, one day to destroy the world with catastrophic violence” (idem, 66).
The secularization of history requires the translation of transcendence into presence.\textsuperscript{15} Rather than a representation of time as infinite progress towards a future that is always ‘yet to come,’ the secularized history of the Baroque shifts its focus to the plenum of the natural world, which is ‘always-already’ present and remains to be discovered. This distortion of time is reflected in a dual figure: first, as the reduction of temporal infinity within a confined space, and second, as the introduction of a reflective infinity of thought within this immanent totality.

Benjamin provides an architectural metaphor for this dual figure: “it corresponds to the volute in the architecture of time. It repeats itself infinitely, and reduces to immeasurability the circle which it encloses.”\textsuperscript{16} The volute is an apt figure for the claustrophobia of Hamlet’s world, which gets increasingly smaller, from the heath where the watchmen keep their guard, to the court interior, to the ‘globe’ of Hamlet’s own distracted mind. “Denmark's a prison,” as Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; but the enclosure of the world within a spatial totality is no obstacle for the restless infinity of thought. Hamlet continues: “I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.”\textsuperscript{17} It is worth noting that prophetic dreams were a common feature of the Baroque \textit{Trauerspiel}. But these do not offer any exit from the total enclosure of the Baroque world. Rather, like mirrors in an interior space, they provide only an inverted reflection of exteriority. If the

\textsuperscript{15} “For where it is a question of a realization in terms of space – and what else is meant by ... secularization other than... transformation into the strictly present -- then the most radical procedure is to make events simultaneous” (Benjamin, \textit{Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 194).

\textsuperscript{16} Idem, 83.

\textsuperscript{17} Shakespeare, \textit{Hamlet}, 2.2.
Renaissance took up the neo-Platonic idea of truth as an ascending ladder of forms, the Baroque world of semblance inverts this figure, describing the *gravity* of thought as force that draws downward beneath the earth’s surface.\(^{18}\)

I will give two examples of the spatialization of temporal phenomena in *Hamlet*. First, the play begins at midnight, and takes place mostly in the dark, if we include the artificial darkness of the play within the play. Although the night scenes are described in temporal terms, midnight is represented as the de-temporalization of time, the ‘dead hour,’ when perturbed spirits walk the earth. Benjamin writes:

> There is a good reason for associating the dramatic action with night, especially midnight. It lies in the widespread notion that at this hour time stands still like the tongue of a scale.... The spirit world is ahistorical. To it the *Trauerspiel* consigns its dead.\(^{19}\)

The ghostly recurrence, ‘jump at this dead hour’ is, in other words, only parasitically temporal; an instantiation of the eternal recurrence of the same.

> The midnight scenes sketch out a spatial totality, or ‘sublunary world,’ which is framed by the movement of the stars in the sky and the pacing of the ghost beneath the ground. Time, described in these terms, becomes a spatial framing device. Benjamin

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\(^{18}\) Benjamin describes the prophetic dreams and nightmares of *Trauerspiel* as follows: “bad dreams come from the spleen, but prophetic dreams are also the prerogative of the melancholic. As the common lot of princes and martyrs they are a familiar element in the *Trauerspiel*. But even these prophetic dreams are to be seen as arising from geomantic slumber in the temple of creation, and not as sublime or even sacred inspiration. For all wisdom of the melancholic is subject to the nether world; it is secured by immersion in the life of creaturely things, and it hears nothing of the voice of revelation” (Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 152).

\(^{19}\) “Now since fate, itself the true order of eternal recurrence, can only be described as temporal in an indirect, that is parasitical sense, its manifestations seek out the temporal dimension. The stand in the narrow frame of midnight, an opening in the passage of time, in which the same ghostly image constantly re-appears” (idem, 135).
describes how the Baroque sky comes down unnaturally low, which Hamlet corroborates in his lament to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that,

[T]his goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestical roof, fretted with golden fire – why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors.

Secondly, the spatialization of temporal phenomena applies not only to this world, but also to the afterworld, which, in *Hamlet* is rendered geographically as an “undiscovered territory” from which no traveler returns. The language of discovery, in which death is not the end of time, but rather an ‘undiscovered’ land, robs the future of its temporal meaning, and equates it with the possible expansion of knowledge. In Hamlet’s soliloquy (‘To be or not to be’), he describes how the representation of the future as an expanded horizon for knowledge subjects all actions to calculation, and thereby transforms the great ‘pitch and moment’ of action into brooding reflection:

Who would fardels bear,/ To grunt and sweat under a weary life,/ But that dread of something after death,/ The undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns, puzzles the will,/ And makes us rather bear those ills we have/ Than fly to others that we know not of? Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,/ And thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,/ And enterprises of great pitch and moment/ With this regard their currents turn awry and lose the name of action.

20 “For the dominant spiritual disposition, however eccentrically it might elevate acts of ecstasy, did not so much transfigure the world in them as cast a cloudy sky over its surface. Whereas the painters of the Renaissance know how to keep their skies high, in the paintings of the Baroque the cloud moves, darkly or radiantly, down towards the earth” (idem, 79).


23 Ibid.
The afterworld repeats the rules of this world on a different (spatial) plane, in territory that is ‘undiscovered,’ yet essentially discoverable. Benjamin refers to this repetition on a higher plane as the ‘spectral time’ of Trauerspiel: “Thus, the mourning play presents us not with the image of a higher existence but only with one of two mirror-images, and its continuation is not less schematic than itself. The dead become ghosts. The mourning play exhausts artistically the historical idea of repetition.”

§2 Melancholy and the Secularization of History

Benjamin uses the concept of ‘natural history’ to describe the secularization of history within a spatial simultaneity. This concept has a double meaning: it refers, first, to the absorption of historical phenomena within a spatially conceived ‘state of nature’; and second, it describes the abbreviation of the medieval ‘chronicle of time’ within the ‘pre-history’ of creation. As a direct consequence of the schism of the church and the division of Europe into warring provinces, the universal history of salvation was no longer a credible narrative. The Baroque philosophy of history consequently rejected eschatology, and historical representation shrunk within the bounds of creation, which was profane: “...an unweeded garden/ That grows to seed.”

24 Benjamin, Selected Writings, I, 57.

25 Shakespeare, Hamlet, 1.2. Although I cannot expand on this theme here, it is worth noting in passing that references to the fall from Eden abound in Hamlet, from the rumor about King Hamlet’s death - “Tis given out that, Sleeping in my orchard, a serpent stung me” (Hamlet, 1.5), to King Claudius’s crime, which has “the eldest primal curse upon’t, a brother’s murder” (Hamlet, 3.3). Benjamin puts it thus: the light of creation is reflected in the swamp of Adam’s guilt (Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 129).
The great authors of the German *Trauerspiel* were Lutherans.\(^{26}\) Whereas the Catholic playwrights of the Counter-Reformation playfully miniaturized the hierarchy of heaven and earth within the royal court, crowning the king as the secular redeemer and lord of creation, the Protestant plays threw themselves into a creaturely state deprived of grace. The Lutheran renunciation of ‘good works,’ and the dependence of grace on faith alone, produced in these plays a relentless mood of melancholy. Benjamin exemplifies this with a reference to *Hamlet*:

‘What is man, If his chief good and market of his time Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more. Sure, he that hath made us with such large discourse, Looking before and after, gave us not That capability of god-like reason To fust in us unused.’ – these words of Hamlet contain both the philosophy of Wittenberg and a protest against it. In that excessive reaction which ultimately denied good works as such, and not just their meritorious and penitential character, there was an element of German paganism and the grim belief in the subjection of man to fate.\(^{27}\)

The denial of good works sought to purify the life of faith from rational calculation, but the unbridgeable gulf between profane creation and grace introduced an element of paganism in the denial of any distinction between animal and human life. Nothing in creaturely life, save God’s grace, redeems the moral soul from corrupt nature. Reflecting the ‘philosophy of Wittenberg,’ the *Trauerspiel* tends to describe moral qualities in natural terms, which of course undermines them. Here’s an example from Hamlet:

\(^{26}\) Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 138.

\(^{27}\) Ibid.
So oft it chances in particular men/ That for some vicious mole of nature in
them,/ As in their birth (wherein they are not guilty,/ Since nature cannot choose
his origin),/ .... Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,/ Being nature's livery or
fortune's star,/ His virtues else, be they as pure as grace,/ ... Shall in the general
censure take corruption from that particular fault. The dram of evil/ Doth all the
noble substance of a doubt/ To his own scandal.20

In this windy discourse, Hamlet argues that birth-defects, for which one is not guilty in a
moral sense, are nonetheless manifestations of *viciousness* (the Latin origin of this word
‘vitium’ conveys the precise relationship between corruption and ‘vita,’ or life).
Although there is much to say about this, I will limit myself to a few explanatory
remarks: first, in the absence of a clearly defined individual will, corruption cannot be
contained within a single character, but spreads, like a ‘dram of evil’ throughout the
entire created world, tainting mankind and objects alike. The guilt in question is not
moral, but ‘natural guilt,’ stemming from creation, or birth. Secondly, the mechanism of
this guilt is causality, which, in its indifferent rule over human beings and things alike,
subjects man to blind fate (‘...nature's livery or fortune's star...’). As Benjamin puts it:

> The core of the notion of fate is... the conviction that guilt (which in this context
> always means creaturely guilt – in Christian terms, original sin...), however
> fleeting its appearance, unleashes causality as the instrument of the irresistible
> unfolding of fatalities.29

The man of faith is denied any direct access to the kingdom of grace, and yet he finds no
satisfaction in contemplating the world around him, which he sees as “a rubbish heap of

29 Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 129.
partial, inauthentic actions.” In opposition to the inauthentic world of actions, the mournful subject withdraws from the world. The ‘I’ stands alone against the exterior world, which indifferently swallows up all created things and other beings; all of this is rendered mere exteriority, or semblance.

The Trauerspiel dramatizes the contrast between the melancholy ‘hero’ and the rest of the cast by presenting the emotional lives of the other characters in strictly immanent, even mechanical terms. The courtiers are craven manipulators, who are both instruments and instrumental in brokering power relations. Claudius uses the apt metaphor of a scale to describe the mathematical precision with which he weighs his passions in order to achieve his political ambitions, assuring the assembled courtiers that he has acted, “as ‘twere with a defeated joy, With an auspicious and a dropping eye, With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage, In equal scale weighing delight and dole.”

According to Benjamin, “The vain activity of the intriguer was regarded as the undignified antithesis of passionate contemplation, to which alone was attributed the power to release those in high places from the satanic ensnarement of history...” In other words, mourning was perhaps the only avenue of individuation left in the aftermath of the Lutheran denial of ‘good works.’ This is certainly the case for Hamlet, who insists on his particularity only in relation to the depth of his feeling, which he sharply distinguishes from the inauthentic ‘seeming’ of all outward behavior. In

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30 Idem, 139.

31 Shakespeare, Hamlet, 1.2.

32 Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 141–42.
response to Gertrude’s question about the *seeming* particularity of his feeling, Hamlet rails:

“Seems,” madam? Nay, it is. I know not “seems.”/ ‘Tis not alone my inky cloak good mother,/ Nor customary suits of solemn black, [/ Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,/] No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,/ Nor the dejected ’havior of the visage,/ Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,/ That can denote me truly. These indeed “seem,”/ For they are actions that a man might play;/] But I have that within which passes show,/ These but the trappings and the suits of woe.33

In the ‘play’ of life, Hamlet alone is a spectator, by the grace of God. It is true that the rest of the world is reduced to theatricality by Hamlet’s absolutism; but let us consider what Hamlet has within that passes show. Hamlet’s utterance creates the impression of profundity only through a series of negations of the surface or exterior manifestations of feeling. But because Hamlet’s inwardness is determined only through the negation of outward expression, he is incapable of uttering what he has within. Hamlet tries another tack, turning his scathing negativity against himself, when he realizes that even the actors in a play are more capable of expression than he: “O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!... I/ A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause, And can say nothing....”34

Despite this gesture of negation, first of the external world, and then of the subject himself, the melancholic does not completely succeed in withdrawing from the world. There remains something thing-like in his attachment to the ‘object’ of his loss;


or rather, thinking itself becomes thing-like in an attempt to hold onto the memory of what is lost. We see this persisting thing-like character in Hamlet’s vow to the ghost that he will wipe away all other thoughts from the book and volume of his brain, in order to keep the ghost’s command as the sole object of his thought:

I'll wipe away all trivial, fond records,/ All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,/ That youth and observation copied there,/And thy commandment all alone shall live/ Within the book and volume of my brain, Unmixed with baser matter. Yes, by heaven!/ O most pernicious woman!/ O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!/ My tables – meet it is that I set it down/ That one may smile and smile and be a villain.35

The fixity of melancholy is captured by the idea of writing, of ‘setting something down’ in the book and volume of the brain. The very description of the mind as a book in which thoughts are engraved emphasizes the mourner’s aspiration to make the object of his meditation permanent, immune to the vicissitudes of time and forgetting.

Feeling is bound to a ‘thing,’ which it ‘hyper-invests,’ or ‘cathects’ (to use Freud’s term).36 Benjamin describes mourning similarly as a withdrawal of feeling from the world as a whole, and of its attachment to particular things, in which feeling is intensified and fulfilled: “feeling... is released from any empirical subject and is intimately bound to the fullness of an object,” which it pursues “with astounding tenacity of intention.”37

35 Shakespeare, Hamlet, 1.5.


37 Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 139.
The mood of mourning revives the empty world as a masquerade; feeling flows out of the subject and into a world of ‘dead things,’ which become animated. In the ‘book and volume’ of Hamlet’s brain, the elements of his recollection take on a life of their own, separating off from their original context, and repeating, in bits and snatches, ‘like sweet bells jangled.’ The scenario of King Hamlet’s death provides the play with a wealth of stock elements, which are recycled through the dialogue, creating a heavy sense of foreboding. For instance, the ear into which Claudius poured poison comes back, not as this particular ear, but as the ear of the eavesdropper (“I'll be placed... in the ear/ Of all their conference”), as a ‘mildewed ear’ of corn (“Here is your husband, like a mildewed ear, Blasting his wholesome brother”), and as the foolish ear, in which a knavish speech sleeps. Through this process of deepening and filling out, the thing in question is detached from its original meaning; it is modulated in different settings, like a chord in a musical composition. This both preserves the memory of loss, and also disperses it, rendering it abstract, and musical.

Through this curious play of repetition and transformation, the original ‘loss’ becomes fulfilled, thereby losing its particularity. This is the very dialectic that Benjamin describes in his theory of allegory. Allegorical interpretation goes through all of the stages of this deepening of intentionality in the object, only in order to show, in its final reversal, how the ‘objects’ of its knowledge are unreal. In order to explain this, I have to touch briefly on the theological significance of this reversal, from the depths of

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39 Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.2, 3.4, 4.2.
material knowledge, into airy abstraction, and finally to the vaporization of the object as such, which leaves the allegorist alone in God’s world.

Allegory is an anti-artistic use of images, which embodies and subverts its material from within. Benjamin locates the origin of allegory in the conflict between Christianity and paganism. Because of the tenacity with which the pagan images retained their cultural force, early Christianity could not simply negate them. Rather, it preserved them, but transformed their meaning. The particularity of the Greek Gods became abstract and were transformed into signs. The whole pantheon was in fact preserved, as a series of polemical counter-images, which were turned into demons in Christian hell. The Counter-Reformation similarly confronted the near threat of paganism, which was revived in the Renaissance occult. In reaction to the compelling immediacy of the Greek gods, Baroque art inherited a wealth of imagery, which it transformed by placing into a hellish context. This explains the intense worldliness of Counter-Reformation art. The bleak Golgotha that it represents is the dark background for the apotheosis with which Baroque art inevitably concludes.

In its zeal to purify and set apart the monotheistic God, the Restoration extracted from this concept a nightmare burden of pagan images, which it re-assigned, and thereby rendered abstract. The relevant comparison with melancholy is that, like the allegorist, the melancholic subject simultaneously preserves and renders abstract the object of loss, thus diverting its immediate power.

In the Lutheran doctrine of the gulf between the profane world and the absolute spirituality of grace, allegory serves yet another function. It inextricably binds knowledge of material things to guilt, first by interpreting this knowledge as demonic,
and second, by fragmenting any semblance of organic totality into dismembered parts. The corrupt and dispersed knowledge of material things underscores the distinction between theoretical knowledge and the true knowing of God. Whereas theoretical knowledge has a false object before it, knowing God is primarily practical and takes the form of love, or the communion between pure spirits. The allegorical process of intensification in the object is drawn downward into an infinite complexity of material detail, but this is not the simple infinity of divine perfection. Rather, it is the infinity of empty subjectivity in the abyss of fallen nature. The pursuit of meaning in the profane world is thrown into this abyss. The allegorical interest in the dismembered parts of the corpse show in an emphatic way that knowledge of the natural world has its home in dead matter. The ‘things’ that the allegorist assembles only acquire the appearance of life when they are animated by the interpretive activity of the allegorist. The allegorist scatters the elements of organic nature throughout the manifold regions of meaning. In this process, life is emblematized as a corpse, and then deliberately dispersed into a loose heap of parts: eyes, ears, mouth, hands, and so on. We can recognize this allegorical dispersal, for instance, in Ophelia’s scattering of flowers and verses, strewing the remnants of memory into the manifold regions of the five senses.

The fulfillment of allegory works by vaporizing its object, or rather, by showing that its object was always the result of a confused impression, rather than something real. The deepening of intentionality in the material world is revealed to have been nothing more than a tumbling fall into delusion. According to Benjamin:

This solves the riddle of the most fragmented, the most defunct, the most dispersed. Allegory, of course, thereby loses everything that was most peculiar to it: the secret, privileged knowledge, the arbitrary rule in the realm of dead
objects, the supposed infinity of a world without hope. All this vanishes with this one about turn, in which the immersion of allegory has to clear away the final phantasmagoria of the objective, and left entirely to its own devices, re-discovers itself, not playfully in the earthly world of things, but seriously under the eyes of heaven.40

What I have tried to show is, first of all, how closely Benjamin follows *Hamlet* in the construction of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Benjamin reads *Hamlet* as the quintessential play of mourning, which he interprets literally, to show the playfulness, or semblance character of mournful feeling. The mourner’s gravity is dramatized in the play as a descent into the grave, which draws an almost prophetic knowledge from its affinity with the netherworld. But this profundity ultimately lacks its object. Its deepest truth is phantasmagorical. When melancholy becomes self-conscious, it vanishes. This path, melancholic and playful in equal measure, is the basis for Benjamin’s argument that *Hamlet* dramatizes the reversal from melancholy to Christianity: the melancholic subject awakens, as if from a bad dream, in God’s world. Benjamin’s reading of *Hamlet* is both intimately textual and an evident distortion; the whorl of the author’s fingerprint is evident in every detail. If I have succeeded in what I set out to do in this epilogue, I will have conveyed merely the ruins of a great building.

40 Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 222.
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