

Exposé of *The Saving Line: Benjamin, Adorno, and the Caesuras of Hope*
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In attempting to determine how the derailment of the Enlightenment project might be remedied, both Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno turned to canonical works of narrative fiction. The resultant texts, Walter Benjamin's major essay *Goethe's Elective Affinities* (1924-25) and Theodor W. Adorno's excursus on Odysseus in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), have played a foundational role in the Frankfurt School and count among the most original philosophical reflections on literature. Although the theoretical claims advanced in these works have attracted a good deal of attention, no sustained attempt has been made to clarify the philosophical implications of Benjamin's and Adorno's interpretive practices in them. Perhaps for this reason it also appears to have gone unnoticed that the two texts are in dialogue, and at times indeed in dispute, with one another. *The Saving Line* reconstructs this wide-ranging critical dialogue with close attention paid to the conditions of approaching literature philosophically. Taking seriously the claim implicit in these works of critical theory to be "about" their respective literary objects, I show that Benjamin's and Adorno's interpretive strategies are no less central to their conceptions than are their explicitly philosophical arguments. My examination of these strategies brings into focus a problematic that animates both authors' projects.

Common to these projects is the bid to counter the rise of destructive forms of obscurantism born of an incomplete actualization of Enlightenment reason. Through a critical reimagining of literary classics, Benjamin and Adorno attempt to change the shape of the culture that has enshrined these works as canonical. This undertaking prompts Benjamin and Adorno to focus key portions of their arguments upon the very act of literary narration. By reflecting upon the act of narration, Benjamin and Adorno make the elusive topic of hope accessible to philosophical thought. The hope salvaged in these critical texts is distinguished from both optimistic expectation and purposive striving by its persistence in the face of irremediable failures and damages. Philosophical critique can make sense of such hope "for the sake of the hopeless ones" (to use Benjamin's formulation) by reflecting on a narrator's stance towards literary characters at the moment of their succumbing to the pervasive and debilitating unreason that Benjamin and Adorno theorize under the heading of "myth." What underwrites the hope that surfaces in such moments is the power inherent in the very act of narration to precipitate an emancipatory truth out of thwarted lives and to pass on this truth to future readers. Benjamin and Adorno claim that such hope enters narration through abrupt shifts to a perspective that transcends both the characters' standpoint and the author's intentions.

Benjamin and Adorno interpret such moments by deploying what I call the double caesura model. This model allows them to construe their respective literary objects in terms of a structure that aligns two breaks in narration: namely, a "hard" caesura that interrupts the very act of narration and a less sharply marked, "soft" caesura internal to the fictional plane. Between these two caesuras runs the "saving line" of my title, a re-purposing of classical philologist Gilbert Murray's term for the Homeric passage that Adorno marks as a caesura. First outlined in Benjamin's essay on *Elective Affinities* and subsequently reworked by Adorno in the excursus on Odysseus, the double caesura model is not fully developed in either of these critical texts. Nor can it be fully developed, for it registers an aporia that arises in a necessary manner whenever critical thought aspires to be both immanent and transcendent to the historical process. By

aligning the two caesuras in their interpretations, Benjamin and Adorno acknowledge the necessity of combining an immanent critique of cultural formations with a transcendent one, and a positive presentation of utopia with a negative one. I argue that this necessity stems from the premises of Benjamin's and Adorno's critical projects.

A latent structure indicating an unresolved problem, the double caesura model comes into view only when Benjamin's essay and Adorno's excursus are considered in light of one another. My joint interpretation of the two works may be viewed as a case study on how a philosophical reading of a literary work can take guidance from a prior critical encounter with another literary work. The critical succession examined in *The Saving Line* is, however, a complex one, for Adorno's excursus goes beyond a mere application of the Benjaminian model. In adapting to another literary work the double caesura model that Benjamin developed in relation to *Elective Affinities*, Adorno reworks the model in accordance with his own philosophical agenda. This adaptation in turn throws a retrospective light upon Benjamin's original formulation of the model.

Although Benjamin's essay on *Elective Affinities* and Adorno's excursus were both written at an early stage in the career of their respective authors, in each case my argument establishes revealing connections to later works. My reconstruction of the implicit dialogue between Benjamin's and Adorno's key early works thus highlights a number of interrelated concerns that persist throughout the authors' careers, and which have received little attention in the voluminous scholarly literature dealing with the well-known dispute that unfolded between Benjamin and Adorno in the late 1930s. These concerns include the post-Kantian problematic of the relation between freedom, experience, and rationality; aesthetic form and its disruption; the relation between immanent and transcendent critique; and such topics pertaining to what Adorno calls "minima moralia" as fidelity, marriage, gender relations, and mortality. At key junctures, moreover, I place Benjamin's and Adorno's works in dialogue with other authors to whom they are responding or who contend with similar matters, including Kant, Hölderlin, Hegel, Nietzsche, Flaubert, Luxemburg, Kraus, and Bakhtin.

The book opens with a textual puzzle. Near the end of his excursus on Odysseus, Adorno asserts that the Homeric narration of the execution of the maids involves a "pausing of speech" that registers an elusive hope. No such pause can be found in the Homeric text, however. It is my contention that we can clarify both the philosophical rationale and the literary justification for Adorno's assertion if we attend to the way in which he is here reworking Benjamin's marking of a caesura in *Elective Affinities*. Adorno's excursus on Odysseus needs to be understood in the context of his tacit dialogue with the older friend and interlocutor who had recently fallen victim to the lethal regression that Adorno and Horkheimer were trying to explain in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The introduction sets the stage by outlining some of the larger stakes of the argument: the question of what it means to write philosophically about literature; the complex hermeneutic situation created by the adaptation of a critical model; and the difficulty of giving a philosophical account of hope, of which Kant's reductive treatment of the topic is symptomatic.

Moving from Benjamin to Adorno and circling back to Benjamin, my argument progresses through four chapters, each of which focuses on a caesura marking. I begin by laying out in chapter 1 the novel conception of narrative caesura that Benjamin outlined, drawing on Hölderlin, in reference to a remark by the narrator in *Elective Affinities*. With this reconstruction of the Benjaminian model in place, it becomes possible to clarify in chapter 2 the philosophical

motivations and the literary basis of Adorno's postulation of a caesura in book 22 of the *Odyssey*. Not the least of the modifications involved in Adorno's reworking of the Benjaminian caesura model is that, as I show in chapter 3, Adorno posits a second, less sharply marked caesura in book 23 of the *Odyssey*. This move attests to the imperative of combining a negative presentation of utopia with a positive one, a problematic shown to be central to Adorno's thinking. In chapter 4, I argue that the doubling of the caesura in Adorno's excursus throws into relief an analogous structure that remained implicit in Benjamin's essay on *Elective Affinities*. For Benjamin's argument aligns the key remark by Goethe's narrator with another moment of transcendence that in certain respects functions as a caesura, namely, the novella "Strange Neighbors" embedded in the novel. I claim that Benjamin's reluctance to identify this embedded story as a caesura can be explained, on the one hand, by a blind spot in his interpretation of *Elective Affinities*, and on the other, by the tension between Benjamin's commitment to negative theology and reason's demand to endow utopia with determinate contours. My argument yields a corrective in both respects.

Extending the line of critical succession linking Benjamin's and Adorno's texts, in my conclusion I demonstrate the adaptability of the double caesura model by commenting on selected passages from Gottfried Keller's novella "A Village Romeo and Juliet," Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain*, and Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. Of great heuristic value for thinking about the ways in which literary narration can intimate a utopian transcendence of historical reality, the double caesura model is thus shown to admit of variations that in each case reflect the critic's stance towards the ontological horizon of the literary work under consideration. These adaptations of the model open up a historical perspective that enables me to summarize the broader lessons of my argument.

My final comparison of the two authors' uses of the double caesura model turns on two differences. First, the young Benjamin's undertaking to defend and extend the Kantian ideal of reason through philosophical art criticism contrasts sharply with Adorno's thesis that making good on the promise of the Enlightenment requires a self-critique of philosophical reason through "remembrance of nature." Second, my argument establishes a difference in critical strategy between Benjamin's meditation on a novel steeped in modernity's critical self-awareness and Adorno's bid to disenchant an ancient epic, mandating greater imaginative licence. I argue that Adorno's strategy depends on an unworkable construal of the Jewish ban on images in terms of the Hegelian logic of determinate negation. This strategy threatens to render Adorno's concept of utopia fantastical and leads him to conflate historically conditioned shortcomings of our form of life with constitutive limitations of human existence. Because Benjamin can hew closer to his literary object, he can flesh out its redemptive moments in more determinate terms, though only at the cost of putting his negative theological commitments under severe strain. I conclude that the undertaking to free literary narration from mythic entanglements is less prone to reverting to a specious re-enchantment if it is brought to bear on a modern than on an ancient work. This, if little else, lends some support to the fragile hope for progress that emerges from Benjamin's and Adorno's redemptive critiques. Since, however, the double caesura model responds to a specific crisis, its legitimation does not extend to every historical situation. In the final section of my conclusion, I mark the limits of its applicability by drawing on a reflection on *mythos* and *logos* that Hans Jonas developed against the backdrop of the ecological emergency.