In attempting to determine why the Enlightenment project had derailed and how this failure 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 for the Franfurt 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 at clarifying 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 with one another.

*The Saving Line* reconstructs this wide-ranging 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 pronouncements. My examination of these strategies brings into focus a problematic that is central to the two authors’ philosophical projects.

Benjamin and Adorno seek to counter the rise of destructive forms of obscurantism born of the incomplete actualization of Enlightenment reason. Through a critical reimagining of literary classics, they attempt to change the shape of the culture in whose canon these works are enshrined. At key points in their arguments, the two authors focus on the very act of literary narration. They do so in order to render the elusive topic of hope accessible to philosophical thought, and to salvage a species of hope that 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.

The critical paradigm that enables Benjamin and Adorno to make sense of such moments is what I term the double caesura model. First outlined in Benjamin’s essay on Elective Affinities and then reworked by Adorno in the excursus on Odysseus, this model is not fully developed in either of the two texts. Nor can it be fully developed, for it answers to an aporia that arises in a necessary manner whenever critical thought aspires to be both immanent and transcendent to the historical process. As a deep 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. Both Benjamin and Adorno 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” one located on the fictional plane. Between the two caesuras runs the “saving line” of my title, a re-purposing of classical philologist Gilbert Murray’s term for a Homeric passage that Adorno marks as a caesura. By aligning the two caesuras in their interpretations, Benjamin and Adorno attempt to combine an immanent critique of cultural formations with a transcendent one, and a positive presentation of utopia with a negative one.

In examining the two works of critical theory in light of one another, I offer a case study of how a philosophical reading of a literary work can take guidance from a prior critical performance concerned with another work. The case examined in The Saving Line is an interesting one because it goes beyond an application of the critical model. Adorno adapts the
double caesura model developed by Benjamin to another literary work and his own philosophical agenda. This adaptation in turn throws an instructive retrospective light upon the original formulation of the model.

Although both works that stand in the focus of my argument were written at an early stage of their authors’ career, I show that in each case revealing connections can be drawn to later works. My reconstruction of the implicit dialogue between Benjamin’s and Adorno’s key early works thus enables me to identify interrelated concerns that persist throughout the authors’ careers. 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 the same issues, 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 guiding hunch that we can clarify the philosophical as well as the literary substance of Adorno’s assertion by attending to the way in which he is at this juncture reworking Benjamin’s marking of a caesura in Elective Affinities. My hypothesis, in other words, is that the excursus on Odysseus was written in 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. The introduction sets the stage by outlining the larger issues at stake in the book: 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 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 is devoted to a caesura marking. I begin by laying out in chapter 1 the critical model of the caesura as it was originally developed by Benjamin 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, which I show 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 exhibits the formal features of 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 by Gottfried Keller, Thomas Mann, and Franz Kafka. Of heuristic value for thinking about the ways in which literary narration can intimate a utopian transcendence of reality, the 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 from which it becomes possible to formulate the broader lessons of my argument.

My final comparison of the two authors’ use of the double caesura model turns on two key differences: first, between the young Benjamin’s claim that the Enlightenment project must be completed through philosophical art criticism and Adorno’s thesis that making good on the promise of the Enlightenment requires a self-critique of philosophical reason through “remembrance of nature”; and second, between Benjamin’s meditation on a novel steeped in modernity’s critical self-awareness and Adorno’s bid, requiring greater imaginative licence, to disenchant an ancient epic. Beside involving an unworkable construal of the Judaic ban on images in terms of the Hegelian logic of determinate negation, Adorno’s strategy also threatens to render his concept of utopia fantastical. 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 moment of crisis, its critical legitimation does not extend to every historical situation. In the final section of my conclusion, I indicate the limits of the model’s adaptability by drawing on a reflection on mythos and logos that Hans Jonas developed against the backdrop of the ecological emergency.