

The Problem of the Image: Sacred and Profane Spaces in Walter Benjamin's Early Writing

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Abstract: From the comparative framework of writing on the meaning of ritual in the field of the history of religions (M. Eliade and J. Z. Smith), this essay argues that one of the major problems in Benjamin's thinking is how to make certain forms of materiality stand out against other (degraded) forms. In his early work, the way that Benjamin deals with this problem is to call degraded forms "symbolic", and those forms of materiality with positive value, "allegorical". The article shows how there is more than an incidental connection with the recent approach to ritual in the field of history of religions, seeing that Benjamin too wants to set out the significance of certain material forms against those that are "ritualistic" and hence false. It is argued that he treats the latter in his essay on *Elective Affinities* and the former in his *Trauerspiel*. The key claim is that the way material forms stand out as meaningful is akin to the Kantian description of the aesthetic attitude, which identifies how certain formations warrant and attract reflective attention and underpin (the) moral orientation. The point is significant since Kantian aesthetics is an object of polemical attention across Benjamin's heterogeneous corpus. Moreover, the approach shows the main difficulty in Benjamin's treatment of sensible forms: what are the criteria he uses to distinguish the "bad" way a sensible form has of being meaningful from the "good"?

Keywords: Walter Benjamin; Immanuel Kant; allegory; symbol; aesthetics of the image.

In an essay entitled "The Bare Facts of Ritual", Jonathan Z. Smith develops a version of the thesis that the sacred is not a substantive category but a relational one. The sacred is not a quality that can be present in things. Rather, it is a manner of treatment of things that exist within a particular space, which marks them as significant and brimming with meaning

in opposition to the ordinary (“profane”) things belonging to the background.¹ In the space of the profane, ordinary things and events happen in an unremarkable way. In contrast, the space of the sacred is one in which everything that occurs is marked as significant and assimilated into the ritual pattern and thus guarded. Smith cites a passage from Kafka which highlights the role of repetition that defines what is distinctive about the events of the sacred space: “Leopards break into the temple and drink the sacrificial chalices dry; this occurs repeatedly, again and again: finally it can be reckoned on beforehand and becomes a part of the ceremony.”² According to Eliade’s influential view of the sacred (or more precisely the “dialectic of the sacred”): a primordial event that is in some way vital (e.g. for the continued existence of the world) must be indefinitely repeated and guarded in its pristine quality by the ritual, which introduces the awesome power of the beginnings into the profane world and replenishes it.³ Kafka, on the other hand, intimates that anything is liable to become sacred through sheer repetition in a space marked off by ritual.

The things that occur in the space of the sacred are symbolic in the sense that they signify, in one way or another, something vitally important. By virtue of being within a space marked off by ritual, the perceptible procedure or object is *treated* as representing a truth and embodying the power of that truth. In contrast, in the profane space things and events are not treated in this way. They are what they appear to be or, in any case, do not point to anything beyond the world of appearances. The inclusion of things in the sacred time-space marks them for the special treatment just described: without it everything would be banal (unmarked). On the other hand, if everything were marked as if it carried symbolic significance we would be led quickly to madness, caught in the impossible situation of feeling, for example, the compulsion to show obeisance to everything. The difference that these spaces define therefore does not just mark the sacred; the contrast in expectations and modes of engagement that they establish also sets out different patterns of human behaviour in the respective spaces.⁴ This point can be elucidated by the need to exclude

1. J. Z. Smith, “The Bare Facts of Ritual”, in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, 53–66 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

2. Smith, “Bare Facts of Ritual”, 53 cites F. Kafka’s “Reflections on Sin, Hope, and the True Way”, in *The Great Wall of China* (New York: Penguin, 1970), 165.

3. See M. Eliade, *Cosmos and History: the Myth of Eternal Return* (New York: Bollingen, 1985).

4. In this broad sense, Niklas Luhmann points out a similar function of marked and unmarked space as the process of differentiation in which certain things are selected as meaningful against a relegated background – for Luhmann, this process of differentiation is the way that the focus necessary for action can be marked in a field of complexity. See N. Luhmann, *Social Systems* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

accidents from the space of the sacred. Anything that occurs in ritual has the potential to become symbolic of the sacred because it is not the thing itself that is “sacred” but the space where it occurs, which marks it as such. Thus accidental things that occur in the space of the sacred can potentially become assimilated into the ritual simply as a result of having occurred in that space. Kafka’s leopards form a reliable habit of assuaging their thirst, which is able to make their drinking part of the ritual. Smith also cites Plutarch’s account of how the priestess of Athene Polias refused the thirsty mule drivers who had brought the sacred vessels to the temple a drink: “No’ she said, ‘for I fear it will get into the ritual.’”⁵ The capacity for the ritual assimilation of the routine is, Smith concludes, one of the core “building blocks of religion”.⁶

I would like to use this perspective of the relational determination of “noteworthy meaning” to reconsider what Walter Benjamin says about the differences between symbol and allegory in his early writing. It is well known that the symbol represents a “bad” aesthetic for Benjamin and the allegory a “good” one. Both symbol and allegory are “images” in the sense that they are material forms with a power to signify something other than their perceptible form. Thus whether the material form of the image embodies what it signifies, in the case of the symbol, or points beyond what it embodies, as in the allegory, each form marks out a space of significance or meaning, which can be contrasted to merely ordinary things that do not so signify. The perspective that Smith outlines from the history of religions is not entirely foreign to Benjamin’s early approach to the topic of the image, which is defined as a significant claim on attention against the factors of diffusion of meaning. However, it is the precise link that Benjamin develops in the “*Goethe’s Elective Affinities*” essay between the capacity of things to embody and to signify meaning as *ritual form* that recommends reconsidering the terms of his famous opposition between allegory and symbol in the light of Smith’s thesis. It seems to me that this perspective also has relevance for analysing the antithetical poles around which different conceptions of the image populate Benjamin’s later work: on the one hand, his writing excoriates the phantasmagoric effect of images in a commodity culture, but on the other, he maintains that the perceptibility of cracks in the experience of totalizing forms of meaning occurs in the counter-experience of certain perceptible forms, such as the dialectical image. In his *Arcades Project*, for instance, he indicates his faith in the caesura-like power of the image when he claims that history breaks down

5. Smith, “Bare Facts of Ritual”, 53, cites Plutarch, *Die vitiosi padore*, 534C.

6. Smith, “Bare Facts of Ritual”, 54.

into images, not stories.⁷ Similarly, against the tone of some of his early essays in which he talks in highly derogatory terms about the undisciplined Goethean notion of the ur-phenomenon, the project of the *Arcades* seems to confirm Arendt's view that this Goethean notion had a positive impact on Benjamin's thinking, and this can be seen in the way that Benjamin sought in the experience of single, miniature things a concentrated, alternative perspective on the whole.⁸ If we follow Smith's relational perspective and accept that the physical materiality of a thing is not sufficient to make of it an "image" that expresses meaning beyond this material form, what is the space that, in Benjamin's writing, determines the revelatory power and insight that can be attached to certain perceptible forms?

The general significance of this question for the study of Benjamin's thought cannot be overstated. It is clear that Benjamin's thinking relies on the idea that perceptible forms can carry revelatory power, and also that this idea draws on his unique coordination of themes and perspectives from "historical materialism" and "theology".⁹ Hence in his late treatment of the

7. W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, H. Eiland & K. McLaughlin (trans.) (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999) 463, convolutes N3, 1 & N3, 4. Hence he describes his project in the first of these passages as the dialectical "reading" of images.

8. See H. Arendt, "Introduction. Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940", in W. Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, H. Arendt (ed.), H. Zohn (trans.), 1–58 (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 12. It should be noted that the positive impact of the Goethean notion is of a heavily adapted kind, not least because of the perspective that Benjamin takes on nature. Benjamin is very critical of the Goethean idea of the ur-phenomenon in his major essay, "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*". See also his comments in the *Arcades*, 462, convolute N2a, 4, which are true to the tone and approach of this early essay: "In studying Simmel's presentation of Goethe's concept of truth, I came to see very clearly that my concept of origin in the *Trauerspiel* book is a rigorous and decisive transposition of this basic Goethean concept from the domain of nature to that of history. Origin – it is, in effect, the concept of *Ur*-phenomenon extracted from the pagan context of nature and brought into the Jewish contexts of history." I will discuss this topic in further detail in my treatment of allegory below.

9. A number of prominent interpreters see in one or other of these anchor points a problem that needs to be managed; others value the rare insights that come from their combination. See for an example of each perspective the respective discussions of this point in Gershom Scholem and Jürgen Habermas. G. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, H. Zohn (trans.) (New York: New York Review of Books, 1981), 149–51; and J. Habermas, "Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique", in *On Walter Benjamin*, G. Smith (ed.), 90–128 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 92: "Benjamin belongs to those authors on whom it is not possible to gain a purchase, whose work is destined for disparate effective histories; we encounter these authors only in the sudden flash of 'relevance' with which a thought achieves dominance for brief seconds of history." Amongst the different intellectual advocates for various aspects of Benjamin's thought Habermas describes Scholem as the "totally inflexible advocate of the dimension in Benjamin that was captivated with the traditions of Jewish mysticism" (91). Outside the field of Benjamin scholarship, Jacques Rancière has persuasively defended the functions of the "materialist-theology" combination

commodity form or in his discussion of the iron and glass of the Paris arcades Benjamin contends that the experiences of these things are “graphic” ones in which the “perceptibility of history” may be grasped.¹⁰ Specifically, their glistening novelty carries with it the following revelation: novelty requires perpetual replenishing and hence capitalism as the unthinking drive to novelty is, in fact, the “eternity of Hell”.¹¹ Even “before they have crumbled”, “the monuments of the bourgeoisie” can be recognized as “ruins”.¹² If we critically consider the status of the image as perceptible meaning in material form, some of the complexities and implications of the perceptibility of the “hell” of modern capitalism in commodity form can be sharpened. Benjamin thinks that there are perceptible objects or events that signify a meaning that is, owing to its very comprehensiveness and abstract nature, not strictly “visible” in these objects and events.¹³ Further, he requires that this invisible meaning be treated as vitally important. In what ways, we might ask, can a material, perceptible object signify a “meaning”, and in what sense must this meaning be seen as “vital”?¹⁴

as the key to those insights of Benjamin’s writing that render it inassimilable to attempts to claim Benjamin for projects in “cultural history”. See J. Rancière, “The Archaeomodern Turn”, in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, Michael P. Steinberg (ed.), 24–41 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

10. “A central problem of historical materialism that ought to be seen in the end: Must the Marxist understanding of history necessarily be acquired at the expense of the perceptibility of history? Or: In what way is it possible to conjoin a heightened graphicness [*Anschaulichkeit*] to the realization of Marxist method?” Benjamin, *Arcades*, 461, convolute N2, 6. See Max Pensky’s discussion of the tension between the new historiographical method and the alternative conception of time presupposed in Benjamin’s notion of the dialectical image in “Method and Time: Benjamin’s Dialectical Images”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, D. S. Ferris (ed.), 177–98 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
11. “What is at issue is not that ‘the same thing happens over and over’, and even less would it be a question here of eternal return. It is rather that precisely in that which is newest the face of the world never alters, that this newest remains, in every respect, the same. This constitutes the eternity of Hell.” Benjamin, *Arcades*, 544: convolute S 1, 5.
12. Benjamin, “Paris, Capital of the 19th Century. Exposé of 1935”, *Arcades*, 13.
13. We can find in Benjamin’s 1929 essay on Proust some licence for this distinction between the singular form of an image and the sources that are able, in contrast, to tell us about a whole. In an especially evocative metaphor, Benjamin compares the “weight” of Proust’s “involuntary remembrance” to the catch at the bottom of a fishing net: in this “stratum” “the materials of memory *no longer appear singly, as images, but tell us about a whole*, amorphously and formlessly, indefinitely and weightily, in the same way the weight of the fishing net tells a fisherman about his catch.” Proust’s sentences are described as “the entire muscular activity” that is required to raise this “catch”. W. Benjamin, “On The Image of Proust”, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927–1934*, M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland & G. Smith (eds), H. Zohn (trans.), 237–47 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 247, emphasis added.
14. It is true that these are not the terms Benjamin uses and he would undoubtedly reject the

This article has three sections. The first two sections compare Benjamin's treatment of the symbol as a degraded perceptual form in his *Elective Affinities* essay with his veneration of allegorical form in his *Trauerspiel*. In the third section, I use Kant's definition of aesthetic space in the *Critique of Judgment* to argue that despite Benjamin's contention that symbol and allegory signify differently, they each belong to an aesthetic space in which material forms signify more than their materiality. The consequences of Benjamin's attempt to oppose a space that falsely signifies (symbol) and one that properly does so (allegory) can be seen in the difficulties that structure some of the concepts developed in his work of the late 1920s and the 1930s, such as "profane illumination" and "universal history".

1. Ritual Forms of Meaning in Benjamin's "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*"

In Benjamin's 1924 "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*" essay he builds a case against the demonic power of the image. He takes the term "demonic" from Goethe's autobiography and uses it to depict the dominating effects of empty ritual forms in Goethe's novel and his life.¹⁵ When Benjamin labels the type of image that carries ambiguous, demonic meanings "symbolic", it is clear that he has in his sights Goethe's view that "the symbol" was a more significant and promising aesthetic category than "allegory", which had nearly universal currency amongst the early Romantics.¹⁶ The

reference to invisible meaning; nonetheless, I think that his conception of perceptible historical forms and the meaning they carry warrants and is usefully repositioned with such terminology.

15. Benjamin's essay gives a prominent place to Goethe's own concept of the demonic in *Poetry and Truth*. He excises from his long citation of Goethe's description of the demonic Goethe's confession of the strategy he used to deal with it. Benjamin cites Goethe as follows: "This essence, which appeared to infiltrate all the others, separating and combining them, I called 'daemonic', after the example of the ancients and others who had perceived something similar. I tried to save myself from this fearful thing." Goethe, cited in W. Benjamin, "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*", in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913–1926*, M. Bullock & M. W. Jennings (eds), S. Corngold (trans.), 297–360 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 316. Goethe's final sentence continues: "by taking refuge, as usual, behind an Image". See J. W. von Goethe, *From My Life: Poetry and Truth*, R. R. Heitner (trans.), Parts 1–3 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 597.
16. The exceptions to this general rule included Friedrich Schlegel, who did not oppose symbol and allegory as the other early Romantics did but saw them as continuous figures of indeterminate meaning, and Solger, who put allegorical rendering ahead of symbolic harmony. Gadamer and Todorov each give detailed accounts of how §59 of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* is the first text to set out the distinctively modern sense of the symbol. Goethe is amongst

key to Benjamin's position in this essay is his view that the category of the "symbol" is not a harmless aesthetic or philosophical term, but that the rudimentary form of the symbol as a self-contained totality of material and intelligible meaning moulds a pernicious approach to life.

other figures loosely associated with "Romanticism" to build on Kant's re-definition of the symbol to place symbol and allegory, rhetorical categories that had previously overlapped or been considered in a continuum of rhetorical terms, in opposition to one another. Benjamin retains the idea of the opposition between these terms but he reverses Goethe's evaluation. In Todorov's account of the features at stake in this opposition he emphasizes the "opacity" of the symbol as against the "clarity" of the ideas, which are the transitive reference of allegory: "in allegory there is an instantaneous passage through the signifying face of the sign toward knowledge of what is signified, whereas in the symbol this face retains its proper value, its opacity". The intransitivity of the symbol does not stop it signifying because its intransitivity "goes hand in hand with its syntheticism. Thus the symbol speaks to perception (along with intellection); the allegory in effect speaks to intellection alone." T. Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 201.

In Gadamer's *Truth and Method* he describes the symbol as "the coincidence of the sensible and the non-sensible" and allegory as "the meaningful relation of the sensible to the non-sensible": H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Second Revised Edition (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 74, emphasis added. This formulation encapsulates the main terms of the opposition between symbol and allegory, as Benjamin understands it, although there is the additional temporal dimension of "development" that belongs to the symbol and "rending" of time that is the work of allegory, which was first articulated in Creuzer and which stands against Goethe's version of symbolic simultaneity of meaning (218). Gadamer notes the transformation that occurs to the word "allegory" when it is "transferred from the sphere of language to that of the plastic arts" (74, note 143). By the time of the eighteenth century this transference was entirely forgotten: "people always thought first of the plastic arts when speaking of allegories; and the liberation of poetry from allegory, as undertaken by Lessing, meant in the first place its liberation from the model of the plastic arts" (74, note 143). The point has specific significance in the context of the original religious use of these terms, which are re-functionalized in modern aesthetic discourse. For instance, in his discussion of the symbol Kant "does justice to the theological truth that had found its scholastic form in the *analogia entis* and keeps human concepts separate from God" (75). But in Goethe and other Romantic re-workings of the symbol where the emphasis is on the inner unity of symbol and what is symbolized, the religious origin of the Greek *symbolon*, which continues in "various religious denominations", is marked: "what fills the symbol with meaning is that the finite and the infinite genuinely belong together. Thus the religious form of the symbol corresponds exactly to the original nature of 'symbolon', the dividing of what is one and reuniting it again" (77–8). Friedrich Creuzer makes this explicit in his account of the symbolism of antiquity when he asserts that "all symbolism" rests on the "original connection between gods and men" (78). Gadamer's account is critical of the way that the difference in meanings between the symbol and allegory in modern aesthetics becomes a contrast in values "under the influence of the concept of genius and the subjectivization of 'expression'" (74). According to this contrast in values, "The symbol (which can be interpreted inexhaustibly because it is indeterminate) is opposed to allegory (understood as standing in a more exact relation to meaning and exhausted by it) as art is opposed to non-art" (75). For Gadamer, the victory of the word and concept of the symbolic is also the triumph of Kant's critical philosophy and the aesthetics of the genius (75).

Benjamin's extraordinary reading of this novel contests its reception amongst the Goethe-cult of the George circle. Within this influential circle the novel had been treated as a reflection on "marriage" and the "martyrdom" of Otilie. Benjamin, in what is undoubtedly one of the most important essays of his entire career, maintains that Goethe had attempted to protect the true meaning of his novel from scrutiny and, in his lifetime, had encouraged such erroneous forms of criticism.¹⁷

Goethe's novel *Elective Affinities* ostensibly treats the breakdown in the marriage between Eduard and Charlotte when Charlotte's god-daughter, Otilie, and Eduard's friend, the Captain, come to stay. The current of primary affinities within the household, sketched against the backdrop of the characters' self-absorbed activities in remodelling the landscape and the buildings on the estate, are irrevocably altered as Eduard and Charlotte's feelings of love for each other are re-directed, as it were; so that their emotional lives now gravitate, respectively, toward Otilie and the Captain. In this charged atmosphere Eduard and Charlotte conceive a son whose face takes the features of those his progenitors desire. The climax of the novel occurs following Eduard's revelation to Otilie that the Captain will attempt to secure Charlotte's consent to a divorce thus allowing the lovers to unite. In Otilie's nervous haste to return across the lake with the infant to the house, she becomes momentarily unbalanced in the boat and the infant falls from her arms and drowns. The lovers' pact for their future, sealed moments before with their first ever exchange of "firm and frank kisses", is broken with the infant's death. A distraught Otilie tries to escape to an institution to lead a celibate life, but when Eduard, who sees the death of the infant as a blessing that removes the obstacle to their union, follows her and entreats her for their reunion, she returns to the house where she secretly resolves to stop eating, and takes her meals in private, giving her food instead to her devoted serving girl, Nannie. This routine of abstinence is only discovered in the unaware household when she dies. Still, in the scenario of the novel, her death is also presented as the response to a provocation: her decline reaches crisis point when she overhears Charlotte's guest, Mittler, talk pompously about the sanctity of marriage. Shortly following her death, Eduard, reduced to a state of extreme despondency, also dies; his last act is that of coveting a casket of

17. See Gershom Scholem's account of the essay's importance for Benjamin. Citing correspondence between the two in 1928, Scholem recounts that in Benjamin's opinion his "best essays" were "the ones on Keller, children's books, *Elective Affinities*, and the task of the translator". Scholem, *Story of a Friendship*, 184. See also Scholem's references to the *Elective Affinities* essay on pages 125 and 137–8.

remembrances of his beloved. The lovers are interred beside the infant in the family chapel. In one of the most bizarre scenes in the novel, Nannie, mad with guilt and confined in a tower, manages to throw herself from the tower and land on her mistress's open casket as the funeral procession passes through the town and, in what is seen as a "miracle" by the townsfolk, is physically unscathed by the considerable fall. The girl, seemingly so dull as to be unaware of her mistress's ill health and its cause in her own gluttony, is transformed by this miraculous event and ends up standing guard over Otilie's coffin in the chapel and even offers words of counsel to those struck, like the young architect who had worked on the chapel, by the grief of her loss.

The true meaning of the novel is disclosed for Benjamin in and through the contrast between the dark space of the novel and the dazzling revelation of the reasons for its pallid status in the alternative space of the novella that the novel contains. In other words, Benjamin identifies two spaces in this novel and holds up one as the truth of the significance of the other. It is in the opening page of this essay that he ventures the contrast between the "material content" and "truth content" of this novel.¹⁸ As such, these two spaces can be considered in the light of Smith's description of the sacred as that which is presented as significant in relation to the merely ordinary. The alternative space of the novella tells the story of two young lovers who jump into a dangerous current to save one another. Viewed from the perspective of the selfless actions of the novella lovers who demonstrate the moral force of the non-calculative decision and thereby the nature of "true love", the novel depicts the vacuity of the life of bourgeois choice in which nothing is to be risked for the things that are "loved". Thus Eduard and Charlotte's wealth, which is the basis for their extension of hospitality to Otilie and the Captain, was secured when, in their youth, they disavowed their true feelings for each other and made financially advantageous matches. For Benjamin the treatment of the novella lovers is evidence that Goethe struggled against the totalizing grip of mythic forces on his own life. The effect of the George circle's veneration of Goethe as the "artist-creator" is the suppression of the important signs of this struggle. In a two-pronged attack on Goethe's wilful self-mythicization and on the critics' complicity in hiding the root cause of the mythic fate lived out by the characters in the novel, Benjamin identifies the disorientating implications for human life when material forms are thought to embody ritually significant meaning. In fact, the embodiment of meaning in material forms leads to baseless ritualization because the meaning such forms embody is only ever

18. Benjamin, "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*", 297.

ambiguous. This identification of insuperable ambiguity in material forms is the core of Benjamin's objection to the symbol as "embodied meaning".

In the essay Benjamin describes concrete circumstances in which the experience of material forms as ambiguously uncertain determines a fateful existence. Benjamin understands myth as a human account (a "traditional tale"¹⁹) of what is vital in human life, which only draws on forms and forces of nature. In myth natural forms and forces are given a human face so that they become approachable for human beings.²⁰ The ambiguity of myth stems from the potentially infinite meanings that arise once mute nature is given expressive powers. This is a distinctive sense of "ambiguity" which describes the existential effects of looking to sensuous forms of meaning to guide human life.

For instance, Benjamin describes how the friends in the novel remove the gravestones from the churchyard "without scruple or consideration".²¹ It is true that Benjamin uses this example to treat the peculiar settings of bourgeois life where traditional institutions hold no authority. But the real issue is what may replace tradition as the frame of meaning for human life. The friends attempt to substitute for tradition an aesthetic order: "See how Charlotte has beautified this funeral-ground," comments Eduard to Mittler in the first chapter of the novel.²² Aesthetic forms, however, do not provide adequate mechanisms of orientation and existential security, nor can they ward off the omnipresent threat that the mythic perspective on life unleashes. Instead, the autonomy of such forms becomes an oppressive regime for human beings.

The "liberation" from an unquestioning relation to tradition is replaced by ritual whose ubiquity only produces anxiety. The "freedom" of these friends brings down on their heads a sense of dread and menace that ironically stems from the carefully arranged environment they inhabit. Ritualistic attachment to formal arrangements and procedures turns daily life into an arena of potential infringements and hence dread of retribution.

19. See W. Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and History* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979).

20. This can be compared with Hans Blumenberg's treatment of this topic. Contra Benjamin, Blumenberg sees myth as an effective way of managing anthropological deficits. See H. Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, R. M. Wallace (trans.) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985). It is significant, I think, that Blumenberg's detailed treatment of Goethe's self-mythicization in Part IV of *Work on Myth*, which includes an otherwise comprehensive survey of literary-theoretical discussions of this topic, leaves out Benjamin's essay on the *Elective Affinities*.

21. Benjamin, "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*", 302.

22. J. W. von Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, R. J. Hollingdale (trans.) (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 33.

Thus instead of their “freedom” from tradition fostering an “authentic” existence, it opens a chasm of potential dangers that crush them. Myth, according to the essay, does not make nature approachable but hands over human life to unfathomable, hence threatening, tyrannical forces.

It is not natural elements per se that are demonic but their insertion into the semiotic system of myth. For instance, the element of water can both destroy human life and be an instrument of salvation. In the novel, Charlotte’s infant drowns in the still waters of the lake. On the other hand, the willingness of the lovers in the novella to risk their lives when they throw themselves into the dangerous current seals the truth of their love, which, “because it risks life for the sake of true reconciliation, achieves this reconciliation and with it the peace in which their bond of love endures”.²³

When there is no anchor point outside mythic nature, natural forms become omnipotent; they dominate human life. The lovers in the novella do not take their bearings from nature. In fact, when the lovers decide to jump, he says, they make this decision each “alone with God”.²⁴ Thus Benjamin makes the point that nature’s sensuous forms can never be the grounds for human meaning. The novella lovers stand opposed to the semblance of nature as a false totality, and do so on the grounds of practical faith in something beyond merely natural life.

Benjamin contrasts these lovers’ practical faith with Goethe’s idolatry of nature. Goethe’s notion of a primal *ur*-phenomenon is disparaged in this context as a “pseudo-scientific” world-view with neither “empirical evidence” nor conceptual precision behind it. With it, he says, the “mythic face” of “sensuous nature . . . triumphs in the comprehensive totality of its appearances. It is, for Goethe, only the chaos of symbols.”²⁵ It is because Goethe is not able to give a conceptual account of the belief he has in a synthesis between “perceptible phenomena” and “intuitable archetypes” that he vainly seeks “the presence of ‘true’ nature as *ur*-phenomenon in its appearances”.²⁶ Thus Benjamin claims that Goethe’s idea “rests upon an ambiguity – sometimes naïve, sometimes doubtless more meditated – in the concept of nature”.²⁷ Goethe compulsively avoided the need to “found a hierarchy of the *ur*-phenomenon”. Instead of a conceptually ruled hierarchy, “the abundance of [nature’s] forms presents itself to [Goethe’s] spirit no differently than the confused universe of sounds presents itself to the

23. Benjamin, “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*”, 342.

24. Benjamin, “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*”, 344.

25. Benjamin, “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*”, 315.

26. Benjamin, “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*”, 314, Benjamin’s scare quotes.

27. Benjamin, “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*”, 314.

ear".²⁸ Benjamin condemns the license that this notion gives to Goethe for the indiscriminate attribution of meaning (*Bedeutung*) to nature's appearances. Such an attribution follows Goethe's view that nature somehow generates and speaks its own meaning:

It is no wonder that, for Goethe, the empire of the *ur*-phenomena could never be entirely clarified by thought. With this tenet, however, he deprived himself of the possibility of drawing up limits. Without distinctions, existence becomes subject to the concept of nature, which grows into monstrosity. ... In this world-view lies chaos. To that pass at last leads the life of the myth, which, without master or boundaries, imposes itself as the sole power in the domain of existence.²⁹

For Benjamin, chaos of symbols and ambiguity of meaning are the consequence of Goethe's assimilation of even the "word of reason" to nature's "voice". The *ur*-phenomenon, with its understanding of nature as an inexhaustible repository of symbols, is part of the world-view of mythic life. Benjamin's well-known pejorative position on the Romantic aesthetic category of the symbol has its basis here: in Goethe's notion of the symbol the experience of a self-enclosed totality combines and unifies intelligible meaning and sensuous form. Such aesthetics is "chaotic" because it coats reality with ambiguous, equivocal meanings – everything becomes an expressive, meaningful form. The ambiguity of meanings that ensues is pernicious on Benjamin's view because it condemns human beings to an anxiety-ridden existence amongst inscrutable ritual forms.

We might say that the references in this essay to the counter-example of the novella stand for a second space, which delimits true meaning. Crucially, in the novel and Goethe's own life, the limiting conditions that the contrast of different kinds of spaces defines for modes of human engagement have been overrun by a rapacious aesthetic instinct – form alone has become the object of ritualization. Against the false totality of Goethe's "chaos of symbols", Benjamin describes the novella as akin to the "sober", "sacred light" of day. He contrasts the novella's lucidity with the shimmering luminescence of myth whose source of light is "inward", "veiled" and "refracted through multicolored panes".³⁰ The context of these remarks is Benjamin's comment that the novella is:

28. Benjamin, "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*", 315.

29. Benjamin, "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*", 316.

30. Benjamin, "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*", 352.

comparable to an image in the darkness of a cathedral – an image which portrays the cathedral itself and so in the midst of the interior communicates a view of the place that is not otherwise available. In this way it brings inside at the same time a reflection of the bright, indeed sober day. And if this sobriety seems sacred, shines sacredly, the most peculiar thing is that it is not so, perhaps, only for Goethe. For his literary composition remains turned toward the interior in the veiled light refracted through multicolored panes.³¹

The novella, in the precision and economy of its “communicat[ion of] a view ... that is not otherwise available”,³² is akin to the effect on aesthetic symbols and forms of what Benjamin calls “the expressionless” (*das Ausdruckslose*). In his brief explanation of this category Benjamin refers to the way that it counters “the chaos in all beautiful semblance” with “the sublime violence of the true”.³³ He goes on to claim that the expressionless alone “completes the work, by shattering it into a thing of shards, into a fragment of the true world, into the torso of the symbol”.³⁴

In citing the “bright” and “sacred” lucidity of the novella and the critical violence of the expressionless Benjamin establishes an alternative space of meaning to the type of uncertain and ambiguous meaning embodied in the chaos of symbolic form. In Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* – written around the date of the publication of his essay on *Elective Affinities* in 1924–5 – he names another kind of image, the allegory, as the counter to the pernicious effects of the symbol. If the symbol is defined pejoratively as the embodiment and signification of ritual meaning in the experience of material form, in what sense does allegory, which also bears a meaning that communicates beyond its perceptible form, escape the terms of this repudiation?

2. Two Kinds of Images: Allegory and Symbol in Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel*

For readers of Benjamin the answer to this question must seem to be straightforward: the kind of meaning that allegory presents is redemptive.³⁵

31. Benjamin, “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*”, 352.

32. Benjamin, “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*”, 352.

33. Benjamin, “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*”, 340.

34. Benjamin, “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*”, 340.

35. W. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, J. Osborne (trans.) (London: Verso, 2009): “[A]n appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory”, 223.

Allegorical meaning qualifies as redemptive in part by way of the contrast Benjamin draws between symbol and allegory. The symbol is the physical form that is alive and brimming with meaning. Allegorical form, in contrast, points to its own decay and deficiency in the way it points beyond itself. The experience of allegory is one of a negative mode of presentation in which the material form itself is presented as deficient. If the chaos of the symbol threatens to erase the sense of a distinction between different kinds of spaces, the function of allegorical form is to mark out two contrasting spaces: the prosaic world and the redemptive meaning that goes beyond it. As such, it provides a mode of orientation amongst the forms of prosaic life that, because it is missing from the false totality of the symbol, discourages the type of routinized ritualization of meaning associated with the symbol. Nonetheless, in Benjamin's analysis of the allegorical machinery of the German *Trauerspiel* he shows how allegory establishes a purely arbitrary sense of the connection between perceptible forms and meaning: in doing so, allegory offers a stinging devaluation of the prosaic world. Indeed, unlike the symbol, which more or less imposes a meaningful form on a setting, in allegory an image is constructed as a meaningful frame in order to evaluate some aspect of human existence. For these reasons there is a twist in the positive evaluation of allegory that relates to the explicit artificiality of the mechanism through which this form relays its meaning. The implications of this point are important to clarify because they raise the question of how it is – beyond the contrast with the symbol – that the allegorical form is marked out as noteworthy.

In the *Trauerspiel* study Benjamin argues against the reputation of allegory as clumsy “conceptual” meaning through the mode of designation.³⁶ Whereas the symbol is a form that is alive and shimmering with meaning, Benjamin showed that previous studies of the baroque had missed the way that allegory, like the symbol, is also a form of “expression”.³⁷ What distinguishes its mode of expression from the symbol is its “strange combination of nature and history”.³⁸ This “combination” is in fact a dialectical exchange between the extremities of nature and history. In the allegorical way of seeing, “[e]verything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather in a death's head.”³⁹ This mode of expression may lack “all ‘symbolic’ freedom of

36. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 162.

37. A form of expression, he says, “like speech and writing”: Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 162.

38. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 167.

39. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.

expression, all classical proportion, all humanity” but it is “nevertheless ... the form in which man’s subjection to nature is most obvious”.⁴⁰

The allegorical expression of man’s subjection to nature is distinctive, however, because of the way that allegorical form separates “visual being from meaning”.⁴¹ Against the idealizing movement of the symbol that transfigures nature and raises up a redemptive moral or aesthetic idea, “in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape”.⁴² In this way the material form is not elevated and transfigured as it is in the case of the symbol, but flattened and compressed.⁴³ Like the “critical violence” of the expressionless in the essay on Goethe, allegory petrifies the movement and shatters the proportions of form. But in the case of allegory this very separation between perceptible form and its “true” meaning raises the problem of how the “meaning” of its form is communicated.

Benjamin addresses this problem in two different ways. When he describes the baroque apotheosis as dialectical, he implies that it is the “movement between extremes” that accomplishes the “allegorical” communication.⁴⁴ In this respect Benjamin addresses the meaning of allegory as such, rather than of particular allegorical forms. Thus he claims that nature is subject to the power of death and for that reason it “has always been allegorical”.⁴⁵ Similarly, the measure of time for the experience of allegory is history. And this measure is geared toward what Benjamin describes as the “fruition of significance and death”.⁴⁶ There is an economy of proportion between significance and subjection: “The greater the significance, the greater the subjection to death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance.”⁴⁷ Hence the suffering of the Passion of the Christ is cited as an instance of how the pain and violence of the world sets out the significance attached to mortal subjection.⁴⁸ It is the general definition of allegory as the presentation of the meaning of “history” as “nature” that this example of the Passion relays. Most notably, this example involves the historical dimension of

40. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.

41. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 165.

42. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.

43. See the discussion of this point in G. Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, T. Conley (trans.) (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1993), 125.

44. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 160.

45. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.

46. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.

47. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.

48. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 182–3.

the tale or story that is missing from the supposedly timeless form of the symbol.⁴⁹

The definition of allegorical meaning that is communicated in this dialectic of extremes, therefore, needs to be distinguished from what Benjamin describes as the “Midas touch” of the baroque that allowed it to transform *any* form into the services of such allegorical meaning. It is this second way of approaching allegorical meaning that really brings into focus the question of how perceptible forms become allegorically meaningful. Benjamin draws attention to the entirely *arbitrary* connections between material forms and the meanings they bear in the German *Trauerspiel*: in Hallmann’s transformation of the “harp” into the “executioner’s axe” we see, he says, the “unashamed crudity” of baroque metamorphoses.⁵⁰ The emblem is the textual machinery that builds on the allegorical separation of visual form and meaning to accomplish the negation of visual form. Thus, allegory works to convey a meaning that is more than its material form precisely because it is the form that is not what it is – the negation of visual form “is” the mode of the allegorical communication of meaning.⁵¹ This is how baroque allegory marks out the deficiency of the prosaic, which it hems in with the extremity of the figure of life as decay and degeneration.⁵² Allegory is an experience of meaning, which is differentiated from the prosaic life, on one side, and other modes of expression of meaning such as the symbol, on the other.

What can be said of meaning that is communicated in this way? How can it be coordinated with Benjamin’s objections to the arbitrary and

49. “The mystical instant [*Nu*] becomes the ‘now’ [*Jetzt*] of contemporary actuality; the symbolic becomes distorted into the allegorical.” The symbol “remains persistently the same” whereas “if it is to hold its own against the tendency to absorption, the allegorical must constantly unfold in new and surprising ways”. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 183.

50. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 231. He cites as well Hallmann’s exposition from his *Leich-Reden*, note †, 231: “For if we consider the innumerable corpses with which, partly, the ravages of the plague and, partly, weapons of war, have filled not only our Germany, but almost the whole of Europe, then we must admit that our roses have been transformed into thorns, our lilies into nettles, our paradises into cemeteries, indeed our whole being into an image of death. It is therefore my hope that it will not be held against me that in this general theatre of death I have not foreborne to set up my own paper graveyard.”

51. There is a similarity here to Benjamin’s own later citations of textual images in the *Arcades* and his specific understanding of the dialectical image as a form that is encountered in language, or that his project is a “reading” of images. See Benjamin, *Arcades Project*: on the “place where one encounters [the dialectical image] is language”, 462, convolute N2a, 3, and on the legible “image that is read”, 463, convolute N3, 1.

52. Benjamin argues that: “The three most important impulses in the origin of western allegory are non-antique, anti-antique: the gods project into the alien world, they become evil, and they become creatures. The attire of the Olympians is left behind, and in the course of time the emblems collect around it”: Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 225.

uncertain meanings of symbolic form in his essay on *Elective Affinities*, which also set perceptible forms apart from the otherwise invisible meaning they carry? Benjamin is clear that the meaning allegory confers is only subjective, by which he signals the double limitation of artificial mechanism and subjective intention.⁵³ The “subjective” status of allegorical meaning allows Benjamin to derive from allegory a type of theodicy motif: evil, he claims, is revealed in the allegorical form to be merely a subjective phenomenon.⁵⁴ The baroque mode of allegorical expression is, he writes, in “all its darkness, vainglory, and godlessness . . . nothing but self-delusion”:⁵⁵

Allegory goes away empty-handed. Evil as such, which it cherished as enduring profundity, exists only in allegory, is nothing other than allegory, and *means something different from what it is*. It means precisely the non-existence of what it presents. The absolute vices, as exemplified by tyrants and intriguers, are allegories. They are not real, and that which they represent, they possess only in the subjective view of melancholy, they are this view, which is destroyed by its own offspring because they only signify its blindness. They point to the absolutely subjective pensiveness, to which alone they owe their existence.⁵⁶

53. “Allegories become dated, because it is part of their nature to shock. If the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and it remains dead, but eternally secure, then it is exposed to the allegorist, it is unconditionally in his power. That is to say it is now quite incapable of emanating any meaning or significance of its own; such significance as it has, it acquires from the allegorist. He places it within it, and stands behind it; not in a psychological but in an ontological sense. In his hands the object becomes something different; through it he speaks of something different and for him it becomes a key to the realm of hidden knowledge; and he reveres it as the emblem of this. *This is what determines the character of allegory as a form of writing. It is a schema*; and as a schema it is an object of knowledge, but it is not securely possessed until it becomes a fixed schema: at one and the same time a fixed image and a fixing sign. The baroque idea of knowledge, the process of storing, to which the vast libraries are a monument, is realized in the external appearance of the script.” Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 184, emphasis added.

54. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 233.

55. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 232.

56. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 233. In his Introduction to the *Trauerspiel*, George Steiner writes that the ending of the *Ursprung* “suggests, in a vein which is unmistakably personal, that only allegory, in that it makes substance totally significant, totally representative of ulterior meanings and, therefore, ‘unreal’ in itself, can render bearable an authentic perception of the infernal. Through allegory, the Angel, who in Paul Klee’s depiction *Angelus Novus*, plays so obsessive a part in Benjamin’s inner existence, can look into the deeps.” G. Steiner, “Introduction”, in Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 7–24 (London: Verso, 1998), 20.

Allegory succeeds where the symbol fails because the meaning that it imparts to things is ultimately *only allegorical*. In other words, it is the form in which the artificiality of meaningful material form as such is marked. In this sense the valorized status of the allegorical form in Benjamin's writing is in service of the general point that sensuous images are deficient modes of relaying meaning. Allegory is the "good" aesthetic because it shows the limitations of aesthetic, that is, material forms of communication per se. When he highlights the subjective pensiveness of allegorical form, Benjamin indicates how this pensiveness points to the deficiency of particular material forms, and from here points emphatically to the general deficiency of material form as such.

In Smith's account access to sacred meaning occurs by virtue of being in a space that is marked as such by ritual. Similarly, we might say that there is nothing allegorical about allegorical forms or symbolic about the symbol. They *are* in the mode of allegory and symbol by virtue of being placed in a certain kind of space.

The status of these forms as modes of communicability of meaning is marked not in the material forms they use, but in the schema of relations in which these forms are able to bear heightened meaning. What kind of space determines such meaning in Benjamin's writing? Despite the critique he intends to make of totalizing material forms of meaning, the space in which allegory works is, in fact, like the space of the symbol to which it is ostensibly opposed, an aesthetic space of meaning.

3. The Aesthetic Space: Benjamin's "Demonic Image" and Kant's "Image of Nature"

A comparison between the critical position Benjamin articulates on ritual meaning and Kant's conception of aesthetic significance can help to make the implications of this point clearer. In particular, the technicalities of Kant's use of aesthetic space can be used to identify the problems in Benjamin's way of opposing symbol and allegory as if they belonged to different spaces of meaning. Like the sacred space of ritual, symbol and allegory are material forms whose expressive capacity is determined relationally against a prosaic field of things. The question is: what is the threshold these forms cross, and what are the features of the space they have entered, to stand out in the way they do against the prosaic? Benjamin's view is that the symbol's expressivity belongs to an aesthetic space, and that allegory perforates this space in its expression of extremes. In the particular way that allegory stands out against the

prosaic as a perceptible form that signifies, however, it also belongs to an aesthetic space of meaning.

In Kant's *Critique of Judgment* a conception of the aesthetic space of meaning is outlined and defended. To be sure, the phrase "aesthetic space" is not Kant's but it can be used to indicate the functional shift that the aesthetic attitude determines for how and what a material form signifies. In the aesthetic space, heightened access to meaning occurs. Like the sacred space of ritual, in Kant's aesthetic space perceptible forms signify meanings beyond their bare materiality. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to state that when he discusses this space Kant entertains the perception that a physical form in this space *should* signify.

The contrast that Kant sets up between the beauties of nature and of art is especially relevant here. Hegel has Kant's conception of the transfiguring effects on nature's singular forms of aesthetic reflection in his sights when in his *Aesthetics* he dismisses nature's beauties as "naïve" and "self-centred" – they can exist and wither away, Hegel says, without anyone to appreciate them.⁵⁷ In Kant's view precisely this independence from the field of human concerns qualifies singular forms of nature as potentially more significant than works of art: in fact, for Kant, nature's forms can be expressive vehicles able to attest in a unique way to the human moral vocation.⁵⁸ But to do so, the experience of such forms needs to arrest our experience of them – both in the sense of standing out against a prosaic background, that is, moving into an "aesthetic" space of significance, and doing so in such a way to occasion a satisfying or meaningful experience of a material form that, crucially, is *not* designed to provide such satisfaction.

Ritual patterns of repetition mark what occurs in the sacred space as significant. A similar determination of significance can be observed in Kant's aesthetic space. What occurs in the aesthetic space depends for Kant on the factor of surprise (the "contingent accord" that is "discovered" by the

57. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, T. M. Knox (trans.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 71: Art "has the purpose of existing solely for our mind and spirit. For this reason alone are content and artistic form fashioned in conformity with one another. The *purely* sensuously concrete – external nature as such – does not have this purpose for the sole reason of its origin. The variegated richly coloured plumage of birds shines even when unseen, their song dies away unheard; the torch-thistle, which blooms for only one night, withers in the wilds of the southern forests without having been admired, and these forests, jungles themselves of the most beautiful and luxuriant vegetation, with the most sweet-smelling and aromatic perfumes, rot and decay equally unenjoyed. But the work of art is not so naïvely self-centred; it is essentially a question, an address to the responsive breast, a call to the mind and the spirit."

58. I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, W. S. Pluhar (trans.) (Indianapolis, IN.: Hackett, 1987).

faculties for its meaning-effects.⁵⁹ Hence when a flower has been displayed in a vase for decoration the features that made it aesthetically significant in nature are lost. Considered as a structure of engagement with nature's forms, the practice of aesthetic judgement also performs a function akin to ritual repetition in the patterns of interaction it establishes with its environment. Aesthetic forms signify on account of the relation they have with a spectator who receives them aesthetically, that is, who expects these forms to signify. This aesthetic reception of things is an attitude that can be cultivated: hence what Kant terms the "intellectual interest of the beautiful" establishes a pattern of interaction with form, which the moral significance he attaches to aesthetic reflection reinforces.⁶⁰

Ultimately, it is a very specific kind of image of nature that authorizes its expression of moral ideas. Under the expectations of the aesthetic attitude, Nature becomes like a second Book; it "winks" at us;⁶¹ it speaks to us in its "cipher language"⁶² and it "symbolises" moral ideas.⁶³ In all of these ways Nature shows that, like the things that occur in the space of the "sacred", the flower that communicates with us is no accident, that the meaning some of nature's forms carry has full warrant for the significance they "express".

The "expressive" form of the flower thus points to highly specific features of the aesthetic space through which it is possible for a flower to signify moral ideas. The religious icon signifies by virtue of being in the space of a religious tradition. In Kant's "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment" the flower signifies because there is an expectation that singular natural

59. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §7, 31.

60. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §42. For Kant, beauties of nature are more significant than those artefacts which bear the interpretable traces of human intention. We can contrast in this respect the different prospects that a tool from a lost civilization whose purpose is obscure to us furnishes for aesthetic reflection from the free beauty of a wild flower, the pleasure of whose form is entirely contingent for our understanding (see Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §17, N.60, 84 & §16). The flower is an organized form whose purpose is not evident and it thereby presents an analogical mirror for the structure of human freedom as a capacity whose ends are not determined. Kant's flower belongs to an aesthetic space when it communicates the moral idea, whereas in Hegel's view the wild flower is simply part of the field of the accidental. What is really noteworthy about the aesthetic volubility of the wild flower is that it allows for an experience of the moral vocation that could not otherwise be had. The contrast between free singular natural beauties which comport moral significance and artefacts designed to please relies on a different kind of design and intention entering, as it were, by the back door, and securing a space in which the moral capacity is insulated from moral nihilism and understood as a vocation.

61. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §42, 167.

62. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §42, 168.

63. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §59.

forms communicate meaning to those who are morally tuned to receive such messages (thus Kant praises the moral feeling of the soul that turns away from museums to the appreciation of nature's singular forms).⁶⁴

In the account Benjamin gives of ritual meaning in his essay on Goethe's novel this attitude toward an autonomously expressive sensuous nature, which is greeted with the expectation that it will communicate, is described as demonic. The aesthetic disposition that looks for and expects meaning in material forms leads directly to the ritualization of experience; this is Benjamin's objection to both the Goethe-cult and Goethe's own chaotically symbolic attitude to nature.

Benjamin speaks eloquently to the problems for human beings of finding a stable point of orientation when they live in "a forest of symbols", whose ambiguous meaning is driven by inscrutable forces.⁶⁵ In this respect we might say that for Benjamin the inclusion of the symbol in the marked-out space of heightened attention is an "accident": it doesn't belong in this space and the practices of ritualization around it undermine the very distinction that establishes the coherence of the marked space of ritual in the first place.

Benjamin uses allegory to mark out the proper focus of this space and he calls the space of the symbol "aesthetic", by which he means the presence of signs grounded in nothing other than materiality. In a neat reversal of Kant's preference for nature over art, it is the subjective artificiality of the mechanism of allegory that allows it to show perceptible forms at their extreme point of mortal subjection and undo their Goethean function of captivation.

However, the comparison with Kant also sharpens the question of the precise difference between the mechanisms of these different forms of expression: in what sense, if the allegory communicates a meaning beyond its physical form that is unrelated to it, is it different from the "aesthetic" operations of symbolic ambiguity? Benjamin's use of allegory can be seen as part of the "aesthetic" space precisely because the allegorical form is greeted with expectations of meaning that allow, in its case, the presentation of material forms as deficient. Allegorical form is expressive through a

64. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §42, 166–7.

65. He cites the phrase "forest of symbols" in his later essay, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire". The phrase is from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*. It relates, says Benjamin, to the quality of perception that occurs in temples which is "of a piece with perception in dreams". W. Benjamin, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire", in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938–1940*, H. Eiland & M. W. Jennings (eds), H. Zohn (trans.), 313–55 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 339. In the *Trauerspiel* he refers to the "wooded interior" of the symbol. See Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 165.

similar structure of the symbol's aesthetic anticipation of meaning. These expectations are unique to the aesthetic space and its modes of operation: allegory too crosses the threshold in which formal satisfaction is derived from a particular kind of experience of material forms.

I have argued here that Benjamin's early writing maintains a difference between two kinds of images and two spaces of signifying forms. The allegorical image that exposes and destroys false totalities is opposed to the symbol which enchants and reduces human life to impotence. We saw Benjamin's pejorative view of the symbols that populate Goethe's novel and entrance its characters in a "forest of symbols". Using the vocabulary of the sacred one may be tempted to say that one kind of image is falsely included in the field of elevated or vital meanings and that the other presents this fact. The symbol signifies in the wrong way (it is described as the "demonic" force that reduces humans to a state of impotence).⁶⁶ The expectation of the sensuous presence of meaning in the symbol is not only false but also a source of endless anxiety. Benjamin calls the space where this expectation is at home "mythic", which may be understood as a sector of the aesthetic space where the sensuous form has the power to signify something vital. Later, in his concepts of "profane illumination" or "universal history" (a history that would be "quotable in all its moments"),⁶⁷

66. Kant also talks about cases of competing aesthetic attention from "art" and "nature", which may be seen as analogous to Benjamin's competing "symbol" and "allegory". He cites the English philologist and ethnologist William Marsden, who spent a number of years living in Sumatra. Marsden "comments", Kant writes, "that the free beauties of nature there surround the beholder everywhere, so that there is little left in them to attract him; whereas, when in the midst of a forest he came upon a pepper garden, with the stakes that supported the climbing plants forming paths between them along parallel lines, it charmed him greatly. He concludes from this that we like wild and apparently rule-less beauty only as a change, when we have been satiated with the sight of regular beauty. And yet he need only have made the experiment of spending one day with his pepper garden to realize that, once regularity has [prompted] the understanding to put itself into attunement with order which it requires everywhere, the object ceases to entertain him and instead inflicts on his imagination an irksome constraint; whereas nature in those regions, extravagant in all its diversity to the point of opulence, subject to no constraint from artificial rules, can nourish his taste permanently." Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, "General Comment on the First Division of the Analytic", 94.

67. In his 1940 piece "On the Concept of History", Benjamin writes: "The chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accord with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history. Of course only a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past – which is to say, *only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments* [my emphasis]. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation à l'ordre du jour*. And that day is Judgment Day." W. Benjamin, "On the Concept of History", in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938–1940*, H. Eiland & M. W. Jennings (eds), H. Zohn (trans.), 389–400 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 390.

Benjamin seems to move in the direction of dismantling this privileged space altogether. On the other hand, his conception of the allegory or the “expressionless”, which is the counter to the mythic, also relies on the aesthetic space.⁶⁸ The allegory is in a sense the anti-aesthetic within this space. Perhaps these two perspectives are reconcilable: allegory erases the boundaries between the sacred and the ordinary (we can cite here the meaning of the concept of profane illumination as the historical perceptibility of ordinary things) from within the aesthetic space, on whose rules it depends for its effects. But even this way of describing the work of the allegory is problematic, for in a sense in profane illumination the ordinary is drawn into the sacred space, rendered capable of signifying in the manner of an (aesthetic) image. The diffuse profusion of signifying forms leads to revolutionary madness. Here we may cite Benjamin’s comment in his 1929 essay on the Surrealists that “No one before these visionaries and augurs perceived how destitution – not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects – can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism.”⁶⁹

Is it for Benjamin the aesthetic space itself, where forms acquire the power to communicate meaning spontaneously as it were, that is, in the words of his essay on *Elective Affinities*, “demonic”? Or is it a particular form of signification, since he thinks that the subjective pensiveness and the artificiality of the allegory dispel the demonic empowerment? Benjamin must say: both. This is the paradox that determines his early treatment of the topic of the image.

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68. “In comparison to the symbol, the western conception of allegory is a late manifestation which has its basis in certain very fertile cultural conflicts [i.e. paganism and Christianity; the Renaissance and the Reformation]. The allegorical maxim is comparable to the scrolls. ... The *Trauerspiel* is therefore in no way characterized by immobility, nor indeed by slowness of action ... but by the irregular rhythm of the constant pause, the sudden change of direction, and consolidation into new rigidity.” Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 197. It is noticeable in the references to irregular rhythms, pauses and intervention in direction how close Benjamin’s description of allegory is to his earlier description of the expressionless (*Ausdrucklos*) in his essay on the *Elective Affinities*.

69. W. Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia”, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927–1934*, M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland & G. Smith (eds), E. Jephcott (trans.), 207–21 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 210.

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