

THE ORIGINS OF EXACT IMAGINATION, OR THE IDEA OF MODERN LIFE

Los orígenes de la fantasía exacta o la idea de la vida moderna

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ABSTRACT

This essay suggests that Theodor Adorno's so-called physiognomic method of interpretation can be understood as an adaptation of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's heterodox scientific method to the realm of social and cultural inquiry. Adorno's persistent reference to underlying social "essences" and historical "ideas" in his writings shares many similarities with Goethe's stubbornly metaphysical conception of an "original phenomenon" (*Urphänomen*) that manifests in natural entities. These similarities are especially surprising considering that Adorno did not appear to have any familiarity with Goethe's scientific writings and only implicitly alludes to them by way of a single Goethean term throughout his life: "exact imagination." I present the "origins" of exact imagination in several senses throughout this essay: a detailed explication of the structure of Goethe's imaginative scientific method; a genealogical sketch of Goethean science from its natural-scientific origins to its role in the historiographic writings of Walter Benjamin and Oswald Spengler, with which Adorno was deeply familiar; and an analysis of how Adorno unwittingly refashioned Goethe's method throughout his career in the interest of disclosing the "idea" of modern life.

Key words: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Oswald Spengler, physiognomy, interpretation.

RESUMEN

El presente ensayo sostiene que el método fisionómico de interpretación de Theodor W. Adorno puede leerse como una adaptación del heterodoxo método científico de Johann Wolfgang von Goethe al ámbito de la investigación social y cultural. La insistente referencia de los escritos de Adorno a las "esencias" sociales subyacentes y a "ideas" históricas presenta muchas similitu-

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des con la concepción obstinadamente metafísica de Goethe, que hablaba de un “protofenómeno” (Urphänomen) que se manifiesta en las entidades naturales. Estas similitudes resultan especialmente sorprendentes si se tiene en cuenta que Adorno no parece estar familiarizado con los escritos científicos de Goethe y solo alude implícitamente a ellos mediante un único término goetheano que emplea a lo largo de toda su vida: “fantasía exacta”. A lo largo de este ensayo presento los “orígenes” de la fantasía exacta en distintos sentidos: una explicación detallada de la estructura del método científico imaginativo de Goethe; un esbozo genealógico de la ciencia goetheana desde sus orígenes en la ciencia natural hasta su papel en los escritos historiográficos de Walter Benjamin y Oswald Spengler, con los que Adorno estaba profundamente familiarizado; y un análisis de cómo Adorno remodeló involuntariamente el método de Goethe a lo largo de su producción con miras a revelar la “idea” de la vida moderna.

Palabras clave: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Oswald Spengler, fisonomía, interpretación.

“We live in the midst of derived phenomena and have no idea how we are to arrive at the original question.”

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

1 ADORNO'S EXACT IMAGINATION

Was Theodor Adorno a philosopher? This is likely the first appellation that comes to mind, but it requires a number of qualifications, for only about a quarter of his collected writings contain properly philosophical subject matter, and much of this material remains either untranslated or otherwise rarely cited and more or less forgotten. It would just as well be possible to call Adorno a sociologist, for he conducted empirical sociological studies throughout his career, taught an advanced sociology seminar every semester for the last fifteen years of his life, and devoted some of his most polemical writings, especially in the 1960s, to a critique of the theoretical foundations of the social sciences. But this title strikes the ear as even less suitable, for there are scarcely any social scientists outside of Germany that

would be willing to include an essay by Adorno on a course syllabus. Perhaps it would then be best to describe Adorno as a cultural critic. The vast majority of his published writings, particularly the writings that find themselves into the hands of enthusiastic readers, concern either the analysis of cultural phenomena—music, literature, horoscopes, popular media, everyday life—or some sort of investigation of the concept of culture as such. But unlike “philosopher” or “sociologist,” terms Adorno readily adopted for himself, this third term, with its acquired associations of cultural elitism and moral superiority, is off limits. “I shudder to find myself described as a cultural critic,” he states in a lecture from 1963. “That actually sounds like the job of a pimp, for a cultural critic is really just a person who lives from that which he exploits and at the same time abuses. I would like to have nothing to do with that” (2021: 132).¹

Cultural criticism, Adorno writes in his eponymous opening essay of *Prisms*, cannot be practiced without further ado; it must become an interpretive enterprise, or what he calls “social physiognomics” (*gesellschaftliche Physiognomik*) (1981: 30 [25]).² To the contemporary reader with a penchant for melodious language, “social physiognomics” sounds far more discordant than the comparatively innocuous “cultural criticism.” It resounds of pseudo-science, of that disturbing and quintessentially German preoccupation with the shape of noses and skulls that, in the words of one intellectual historian, “connects [Johann Kaspar] Lavater and his theories with the atrocities of Auschwitz” (Gray 2004: xxi). Adorno, one might argue, does not aspire to intuit essences on the basis of appearances, does not see the exterior as a function of the interior; perhaps he simply means to suggest that his work is more attuned to the façade, surface, or “physiognomy” (*Physiognomie*) of cultural life than ordinary cultural criticism. But this hesitant explanation is certainly wrong. Adorno leaves no doubt that his intention when examining cultural phenomena is “to decipher (*entziffern*) the total social tendency which comes to light in them” (1981: 30 [25]). Whatever the disciplinary context, Adorno describes the scholar as a kind of cryptologist, and the task of research as one of decoding the enigmatic surface of modern life, just as the physiognomist reads the human face as an encrypted expression of an underlying moral character.

¹ It should be noted that in German, *Kulturkritiker* literally means “critic of civilization” and is often associated with a reactionary, anti-modern sensibility.

² All citations from works published in the main division of Adorno’s collected writings will refer to the English and the German page number. Almost all of these translations have been modified.

This invocation of a physiognomic interpretive paradigm is most salient in Adorno's final published essays, particularly in his sociological treatises of the 1960s. Adorno's intention in these late methodological writings is to distinguish between a form of positivistic social research that conceives of society as an aggregate of individually verifiable phenomena, and a critical social research program that grasps such phenomena as expressions of an underlying "essence." Knowledge of this essence is inextricably linked to sensuous perception; the critical social scientist must develop a sixth "sense" (*Sinn*) as it were, one attuned to "that which flashes up in every social phenomenon." This sense is the "organ of scientific experience" (1976: 33 [315-6]); it can be described as "the faculty of interpretation" (2000: 146), the ability to "become conscious of totality in traces of empirical social reality" or to "perceive 'the social' (*das Gesellschaftliche*) that is expressed in social phenomena (*sozialen Phänomenen*)" (1976: 54 [339]) "Anyone who cannot read individual *faits sociaux* as ciphers for a wider social reality," Adorno bumptiously tells his sociology students in 1968, "ought, judged by my conception of sociology, to steer clear of that discipline and become a social expert, or whatever such a function might be called, for he is not a sociologist" (2000: 22). That is Adorno's unequivocal verdict on the function of the social sciences. But remarkably, the most elaborate explication of this conception of interpretation occurs not at the very end of Adorno's career as a sociologist, but rather at the very beginning of Adorno's career as a philosopher, namely in his inaugural lecture of 1931 on the contemporary relevance (*Aktualität*) of philosophy. Here he states, "the idea of science is research; that of philosophy is interpretation" (1977: 126 [334]), and he spends the second half of this famously obscure essay describing what this means. The philosopher, he argues, must inventively construct constellations out of the riddle-like "refuse of the phenomenal world" in order to "light up the riddle-form like lightning" (128 [336]; 127 [335]), which then suddenly illuminates an "inner-historically constituted idea" (128 [337]). The "organon" of this inventive procedure is neither a "sense" nor quite a "faculty," but rather an "exact imagination" (131 [342]).

I will return to this difficult lecture. For now, I wish to draw the reader's attention to a surprising coincidence. Just as the word "physiognomy" appears in Adorno's later writings as a curious throwback to the pseudo-scientific writings of Lavater and Goethe at the close of the eighteenth century, this ironic rehabilitative gesture is also present in Adorno's inaugural lecture when he endorses "exact ima-

gination.” For this method is also not his own; it belongs to Goethe. In fact, although the term most often appears today in relation to Adorno’s work (Cook 2018; Nichol森 1997), this was not the case at any point during his lifetime. It was first coined in an 1824 book review by Goethe, which is included in most major collections of Goethe’s natural-scientific writings (Goethe 1988: 46). Here the term appears as a three-word phrase, “exact sensuous imagination” (*exakte sinnliche Phantasie*), which is offered as an intuitive counterpart to the “exact sciences,” or what one today calls the “hard sciences.” Secondary literature on Goethe usually employs the three-word phrase, although the middle adjective is occasionally omitted. In the interwar period, namely at the time when Adorno delivered his inaugural lecture, the term was closely associated with the controversial work of Oswald Spengler, who refers to “exact sensuous imagination” in crucial methodological contexts at every point in his career (1904: 1; 1926: 25, 56, 97; 1965: 144). However, it is likely that Adorno picked up the term from either Walter Benjamin, whose decidedly Goethean conception of the task of philosophy is clearly present all throughout Adorno’s inaugural lecture, or (more likely, in my opinion) from Gottfried Salomon, a fellow Frankfurt-based sociologist and close friend of Adorno and Benjamin who uses the two-word term “exact imagination” in relation to Goethe in multiple writings, including a widely-read article from the late 1920s on Marx’s concept of ideology (1926: 421; 2011: 90).³

³ There are a number of compelling reasons to believe that Salomon introduced Adorno to the term. Salomon’s use of the term “*exakte Phantasie*’ (Goethe)” in his 1926 essay on Marx’s theory of ideology in the *Soziologische Jahrbuch*, with Goethe’s name appearing in parentheses after the two words, is highly unusual insofar as it does not occur within the context of a discussion of Goethe’s scientific writings, but rather within the context of a discussion of “ciphers” and the manner in which “truth shines through historical disguises.” Salomon was the most enthusiastic supporter of Benjamin’s *Habilitationsschrift* at Frankfurt University and maintained a written correspondence with Benjamin throughout the 1920s; Benjamin asked Salomon to send him a copy of the Marx essay in 1926 (Kambas 1982). It is likely that Adorno, who (along with his parents, incidentally) was close with Salomon, would have also studied this important essay in the late 1920s. All of this evidence is compounded by another intriguing coincidence: Salomon uses the phrase “*exakte Phantasie*’ (Goethe)” again in a 1963 commemoration of Ernst Troeltsch in Heidelberg (Meyer, 2011). It is, indeed, Troeltsch who first uses the two-word term “*exakte Phantasie*” (the earliest use that I have been able to find) in his massive 1921 work on historicism, which Benjamin and Adorno studied with Salomon in 1923; this is in fact where the two younger thinkers first met! This leads me to believe that Salomon discovered the phrase via Troeltsch, considered it particularly important, and taught it to his students. In case none of this is true, it should be noted that Ernst Cassirer uses the phrase “*exakte sinnliche Phantasie*” in many of his outstanding writings on Goethe, beginning with *Freiheit und Form* (1916), which was read by Benjamin and possibly by Adorno as well. Much of the secondary literature on Spengler from the 1920s refers to “*exakte sinnliche Phantasie*.” Ernst Bloch is also a strong candidate for introducing Adorno to the term: he uses the two-word phrase “*exakte Phan-*

This surprising constellation of names—Goethe, Spengler, Benjamin, Adorno—does not constitute a familiar tradition, but it will in any case anchor the following sections of this paper. Just as Benjamin insists that “ideas come to life only where extremes gather around them” (2019: 11), so I hope, in what follows, to blow a faint breath of life on the dying idea of exact imagination by assembling an unlikely configuration of its most extreme exponents. More specifically, I wish to show that if we peel back the crust of dramatic political differences that separate someone like Benjamin from someone like Spengler, it is possible to see these two eccentric thinkers as the most ambitious representatives of the widespread attempt to adapt Goethe’s intuitive, physiognomic method of scientific inquiry to the study of modern cultural life. This is the nexus within which one must then understand Adorno’s work. Adorno alludes to this characteristically German and unabashedly metaphysical paradigm of scientific inquiry—without having a shred of familiarity with Goethe’s scientific writings, it seems to me—throughout his life, and attempts to bring its most implausibly speculative features down to earth by combining them with the findings of advanced economic, sociological, and psychoanalytic research. What makes Adorno so unusual alongside his contemporaries in twentieth-century critical social theory—what makes it so perennially difficult to understand him—has perhaps less to do with his novelty and more to do with the fact that he stokes the fading embers of this superannuated metaphysical tradition deep into the second half of the twentieth century, into a world where scarcely anyone alive either understands it or is willing to defend it.

2 ADORNO’S IDEA

Before turning to Goethe’s heterodox conception of science, it is useful first to get a better handle on Adorno’s specifically Goethean intentions. An examination of his inaugural lecture is instructive in this regard. Beyond the fact that it is effectively a methodological foundation underlying all of Adorno’s interpretive work, it also strikes me as Adorno’s most Goethean essay, deeply informed as it is by Benjamin’s patently Goethean conception of truth developed in the *Origin of German Tragedy*. Furthermore, it is written at a period in German intellectual histo-

“*tasie*” throughout his life, but the earliest example I have been able to find is an essay from 1932 (Bloch, 1991: 365), one year after Adorno’s inaugural lecture, which Bloch already read in 1931. One wonders how Bloch reacted to this lecture; his letter to Adorno containing his response has been lost.

ry when juxtapositions of Goethean and Kantian conceptions of science were discussed frequently enough in academic contexts that it is likely that many of the listeners present at Adorno's lecture would have understood the phrase "exact imagination" as a coded homage to Goethe contra Kant. Finally, this lecture avoids the dichotomy of essence and appearance that one finds so frequently in Adorno's later work; here the operative distinction is between whole and part—that too is Goethean.

We can begin to understand this early lecture by recalling Adorno's preface to *Negative Dialectics*, in which he programmatically describes his life's work as the attempt to use the "strength of the subject to break through the deception (*Trug*) of constitutive subjectivity" (1973: xx [10]). In 1931, the metaphor is similar: not breaking through deception but rather unlocking a door. Philosophy must "construct keys, before which reality springs open" (1977: 130 [340]). These "keys" are synthetic arrangements of concepts that are developed by the interpretive philosopher, but they should nevertheless correspond in some manner to ideas that exist in reality, namely what Adorno calls "inner-historically constituted ideas," or "concrete inner-historical complexes" (128 [337]; 129 [339]). The immediate inspiration for this notion of an historical idea is Benjamin's "historiographic idea" of "*Trauerspiel*," and Adorno identifies "the commodity form" as another such possible idea in this inaugural lecture (128 [337]). These ideas might be called—in the philosophical language that Benjamin employs in his work—constitutive ideas in the Kantian sense of the term, or *universalia in re* in the Aristotelian sense (2012: 17). They are ideas proper to things themselves, ideas "in things," not mere concepts (*universalia post rem*) that the human understanding imposes on a sensuous manifold by identifying shared characteristics among discrete phenomena. How does the philosopher then construct this "descriptive exposition of the world of ideas"; what is his or her principle of concept formation? Adorno describes the philosopher as a sort of bricoleur who must, through the indispensable yet highly mysterious powers of "exact imagination," inventively construct "constellations," "configurations," "models," or "historical images" out of "small and intentionless elements" which the philosopher "receives from the social sciences." (1977: 126-130 [336-340]). The reader at this point should imagine Siegfried Kracauer's experimental construction of the archetype of the "salaried employee" (*der Angestellte*) out of a meticulously constructed "mosaic" of empirical observations in interwar Berlin (Kracauer, 1998: 32), or Benjamin's idiosyncratic attempt to "carry over the principle of montage

into history” through the juxtaposition of citations in order to “grasp the construction of history as such” (Benjamin, 1999: 461); this is undoubtedly the sort of *ars inveniendi* that Adorno has in mind.⁴ Then comes the most intriguing claim of the essay, and certainly the most questionable aspect of Adorno’s interpretive enterprise: when the mosaic-like configuration of enigmatic phenomena is perfectly composed, the individual tiles “fall into a figure which can be read as an answer” to the riddle such that “the question disappears” or is “annihilated.” The enigma is lit up “like lightning”; it “catches fire.” In Benjamin’s no less suggestive language, “the empirical world enters of itself into the world of ideas and dissolves in it.” This constitutes the “salvation of phenomena” (2012, 8: 26). If the reader can stomach the expressionistic images of fire and lightning, Adorno’s conception of philosophical bricolage is not terribly complicated; in fact, it is surprisingly simple for such a conceptually high-octane lecture. Philosophical writing should incorporate a diversity of theoretically informed observations from disparate disciplines and should somewhat impressionistically—with the assistance of “exact imagination”—bind this material together by organizing it around a leading idea. That is more or less what a typical essay looks like, and “essayism” is indeed how Adorno labels his ideal philosophical form at the end of his lecture (132 [343]). But a serious question remains, namely the same question that arises when one encounters the physiognomic metaphor in Adorno’s later writings: what is the status this “inner-historically constituted idea” that Adorno’s interpretive philosophy attempts to disclose? Constellations are “models with which the *ratio* searchingly and probingly approaches a reality that abstains from any law”—this is the extent to which they are products of induction—but paradoxically, reality “may again and again emulate the schema of the model to the extent that the latter is correctly formed” (1977: 126-130 [336-340]). A reality that is averse to laws nevertheless conforms to the philosopher’s construction—how is that possible?

It seems to me that there are two possible responses to this question. It may be the case that Adorno believes, following a metaphysically inclined thinker like Benjamin, that there are such things as “constitutive ideas,” formative forces, ani-

⁴ It is highly instructive to examine the correspondence between Adorno and Kracauer during this period, namely from the point when Adorno first reads *Die Angestellten* in 1930 to the point when Kracauer and Benjamin read Adorno’s inaugural lecture a year later (Adorno & Kracauer, 2020). Although the influence of Benjamin’s thought on Adorno’s early work is well-documented, Kracauer’s *Angestellten* is perhaps an even better concrete example of what Adorno has in mind in his inaugural lecture.

mating principles, monadological entelechies, or some other elusive ground of reality that remains obscure to the observational capacities of ordinary scientific methodology. If this is what Adorno's philosophical program is after, then one can say that Adorno attempts to overcome the limitations of Kantian epistemology, which restricts human knowledge to phenomena that behave in accordance with the principle of efficient causality, phenomena that can be explained by a mechanistic conception of the world. Only another, differently constituted understanding—an “intuitive,” “divine,” or “archetypal” understanding (*intuitiver/göttlicher Verstand* or *intellectus archetypus*)—would be able to proceed “from the whole to the parts,” namely from the archetype or idea of things—Kant's term is the “synthetic universal” (*das synthetisch-Allgemeine*)—to particular phenomena (Kant, 1987: §77). This divine being would, in other words, be able to look at all of the dramatic works that Benjamin identifies as expressions of *Trauerspiel*, all of the cultural practices of salaried employees in Weimar Germany, or all of the phenomena mediated by the commodity form, and simply grasp these phenomena as derivations of an underlying pattern without further ado.

Obviously, it is not possible for a human mind to achieve this kind of divine intuition without the assistance of concepts. We need a principle of selection, a sense of *what* we are looking for in the midst of the chaotic complexity of reality. Kantian philosophy does, in fact, permit humans to develop such concepts, and Kant even believes that they are necessary in disciplines that deal with seemingly self-legislating phenomena, such as biology, or perhaps even world history. But this particular concept, which is called a “regulative idea” or “*focus imaginarius*”—an imaginary reference point—is entirely different from an idea that would inhere in the thing itself; it is not a “synthetic universal.” A regulative idea “only serves us as a guide that allows us to consider natural things in terms of a new law-governed order by referring them to an already given basis as that which determines them” (1987: §67). It merely allows us to treat phenomena *as though* they were caused by an underlying idea (or “purpose” [*Zweck*]) that we attribute to them by way of our reflective (rather than determinative) power of judgement, but it does not permit us to say anything about the ideal purposive or formal-developmental structure of the phenomena themselves—if there even is one.

But if this notion of a *focus imaginarius* is what Adorno has in mind when he extols the powers of exact imagination, then his interpretive aspirations are not particularly original, for it is Max Weber who first calls upon Kant's conception of

the regulative use of reason in order to develop a conceptual apparatus for the investigation of historical complexes (or in the language of nineteenth-century German historiography, “historical individuals”). Weber calls this instrument the “ideal-type.” He defines this conceptual tool as a “limiting concept against which reality is measured—with which it is compared—in order to bring out certain significant component parts of the empirical substance of that reality” (Weber, 2012: 127). It is a “heuristic instrument” which “renders specific services for the purposes of research and exposition” (2012: 125). Ideal-types, among which “capitalism” is the most relevant example for Weber’s purposes (although “the Renaissance” or “neoliberalism” or any such periodizing designation would be exemplary), do not “exist” anywhere in reality; they are hypothetical motivating forces that are attributed to phenomena from the researcher’s selectively interested point of view. Weber sometimes illustrates the subjective dimension of his theory with a pithy line from Goethe’s *Faust*: “each one sees what he carries in his heart,” and so if one carries a sensitivity to capitalism in their heart, they have a more or less convincing ability to notice it at work in all things (2012: 135). As a principled nominalist, Weber remains agnostic about whether such ideas actually enjoy an independent existence as essential laws or autonomous motivating factors outside of our imputation of their causality to a range of cultural phenomena. “That is a completely separate question,” he diplomatically notes, leaving some space for metaphysics beyond the realm of social science. “What matters to us when we want to gain knowledge of reality is the *constellation* in which those (hypothetical!) ‘factors’ are to be found, *configured* as a cultural phenomenon that we find historically significant” (2012: 116, italics added, exclamation point in original). Moreover, Weber insists that every researcher makes use of these heuristic fictions whether they know it or not. It is not possible to investigate any aspect of reality or present it to the reader in a convincing manner without this conceptual implement, and it is “naive self-deception on the part of academic specialists to think otherwise” (2012: 120).

Is Adorno’s “inner-historically constituted idea,” or his notion of an “essence” in his later sociological writings, an idea that inheres in reality itself or a regulative idea that the researcher employs in their investigation of reality? Is Adorno a dogmatic metaphysician or a neo-Kantian sociologist? Adorno’s inaugural lecture does not allow us to come to a conclusion on this point. He notes that his “historical images” (or constellations) are “instruments of human reason” that “must be produced by human beings.” They do not “lie organically before us in history” (1977:

131 [341]). This lends plausibility to Axel Honneth's provocative claim, in his neo-Kantian rehabilitation of Adorno's physiognomic research program, that "hardly a methodological thought in Adorno's inaugural lecture had not already been formulated by the author of *Economy and Society*" (2005: 53). However, the differences between Adorno and Weber are stark. Adorno insists, first, that the philosopher "must proceed interpretively without ever possessing a sure key to interpretation," that is to say, without a regulative idea to guide the research process (1977: 126 [334]). Weber seems to deny that such an investigation would yield anything more than a "chaos of existential judgements concerning innumerable single perceptions" (2012: 117). More importantly, there is nothing in Weber's stringently subjectivist method that corresponds to Adorno's notion of an "annihilation" or "disappearance" of the hypothetical nature of the constellatory idea, and Weber would certainly be the last to claim that it is possible to extinguish the subject and bore into the heart of reality as such. Nothing less than this is demanded by Adorno's philosophy, whereas for Weber, "deception" (in Adorno's loaded use of the word as a synonym for constitutive subjectivity) is a condition of possibility for scientific *objectivity*. Adorno does not demonstrate familiarity with Weber's program at this early point in his career, but he criticizes the regulative and merely hypothetical understanding of cultural phenomena in all of his contributions to the *Positivismusstreit* of the 1960s, often by establishing a contrast between Weber's notion of "interpretive sociology" (*verstehende Soziologie*) and a more emphatic notion of "interpretation" (*Deutung*) that figures in Adorno's own dialectical research method. "Interpretation is the opposite of a subjective attribution of meaning," he writes. "A dialectical concept of 'meaning' would not be a correlate of Weber's interpretation of meanings (*sinnhaftes Verstehen*), but rather the social essence that *shapes* the appearances, appears in them, and lies concealed in them. This essence *determines* the phenomena; it is not a general law in the common scientific sense of the term" (1976: 37 [320], emphasis added).

Let us then break down Adorno's philosophy into a presupposition, a task, and a method. Presupposition: social and cultural phenomena are determined by an underlying essence, law, or idea. Task: the researcher must come face to face with this idea by shepherding the enigmatic *membra disjecta* of modern life into a synthetic image that somehow crystallizes into the shape of the idea itself. Method: exact imagination?

3 GOETHE'S *URPHÄNOMEN*

Just as Kant's elaboration of the reflective (rather than determinative) use of judgement for the analysis of organic phenomena serves as a methodological foundation for the German conception of social-scientific objectivity at the turn of the twentieth century, Goethe's contemporaneous explication of an "intuitive power of judgement" (*anschauende Urteilskraft*) constitutes the origin of a nonconformist counter-tradition to the Kantian scientific paradigm, one motivated more by the ineluctable lure of reality than a humble respect for the limits of human experience. Likewise, just as Adorno's eccentric outline of interpretive philosophy bears striking resemblance—save one or two crucial details—to the Weberian conception of interpretive sociology, so does Goethe's eccentric conception of science map almost directly onto Kant's framework for the inquiry into purposive phenomena. But not quite: for the strictly Kantian philosopher must find Goethe's methodological program unintelligible at several crucial junctures. "They listened to me," Goethe tells us of the early nineteenth-century disciples of Kantian philosophy, "but were unable to respond or help in any way. It happened several times that one or the other of them would admit with a bemused smile: this is indeed an analogue to Kantian thought, but a peculiar one" (Goethe, 1988: 40).

It is not difficult to determine where Goethe's scientific method appears recognizable but peculiar to the Kantian philosopher, for Goethe developed his method in conscious tension with bemused Kantians, and he was himself well-versed in the argument presented in the latter half of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Let us quickly remind ourselves of the most important features of this argument. Kant does not allow the human mind to offer causal explanations of reality other than by recourse to mechanism. We always only perceive efficient causes at work, even if there is something about the constitution of apparently organized, autonomous, and self-developing phenomena that simply compels us to develop a regulative idea of a formal or final cause, a "purpose of nature" (*Naturzweck*) that is operative in things. But we cannot say anything more about this cause, and "it is absurd for humans even to attempt it, or to hope that perhaps someday another Newton might arise who would explain to us ... how even a mere blade of grass is produced" (Kant, 1987: §75).

Enter Goethe, another Newton, who made it his life's mission to explain the internally motivated development of natural phenomena.⁵ The first and most formative of these attempts consisted in an analysis of plants in the botanical gardens of Naples and Palermo during his Italian journey of 1786-1787.⁶ In examining and comparing the diversity of plant forms in southern Italy, Goethe believed that he had "arrived at a clear perception of the sequence in their progression," the logical metamorphosis from seed to fruit that serves as the law of development for all plants, each of which expresses this law in a unique manner depending on environmental circumstances (1988: 18). Goethe first describes this "law" or "model" in a letter to Herder from Naples as an "*Urpflanze*," or archetypal/original plant, and he presumptuously claims that "with this model and the key to it, an infinite number of additional plants can be invented, which must be logical, that is, if they do not exist, they *could* exist" (1988: xvii). Goethe eventually comes to call this archetypal law or "key" underlying all living things, this formal rather than efficient cause of phenomena, a "symbol," "pure phenomenon," or "archetypal/original phenomenon" (*Urphänomen*); sometimes he resorts to the traditional philosophical language of the Platonic "idea" or the Aristotelian "concept." It is "that which always becomes apparent and is therefore evident to us the law of all appearances" (1998a; §1136).

Seven years after this intellectually productive season in Italy, Goethe explained his natural-scientific method to a trained Kantian, Friedrich Schiller, while walking back to the latter's home in Jena after an uninspiring lecture on botany; here one can begin to see what Goethe means when he notes the "bemused smile" of the card-carrying Kantian philosopher. Goethe recounts this now-legendary conversation in a recollection later in life:

"We reached his house, and our conversation drew me in. There I gave an enthusiastic description of the metamorphosis of plants, and with a few characteristic strokes of the pen I caused a symbolic plant to spring up before his eyes.

⁵ Much of my discussion of Goethean science, particularly its relation to Kantian philosophy, is informed by the admirably precise writings of Eckart Förster (2001; 2012). The best interpretations of Goethean science from the first half of the twentieth century, which instructively relate Goethe's work to the scientific currents of the nineteenth century and provide a sense of the atmosphere in which someone like Benjamin or Spengler would have studied Goethe's work, are found in the writings of Ernst Cassirer (1945; 1963).

⁶ It should be noted that Goethe's collaboration with Lavater on physiognomic studies occurred a decade prior. Goethe cites this "attention to both definition and mutability of form" in his physiognomic research as an important precursor for his later scientific work (1988: 68).

He heard and saw all this with great interest, with unmistakable power of comprehension. But when I stopped, he shook his head and said, “That is not an observation from experience. That is an idea.” (*Das ist keine Erfahrung, das ist eine Idee.*) ... I collected my wits, however, and replied, “Then I may rejoice that I have ideas without knowing it and can even see them with my own eyes.” (1988: 20)

This conversation can be interpreted in the following manner: Goethe claims that he is able to see “with his own eyes” the obscure principle out of which the empirical world of plants emerges, and Schiller responds by telling him that this so-called “symbolic plant” is merely an idea—namely, a regulative idea—that Goethe projects onto his experience of empirical phenomena in order to judge them as effects of an underlying purpose; it is a reflective judgment, not a determinative one. Schiller “had joyfully assimilated the philosophy of Kant which so exalts the subjective element although it appears to put limits on it,” Goethe notes with some disappointment. “He did not view [nature] as she is, a source of creation from the deepest depths to the loftiest heights, going about her living work in accord with systematic laws; instead, he chose as his focus a few empirical qualities of human nature,” namely the discursive rather than intuitive nature of the human understanding (1988: 19). This is the essential difference between a biology informed by Kantian philosophy on the one hand and Goethean science on the other: Kantian ideas are products of the human mind, whereas Goethean ideas are out there in the world of things. What gives Goethe the right to assert this? His answer is precious and not one bit helpful: “How would I otherwise know that this or that formation is a plant if they were not all formed according to the same model?” (Goethe, 1982: 251).⁷

Twenty-five years after this encounter with Schiller, in an essay titled “The Intuitive Power of Judgement” (*Anschauende Urteils kraft*), Goethe elaborates this single most important distinction between Kant’s philosophy and his own in more precise language, again referring to the forms of judgment delineated in the third critique. “Our master limits his thinking person to a reflective, discursive faculty of judgement and absolutely forbids him one which is determinative,” Goethe rightly notes. “But then, after he has succeeding in driving us to the wall, to the verge of

⁷ For virtually every dogmatic assertion made by Goethe, there is a critical correlate in Kant’s third critique. Kant’s discussion of natural phenomena which “seem to have been produced according to a common archetype” (*Urbild*) occurs in §80. The operative word, of course, is “seem” (*scheinen*).

despair in fact, he makes the most liberal statements and leaves it to us to decide how to enjoy the freedom he allows us” (1988: 31). Goethe then quotes these “liberal statements” at length, namely the famous passage from §77 of the *Critique of Judgement* in which Kant develops his notion of a “synthetic universal” that is accessible to an “archetypal intellect,” or an intellect that is capable of making determinative judgements about derived phenomena. Goethe notes that “the author seems to point to divine reason,” and then claims for himself the powers that Kant reserves for God:

“Why should it not also hold true in the intellectual area that through an intuitive perception of eternally creative nature we may become worthy of participating spiritually in its creative processes? Impelled from the start by an inner need, I had striven unconsciously and incessantly toward the archetypal (*Urbildliche*) and prototype (*Typus*) and had even succeeded in building up a method of representing it which conformed to nature (*naturgemäße Darstellung*).” (1988: 31)

What exactly is Goethe’s method of representing his object in accordance with nature? There is not enough space here to examine the unusual didactic structure of his various scientific explications of natural phenomena, among which his *Metamorphosis of Plants* and *Theory of Colors* are the most well-known. Nevertheless, his methodological statements about research and exposition are highly instructive. The chief obstacle that the researcher must overcome is the tendency for the understanding (*Verstand*) to separate nature—which is an organic unity—into discrete parts that have no living relation with one another. Healthy common sense (*gesunder Menschenverstand*) as well as enlightened scientific consciousness are guided by the analytic operations of the understanding, whereas a “spiritual participation in nature’s creative processes” would require another faculty of cognition that Kant can only ascribe to the synthetic powers of a “divine” intellect, but which Goethe grants to human reason (*Vernunft*). This is achieved through the construction of something like a constellation. “No phenomenon is explicable in and by itself; only many of them surveyed together, methodically arranged, can in the end amount to something which might be valid for a theory” (1998a: §1230).

How does one determine the logically correct order of phenomena in this representation? This is the point at which Goethe appeals to the imagination (*Imagination, produktive Einbildungskraft, Phantasie*), a faculty of the human mind, indispensable to reason, that steps in when the discursive character of the understand-

ing reaches its limit.⁸ In a preliminary study on plant physiology written in 1795—the year after his conversation with Schiller—Goethe describes a “productive” comportment that the researcher must adopt in order to allow the analytic, discriminating character of scientific consciousness to seamlessly transform into a higher, synthetic capacity to cognize pure phenomena. This productive imagination is a sort of ability for the observer to construct totalities that do not manifest themselves in a given sensuous intuition; it allows the researcher to visualize all of the aspects of the phenomenon in question—the various stages in the metamorphoses of a plant that never appear in a single intuition is paradigmatic—in a single vision before “the eye of the mind” (*Auge des Geistes*) so that the discrete observations “form a certain ideal whole.” “The seekers of knowledge may cross and bless themselves against imagination as often as they wish—before they know it, they will have to call on imagination’s creative power for help.” Once the exact imagination has arrived at the construction of an “ideal whole,” then “it may then become nature’s job to fit itself somehow inside this idea” (*sich in diese Idee zu fügen*) (1988: 74-75).

Just as there is nothing terribly strange about Adorno’s essayistic ideal of philosophical writing, the *constructive* dimension Goethe’s description of scientific representation is also more or less comprehensible. It is, in fact, less impressionistic than Adorno’s early conception of interpretation; the emphasis on “methodical arrangement” of the empirical phenomena “shown in sequence” suggests that the presentation of the “idea” requires some degree of systematic rigor. It is, however, the claim that it is nature’s job to “fit itself inside this idea” that sounds outrageous to the reader—just as outrageous as Adorno’s claim that reality “emulates” the philosopher’s schema. Are ideas not subjective theoretical instruments for grasping nature in her elusiveness? All of Goethe’s scientific writings seem to say: yes and no. One *begins* a scientific inquiry with some kind of regulative idea of the empi-

⁸ Goethe never gives a succinct and satisfying definition of what he means by “imagination,” but Cassirer’s lengthiest explication of the term, in a lecture from 1923, is useful at this point. “Nothing happens in living nature that is not combined with the whole. Therefore, if phenomena appear as isolated, they must not, for this very reason, be isolated. [Goethe] insists, however, that we cannot force this conviction on nature as a subjective claim, but that, step by step, we have to prove it in the object itself. In all observations of objects, the highest obligation remains to discover every particular condition according to which the phenomenon appears, striving for, to the greatest possible extent, the integrity of the phenomenon, ‘because in the end, these conditions must be capable of being strung together, of interlocking with one another, and must form before the researcher a kind of organization, manifesting their common inner life’. In this way, according to Goethe, the ‘power of the imagination’ proves itself in research—this power, which is not rendered vague by imagining things that do not exist, rather constructs the figure of reality itself, according to the rules of an ‘exact sensory phantasy’.” (Cassirer, 2013: 40)

rical phenomena under investigation which then somehow *transforms* into the idea that is constitutive of the latter; a human idea becomes a divine one. “Hypotheses are scaffoldings erected in front of a building and then dismantled when the building is finished,” Goethe notes in a posthumously published aphorism (1998a: §1222). Once the researcher has finally completed their ideal construction, it is “possible for us to descend, just as we ascended, by going step by step from the *Urphänomen* to the most mundane occurrences of our daily experience” (1988: 195). This—to mix metaphors from Goethe’s letter to Herder and Adorno’s inaugural lecture—is the natural-scientific “key” that springs open the door to the concealed heart of reality.

My hasty presentation of Goethe’s scientific method will not assuage the reader’s well-founded reluctance to take Goethe’s speculative enterprise seriously. But it is in any case hard to miss what is so captivating about Goethe’s mission and why it has remained a constant source of fascination for maverick minds: it attempts to reveal the eternal idea lodged in the transitory manifestations of life; to raze the walls of the subjective constitution of reality in order to come face to face with its underlying structure; to abnegate hypothetical systematizations of reality—the divorce of ideas from reality—under the guiding principle that “everything factual is already theory” (1998a: §575). I have tried to distill some of Goethe’s conceptual promiscuity, his wide diversity of interests, and the tremendous adaptability of his research program into a relatively simple and schematic project that is only problematic at one specific juncture, which is this: how does the regulative idea or hypothesis that the scientist employs at the outset of their investigation transform into the inner “idea” of the phenomenon without exposing itself to the accusation of what Kant calls “transcendental illusion,” or the confusion of appearances with the autonomous constitution of the thing itself? For Goethe, the answer is to be found in an “exact imagination,” but it sounds like sorcery.

Goethe did not think there was anything implausible about his scientific method—*so long as it confines itself to the study of nature*. Other problems lie in wait for the Goethean theorist of culture and history. Are there ideas at work in the world of human affairs, as the nineteenth-century idealist philosophers of history and romantic historiographers suggested? Goethe demonstrated an ability to be titillated by this question but remained for the most part unwilling to answer in the affirmative. Imagine, now, a seventy-eight-year-old Goethe and a Hegel twenty

years his junior discoursing about the “dialectical method” over a cup of tea in the fall of 1827.

“If only,” Goethe chimed in, “these intellectual arts and dexterities were not so frequently misused and employed to make the false true and the true false!”

“That certainly happens,” responded Hegel, “but only with people who are mentally ill.”

“I therefore congratulate myself,” said Goethe, “upon the study of nature, which preserves me from such sickness. For here we have to deal with the infinitely and eternally true, which throws off as incapable everyone who does not proceed purely and honestly with the treatment and observation of his subject. I am also certain that many a dialectical sickness would find a wholesome remedy in the study of nature.” (Goethe, 1998b: 244, translation amended)

4 URPHÄNOMENE IN MODERN LIFE: BENJAMIN AND SPENGLER

Goethe’s theory of ideas (*Ideenlehre*) and his intuitive power of judgement were repeatedly held up as a battle cry against Newtonian mechanism and Kantian formalism throughout the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century. Ironically, this was not the case among errant natural scientists, but rather in the effort to provide the *cultural sciences*—*pace* Goethe!—with an autonomous methodological foundation. Wilhelm Windelband provides one of the most schematic and well-known distinctions between these two approaches in his inaugural address at the University of Strasbourg in 1894, titled “History and Natural Science.”

“In natural-scientific thought, the inclination toward abstraction predominates; in historical thought, by contrast, the inclination toward intuitiveness (*Anschaulichkeit*). This claim will be surprising only to those who are accustomed to limit the concept of intuition in a materialistic manner to the reception of what is sensuously present, and who have forgotten that there is likewise an intuitiveness, or an individual vitality of an ideal present, before the eye of the mind (*Auge des Geistes*) just as much as the eye of the body.” (Windelband, 2015: 293-294).

The distinction at play here is not one between the intrinsic structure of natural and historical phenomena, but rather between two different modes of *observation*, which Windelband famously calls “nomothetic” and “idiographic” respectively.

The natural scientist calculates lawful regularities; the historian makes “historical individuals” come to life before the mind’s eye.

Spengler and Benjamin arrive on the scene at the tail end of this historiographic tradition.⁹ In a certain sense, the Goethean conception of the “idea,” and the demand for “intuitive” representations of ideal forms, which proved so productive in the work of nineteenth-century German anthropologists and historians like Wilhelm von Humboldt and Leopold von Ranke, had been largely discredited at the start of the twentieth century by neo-Kantian tendencies in the academic study of history and culture. Weber, for example, is critical of the naivety of traditional German historiography when he notes that “in the historian’s representation (*Darstellung*) everything is supposed to depend completely on ‘sensitivity’ (*Takt*), on the suggestive intuitiveness (*Anschaulichkeit*) of his report, which allows the reader to ‘relive’ the represented content.” Weber rightly notes that this historiographic truism confuses “the psychological processes by which a piece of scientific knowledge is *constituted*, and the ‘artistic’ form in which this piece of knowledge is *presented* with the purpose of influencing the reader ‘psychologically’” (Weber, 2012: 176). In other words, the historian *claims* that they are enabling the reader to experience something essential about reality even though this essential content is fact one of the historian’s tacit principles of content selection; the *Anschaulichkeit* of idealistic historiography is a cunning trick that “makes the false true,” to borrow Goethe’s suggestive warning.

Spengler and Benjamin are aware of these methodological considerations and make desperate efforts to overcome them, most notably by doubling down on the most questionable aspects of Goethean science—such as the theory of the archetype—and applying them unceremoniously to the domain of historical inquiry.¹⁰

⁹ I do not mean to suggest that Spengler and Benjamin were inspired by Windelband’s somewhat problematic distinction between the idiographic and nomothetic method, but I *am* claiming that they are both influenced by the opposition of natural-scientific and historical modes of analysis espoused by the “historicist” current of German historiography. Spengler, despite his eccentricity, was always recognized as an heir to the Rankean tradition (Meinecke, 1959). Benjamin’s frequent critique of what he calls ‘historicism’ is hopelessly confused, and I remain thoroughly convinced by H.D. Kittsteiner’s description of Benjamin as a “materialist historicist” (1986).

¹⁰ Spengler convincingly quotes Goethe throughout his career, especially in the first volume of *Decline*, but his Goetheanism is almost entirely absent from English-language secondary literature. The best essay on Spengler’s reception of Goethe is a relatively recent study by Gilbert Merlio (2014). Benjamin’s reception of Goethe has been the subject of much attention over the years (Steiner, 1986; Pizer 1989; Charles, 2019).

Consider one of Spengler's many Goethean methodological statements from the first volume of *Decline of the West*:

"It is thoroughly possible, given a physiognomic sensitivity (*Takt*), to recover the essential organic features of whole centuries of history out of the scattered particulars of ornamentation, architecture, and writing, or out of isolated data of a political, economic, or religious nature; to read the form of the state out of the contemporaneous formal elements of artistic expression, the character of the economy out of corresponding mathematical forms. A genuinely Goethean method, leading back to Goethe's idea of the *Urphänomen*, which is already to a limited extent common in contemporary zoology, but which *can be extended over the whole domain of history* to an unanticipated degree." (Spengler 1926: 113, translation amended, italics added)

Compare this with a frequently discussed handwritten note by Benjamin, discovered after his death and incorporated into his posthumously edited *Arcades Project*:

"In studying Simmel's presentation of Goethe's concept of truth, I came to see very clearly that my concept of origin [*Ursprung*] 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 *Urphänomen* extracted from the pagan context of nature and brought into the Jewish contexts of history. Now, in my work on the arcades I am equally concerned with fathoming an origin. To be specific, I pursue the origin of the forms and mutations of the Paris arcades from their beginning to their decline, and I locate this origin in the economic facts. Seen from the standpoint of causality, these facts would not be *Urphänomene*; they become such only insofar as in their own individual development—"unfolding" might be a better term—they give rise to the whole series of the arcade's concrete historical forms, just as the leaf unfolds from itself all the riches of the empirical world of plants." (Benjamin, 1999: 462, italics added)¹¹

¹¹ Adorno draws special attention to this passage in his preface to Rolf Tiedemann's *Studien zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins* (1965). It is possible that Adorno was not entirely aware of the extent of Benjamin's interest in Goethe's botanical studies until the *Arcades* were reconstructed by Tiedemann, well after Benjamin's death. In any case, I must disagree with the recently published hyperbolic claim that "Adorno would have considered it a disgrace that there was ever a serious debate whether history consisted of Spengler's self-enclosed and plant-like cultures" (Immanen, 2021: 184-5). While it is true that Adorno disliked organic metaphors and criticized some of the

Spengler and Benjamin wish make use of their unrestricted sensitivity to “scattered particulars” in order to assemble a constellation of intrinsically related phenomena that then reveals an “origin” or “idea”—an *Urphänomen*—of modern life, just as Goethe came face to face with the idea of the plant. Basic familiarity with Goethe’s project should render the proceeding passages largely comprehensible, but some additional references to Goethean themes in the work of Spengler and Benjamin will make their shared intention even clearer. Spengler and Benjamin argue that the emergent methods of formalist (neo-Kantian) historiography are unable to appreciate the living dynamic at work in culture, which develops “with the same superb aimlessness of the flowers of the field” and belongs “to the living nature of Goethe, not the dead nature of Newton” (Spengler, 1926: 21). The properly materialist historiographic technique, as Benjamin describes it, is one of “construction out of facts. Construction with the complete elimination of theory. What only Goethe in his morphological writings has attempted” (Benjamin, 1999: 864). Benjamin demands, quoting Borchardt, that we cultivate the “image-making medium within us” (1999: 458) and thus break with the practice of “vulgar historical naturalism” (1999: 461). Likewise, Spengler distinguishes “the method of Goethe’s much-discussed exact sensuous imagination, which leaves the living undisturbed,” from the “exact murderous method of modern physics” (Spengler, 1926: 97). For Spengler, the professional historian mistakenly understands historical continuity additively, “as a sort of tapeworm industriously adding on to itself one epoch after another” (1926: 22). For Benjamin, the same historian “recounts the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary”; institutionalized historiography “musters a mass of data to fill the empty, homogeneous time” (2003: 396-397). In somewhat more precise philosophical language, they are both concerned with transcending the deceptive veneer of efficient causes, or what they both call “causal relations” (*Kausalzusammenhänge*), in order to reveal the formal cause—the “destiny” (Spengler) or the “nexus of expression” (*Ausdruckszusammenhang*) (Benjamin)—operative in the metamorphoses of modernity that unfolds behind the screen of consciousness.

But the remarkable similarities end at these meta-theoretical reflections, for Spengler and Benjamin have completely different “ideas.” For Spengler, “culture is the *Urphänomen*” (Spengler, 1926: 105). Just as Goethe’s *Urpflanze* logically metamorphoses from leaf to calyx to petal to pistil to fruit, so does Spengler’s notion of

organicism features of Spengler’s work, he certainly would not find this entire intellectual tradition “disgraceful.”

“culture” develop in a predictable manner: it blossoms out of nothing in a spring-time of creative passion and religious feeling; matures in a summer of rationalist metaphysics and mathematics; ages through an autumn of enlightened urban intelligence; and senesces in a winter of megalopolitan utilitarianism. All of the philosophical currents, economic systems, political forms, architectural styles, and artistic movements of human history can be explained according to this rigid schema of the inexorable destiny of the eight great cultures, each of which, curiously, has a lifespan of one thousand years. The task of the modern historian is to make sense of our contemporary cultural situation through the representational strategy of “comparative cultural morphology,” or a literary juxtaposition the winter of “Faus-tian culture” (i.e. modern Western culture) with the decline of the other seven great cultures. These historiographic constellations are clumsy, forced, and yet strangely compelling:

“Now the old evolved cities, with their Gothic nucleus of cathedral, townhall, and high-gabled alleys, around whose towers and gates the Baroque period had made a ring of brighter and more elegant patrician houses, palaces, and hall churches, begin to overflow in all directions into a formless mass, to eat into the decaying countryside with their heaps of rental barracks and commercial buildings, and to destroy the venerable face of olden times through reconstruction and alteration. Looking down from one of the old towers upon the sea of houses, one perceives in this ossifying historical development precisely the epoch that marks the end of organic growth and the beginning of an inorganic and thus unlimited agglomeration that transgresses all horizons. And now appears that artificial, mathematical, utterly foreign product of a purely intellectual satisfaction in the utilitarian: the city of the city planner, which in all civilizations aims at the same chessboard form, the symbol of soullessness. These regular rectangle blocks astounded Herodotus in Babylon and the Spaniards in Tenochtitlan. In the ancient world, the series of “abstract” cities begins with Thurii, which was “planned” by Hippodamus of Melitus in 441. Priene, whose chessboard scheme entirely ignores the changing elevation of the earth, Rhodes, and Alexandria follow as models for innumerable provincial cities of the Imperial Age. The Islamic city planners laid out Baghdad in 762, and the giant city of Samarra on the Tigris a century later, according to a plan. In the Western world the layout of Washington in 1791 is the first major example. There can be no doubt that the world-cities of the Han period in China and the Mauryan Empire in India

possessed this same geometric pattern. Even now the world-cities of Western Civilization are far from having reached the peak of their development. I see—long after the year 2000—cities laid out for ten to twenty million inhabitants, spread over enormous areas of countryside, with buildings that will dwarf the biggest of the present and notions of traffic and communication that would appear to us today as madness.” (Spengler, 1928: 100, translation modified)¹²

Spengler’s literary constructions of the *Urpänomen* are comparable to an art installation of eight contiguous video screens each displaying a time-lapse film of the rise and fall of a particular culture from a bird’s eye perspective. Buildings are erected and then crumble in so few sentences that the reader feels that they are witnessing a purely natural-historical development. It is, to be sure, a logically motivated kind of natural history. The eight moving images are perfectly synchronized; a single glance shifts from a view of modern European apartment buildings to the fall of the Roman Empire. The cunning juxtapositions of the unique cultures at their “contemporaneous” stage of transition into a “late” phase of civilization creates an impression of pre-destined lawfulness; the medieval city begins to sprawl beyond its outer limits until it refashions itself as a rectangular grid, just like Baghdad during the decline of “Magian culture,” just like Alexandria during the decline of “Apollonian culture.” There is no contingency in this developmental pattern, no “men who make their own history,” no priority given to modes of production, no room for revolutionary interruptions of divine fate; every deliberate action, economic transformation, or spontaneous revolution is simply a functionary of the ruse of history. Consequently, Spengler believes that he is able to imagine events for which he has no historical evidence—such as the construction of cities in China and India—and to prophesy the developmental patterns of cities some eighty years into the future. This is the cultural-theoretical analogue to Goethe’s claim that from his symbolic *Urpflanze*, “an infinite number of additional

¹² I have chosen this highly representative passage in part because both Adorno and Benjamin were familiar with it. Adorno begins his 1941 critique of Spengler by quoting from Spengler’s description of “The Soul of the City” (1981: 51). Benjamin’s several quotations of Spengler through the *Arcades* are all derived from this short chapter of Spengler’s work. Particularly intriguing is the fact that, although Spengler uses the concept of *Urpänomen* all throughout the first volume of *Decline of the West* (which neither Benjamin nor Adorno appear to have read), the term only appears once throughout the entire second volume, and yet the occurrence is in this very chapter, on a page from which Benjamin cites passages. Was Benjamin inspired by Spengler’s description of the city as “an *Urpänomen* of human existence?” Unlikely—for Benjamin’s copy of *Le déclin de l’Occident* was in French, and he would have encountered this phrase as “un phénomène primaire,” which does not sound especially Goethean.

plants can be invented.” Every derivative phenomenon follows the exact same pattern.

All of this looks completely different in the work of Benjamin. His “origin” of modern life is not culture as such but “economic facts,” or in another statement, “the fetish character of the commodity.” He has no interest in discovering laws applicable to the whole of human history, and he ridicules idealist universal histories of the Spenglerian variety as a kind of Esperanto. Whereas Spengler believes that there is one single *Urphänomen* of human history that has blossomed only eight times—this is often described as Spengler’s pluralism, although eight expressions of a single archetype is not particularly plural—Benjamin remains interested in a specific *Urphänomen* of capitalist modernity that blossoms in every particular cultural phenomenon. His guiding intention is “to conjoin a heightened intuitiveness (*Anschaulichkeit*) to the realization of Marxist method,” or rather, “to grasp an economic process as an *anschauliches Urphänomen*” (1999: 461; 460). To borrow some of the language from the traditional Marxist theory of culture, Benjamin wants to show—to make intuitive—the fact that “the economic conditions under which society exists are expressed in the superstructure—precisely as, with the sleeper, an overfull stomach finds not its reflection but its expression in the content of dreams” (1999: 392).

Benjamin, however, unlike Spengler, proceeds more or less without a key; he assembles artifacts from the superstructure without knowing anything about the base. This is authentically Goethean; Benjamin’s method of poring through descriptions of Parisian life at the Bibliothèque Nationale and assembling these materials into a coherent whole resembles Goethe’s aleatoric investigations in the botanical gardens southern Italy far more closely than Spengler’s highly selective appropriation of historical data. But what is the idea that binds together Benjamin’s observations? Economic facts? Commodity fetishism? Benjamin’s theoretical understanding of political economy is not nearly sophisticated enough to say anything more about this. Let us examine the “magnificently improvised theory of the gambler” that Benjamin read to Adorno in Königstein in 1929 (1981: 238/GS 10.1: 249). The importance of this preliminary sketch for the *Arcades* can hardly be overestimated; it is possibly the most direct inspiration for Adorno’s notion of an “adequate construction of the commodity form” outlined in his inaugural lecture of 1931, and formally it appears as a sort of prototype for Adorno’s later aphoristic style. The fragment begins in medias res:

“Hasn’t his eternal vagabondage everywhere accustomed him to reinterpreting the image of the city? And doesn’t he transform the arcade into a casino, into a gambling den, where now and again he stakes the red, blue, yellow *jetons* of feeling on women, on a face that suddenly surfaces (will it return his look?), on a mute mouth (will it speak?)? What, on the baize cloth, looks out at the gambler from every number—luck, that is—here, from the bodies of all the women, winks at him as the chimera of sexuality: as his type. This is nothing other than the number, the cipher, in which just at that moment luck will be called by name, in order to jump immediately to another number. His type—that’s the number that blesses thirty-six-fold, the one on which, without even trying, the eye of the voluptuary falls, as the ivory ball falls into the red or black compartment. He leaves the Palais-Royal with bulging pockets, calls to a whore, and once more finds in her arms the communion with number, in which money and riches, otherwise the most burdensome, most massive of things, come to him from the fates like a joyous embrace returned to the full. For in the gambling hall and bordello, it is the same supremely sinful, supremely punishable delight: to challenge fate in pleasure. That sensual pleasure, of whatever stripe, could determine the theological concept of sin is something that only an unsuspecting idealism can believe. Determining the concept of debauchery in the theological sense is nothing else but this wresting of pleasure from out of the course of life with God, whose covenant with such life resides in the name. The name itself is the cry of naked lust. This holy thing, sober, fateless in itself—the name—knows no greater adversary than the fate that takes its place in whoring and that forgets its arsenal in superstition. Thus in gambler and prostitute that superstition which arranges the figures of fate and fills all wanton behavior with fateful forwardness, fateful concupiscence, bringing even pleasure to kneel before its throne.” (Benjamin, 1999: 489-490)

Benjamin’s literary style is micrological. He revels in the greater social significance of the individual detail, and he notably calls this capacity, in an earlier context, the “faculty of imagination (*Phantasie*),” that is to say, “the gift of interpolating into the infinitely small, of inventing, for every intensity, an extensiveness to contain its new, compressed fullness” (Benjamin, 1996: 466). He artfully maneuvers between a cascade of “infinitely small” images—the baize cloth of the casino tables, the ivory roulette ball, the bulging pockets of the victorious gambler—and grand economic, theological, psychological, and philosophical reflections, all discharged

in a rapid-fire stream of tightly coordinated associations. Despite the fragment's prima facie chaos, there is a clear representational strategy at work. Benjamin is attempting to provide an *Urphänomen*, namely “economic facts” (or more precisely, the commodity form) with a degree of *Anschaulichkeit* that is lacking in traditional Marxist historiography. In the somewhat more focused, first half of the fragment, there is an attempt to develop a series of homologues between two spheres of nineteenth century Parisian culture that are mediated by the commodity form: “gambling hall and bordello,” or the thrill of gambling and the thrill of sex; colorful gambling tokens and spontaneous emotions; the arbitrariness of the number and the fungibility of the prostitute's body. But that is as much as Benjamin's method is able to capture, and it is not at all clear from this passage—nor any other passage in the later, more self-consciously Marxist drafts of the *Arcades Project*—how the “unfolding” of economic facts “gives rise to the whole series of the arcade's concrete historical forms.” There is scarcely any regulative principle at work here, and the reader would be hard-pressed to derive an archetype from this and other sketches that may then be employed to descend to the metamorphoses of everyday life in nineteenth-century Paris. That is what Benjamin would need in order to achieve his Goethean aspirations.

Benjamin takes seriously Goethe's inductive principle that “everything factual is already theory” and he believes that this recuses him from the need for any theory at all.¹³ Spenglerian historiography is, by contrast, overburdened by its regulative theoretical apparatus. His *Urphänomen* is a Goethean “key” to the encrypted phenomena of everyday life, but it is not constructed out of a living relation to reality. This is, to be sure, somewhat of a schematic exaggeration. Spengler's work would be a lifeless logic without illustrative reference to the Gothic cathedral and the patrician houses, and Benjamin's sketch would be a confused mess of observations if a tacit interest in the commodity form did not linger in the background. But both Benjamin and Spengler are unique as historians inasmuch as they drive their respective representational strategy to its limit; this is what Adorno recognizes as the merit in each of their works. He praises Benjamin's attempt “to redeem induction” (1973: 303 [298]) through his “close contact with his material surroundings” (1981: 236 [247]). On the other hand, insofar as Spengler's approach to cultural explanation begins with a schema, his approach “has the merit of exposing the

¹³ Benjamin quotes these Goethean words more than any other (1994: 313; 1996: 192; 1999: 864). Spengler also quotes this apothegm in the first volume of *Decline* (1926: 156).

'system' in the individual"; he allows the reader to comprehend the logic of the *Weltgeist* at work in material reality (1981: 62 [59]).

But rarely do the poles of induction and deduction meet in the work of Benjamin and Spengler; this is the extent to which their massive historiographic projects are failures in Adorno's eyes. Adorno criticizes Benjamin's "social physiognomics as all too immediate, lacking reflection on the mediation by the whole of society," and so his "materialist construction of history lags behind theory" (1976: 39 [323]). Benjamin's fragmentary and unregimented presentation of details is "too close to its object" such that "the object becomes as foreign as an everyday, familiar thing under a microscope" (1981: 240 [251]). Spengler, on the other hand, "proudly calls his method physiognomics," although "in truth his physiognomic thought is bound to the total character of his categories. Everything individual, however exotic, becomes a cipher of the grandiose, of the 'culture', because Spengler's conception of the world is so rigorously governed by his categories that there is no room for anything that does not easily and essentially coincide with them" (1981: 62 [59]). Both are bad physiognomists: Benjamin is too close to things and thus cannot convincingly illuminate in a single coherent vision the essentiality that stands before his eyes; he is an impressionist. Spengler inserts every little thing into the framework of his historiographic schema, regardless of whether or not it fits; he childishly scribbles in between the lines of his coloring book.

5 ADORNO'S TRAINED IMAGINATION

Goethe's scientific method mediates between these extremes. In the laudatory words of Friedrich Meinecke, the most distinguished intellectual historian to make the case for a specifically Goethean historical sensibility, Goethe's writings oscillate between "an inductive reverence for the small and a grandiose awareness of the great encompassing whole." His expositions of natural phenomena are like a "pendulum swinging between reality and the ideal" (Meinecke, 1972: 482, 488). Adorno does not appear to be entirely aware of the need for this delicate balance of induction and deduction in his earliest philosophical writings, but an insistence on the mediation between these two poles characterizes all of his sociological treatises of the 1960s. What is required of the researcher, Adorno notes in his manifestly Goethean words, is a "reciprocity of theory and experience," or in other words, "a combination of imagination (*Phantasie*) and a flair for the facts." In these

late sociological writings, “imagination” no longer appears as an occult faculty. It is simply the tacit theoretical mediation of all experience, the ability to tentatively subsume empirical observations under higher ordering principles. All observation proceeds from some sort of *focus imaginarius*, and there is thus “no experience that would not be mediated through—often unarticulated—theoretical conceptions.” But this conception, or regulative principle, cannot be pulled out of thin air; it is not just the condition, but also the result of a spontaneous engagement with reality. There are “no conceptions that are not—insofar as they are worth anything—grounded in and constantly measuring themselves against experience.” In short: “theory and social physiognomics are fused” (Adorno, 1968: 186).

Does this not sound an awful lot like Weber? I was not entirely fair to him in the earlier sections of this essay. I noted that Weber makes use of regulative theoretical conceptions in order to illuminate cultural phenomena by providing them with a hypothetical animating principle. The most serious drawback of this procedure is that “each one sees what he carries in his heart,” and so it is consequently possible for a dozen researchers with a dozen uniquely fashioned hearts to interpret reality as a function of a dozen incompatible ideas. Weber recognizes and rigorously defends the possibility of such epistemic relativism in his treatise on objectivity. But he is, all the same, a fine macro-sociological theorist with a keen eye for the constitution of the hearts of individuals by the relatively homogenous structure of modern life. It *can* happen that the researcher makes use of an entirely arbitrary idea to explain away every detail of the world—it stands to reason that this is what Spengler does—but it is more often the case that the meticulous researcher constructs an ideal-type on the basis of a “methodologically trained imagination” (*methodisch geschulte Phantasie*) that is “oriented toward reality” (2012: 118). This is the inductive moment of ideal-typical concept formation; it is a fusion of theoretical presuppositions with physiognomic sensitivity. Weber never tires of emphasizing the need for this productively imaginative experience. The commonplace notion that science is nothing more than “mere calculation, carried out in laboratories or bureaus of statistics with cool reason alone,” demonstrates “remarkably little understanding of what actually goes on in factories or laboratories: there too, something has to *come to you*—and the right thing too—if you are able to accomplish anything valuable” (2020: 12). A critique of Weberian subjectivism is valid only insofar as it takes this indispensable and unmistakably Goethean moment into account: the imaginative probing after “the right thing.”

I have also noted that Adorno criticizes Weber's neo-Kantian presuppositions throughout his life. Let it be known that Adorno has a tendency—one that he shares with Benjamin and Spengler, incidentally—to overestimate his own originality, and to claim that he is making a novel contribution to sociology or philosophy when he is in fact repackaging well-worn ideas. Adorno tempers this tic as he matures in life. Even if one struggles to find any kind of *coupure épistémologique* in Adorno's remarkably consistent career, his later work is nevertheless characterized less by a callow attempt to overturn the disciplines of philosophy and sociology and more by a sober admiration for theoretical heights that have long been reached. The following surprising passage from *Negative Dialectics* on the concept of "constellation" should be read as a kind of postface to Adorno's inaugural lecture, which, to recall, was inspired by Benjamin's study of German *Trauerspiel*—so deeply grounded in this earlier work that Benjamin accused Adorno of plagiarism. Now, thirty-five years later, Adorno writes:

"How to unlock the object by way of constellation is less to be learned from philosophy, which has never been interested in such things, than from important scientific investigations; advanced scientific work has in many instances been ahead of its own philosophical self-understanding in the form of scientism. It is by no means necessary to take intrinsically metaphysical studies as one's point of departure, like Benjamin's *Origin of German Trauerspiel*, which conceives of truth itself as constellation. One should rather refer back to such a positivistically-minded scholar as Max Weber. To be sure, he understood the 'ideal-type' in the sense of a thoroughly subjectivist epistemology, as a tool to approach the object, lacking any substantiality in itself and thereby capable of dissolution at will. But as is always the case with nominalism, however futile he may consider his concepts, something of the character of the object reveals itself in them; the concept reaches beyond its heuristic vantage." (1973: 164 [166])

Adorno's point, which he elaborates throughout the rest of this section of the text, is this: a neo-Kantian sociologist like Weber might *think* that his concepts bear no necessary relation to the object itself—that is his scientistic self-understanding—but because such regulative ideas are synthetically constructed and amended through a close contact with a range of empirical phenomena, they *do* manage to capture something of objective reality. Adorno likens Weber's ideal-typical constructions, namely in his work on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, to emphatically artistic compositions. They are "subjectively generated," and yet "the

nexus that [Weber's work] establishes—precisely the ‘constellation’—becomes legible as a sign of objectivity.” His ideal-types “transform themselves into determinate knowledge” (1973: 165 [167]). This is the moment that appears in Goethe's work as the curious transformation of the merely “hypothetical” idea into an idea that exists in reality itself; it is the moment described in Adorno's inaugural lecture as the “annihilation of the question”; it is Benjamin's “dissolution of the empirical world into the world of ideas.” And now, in his most mature theoretical statement, Adorno claims that the model for this expository method is not to be found in the philosophical work of Benjamin, but rather in the empirical studies of Weber, namely the figure in German intellectual history who is best known for grounding the social and cultural sciences within the bounds of possible experience set forth by Kantian epistemology. Weber's method “proves itself to be a third option beyond the alternative of positivism and idealism,” Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics* (1973: 166 [168]). That is exactly how Adorno defines his own aspirations at the start of his career.

Does this mean that Adorno's interpretive philosophy, which originates in the Goethean method of “exact imagination,” concludes with Weber's “methodologically trained imagination”? Does Adorno eventually come to realize that his ambitious philosophical aspirations were already accomplished by fin-de-siècle sociological research? Is that all there is? Such a claim is likely to irritate the philosophers, who wish to preserve Adorno's eccentricity from the sterility of the social sciences; to humor the sociologists, who see nothing but unbridled speculation in Adorno's critique of sociological method; and to befuddle the cultural critics, who are rarely taken by such methodological considerations. But it should in any case be taken seriously as a possibility.

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