

The Ambiguity of Ambiguity in Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence'

Alison Ross

For the purposes of analytical clarity it is possible to distinguish a number of different ways that Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' uses the term 'ambiguity' [*Zweideutigkeit*]. Whereas in Benjamin's late work, 'ambiguity' can mark an equivocal value, as in the formula he uses in 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century' (1935) to describe the components of the dialectical image as 'ambiguous' (AP 10), the 'Critique of Violence' typifies the way the term is used in the early work to confer an exclusively pejorative meaning. In general, ambiguity in the early work is used to condemn the lack of clarity and absence of truth that Benjamin defines as attributes of 'myth'. The position is put in stark terms in the 1924 essay, 'Goethe's *Elective Affinities*'. In this essay Benjamin links ambiguity to guilt, fate and ritualistic life. One of the significant theses in this essay is Benjamin's critique of ritualistic life. Empty rituals do not provide adequate orientation for human beings; they proffer ambiguous forms, which condemn human beings to a fateful existence. The key to Benjamin's position in this essay is the contrast he draws between mythic life and theological perception. The thesis that mythic life is a life which founders in ambiguity is supported in the essay through the opposition between mythic ambiguity and the clarity of theological perception. In general, the opposition is marked by references to the ambiguous mysticism of word use or silence in the case of myth, and the clarity of logos in the case of theology.

The functions of the lack of clarity that is the defining feature of mythic ambiguity in the 'Critique of Violence', however, are ambiguous. For instance, Benjamin describes the law as 'demonically ambiguous' and he cites as evidence for this description Anatole France's ironic claim that 'Poor and rich are equally forbidden to spend the night under the bridges' (SW 1:249). Since only some in fact enjoy this 'right', the 'equality' of the law is shown to pretend to a false universality that disguises its material interest in the protection of class interests. On the other hand, when Benjamin describes the ambiguity of myth in the essay, he refers specifically to its indeterminacy. A further complicating factor in the position of 'ambiguity' in the essay in this respect is the connection that Benjamin tries to make between the features of legal and mythic violence. Benjamin's essay identifies how legal violence is not restricted to the imposition of punishment, but to inducing feelings of anxiety

and guilt. As evidence for this claim, Benjamin refers to the earliest legal statutes as 'unwritten' and the 'retribution' their transgression incurs as something that 'befalls' an 'unsuspecting victim': 'A man can unwittingly infringe upon them and thus incur retribution ... But however unluckily it may befall its unsuspecting victim, its occurrence is, in the understanding of the law, not chance, but fate showing itself again in its deliberate ambiguity' (SW 1:249). The anxiety and dread that 'law' induces points to its intimacy with 'the deliberate ambiguity' of 'fate'. However, this connection between fate and law also points to the difference between the deceitful subjugation that law requires in its 'demonic ambiguity' and the indeterminacy that defines fates (and law's) 'deliberate ambiguity'.

There are a series of other examples in the essay, which aim to tie law to mythic fate and violence through remarking on law's 'ambiguity'. Thus he claims that the line that neither party may cross established in the peace treaty is an ambiguous line (SW 1:249); he also contends that the functioning of the law is ambiguous insofar as the subject's ignorance of the law is no answer to the law (SW 1:249); and, as we saw in the case of Anatole France, that law 'enforces' a false equality. Each of these uses of ambiguity to characterize law assists Benjamin's attempt to link 'law' and 'myth' and to characterize both as engendering guilt in their use of violence. Hence he claims that the punishment of Niobe in Greek myth is 'ambiguous' and that it leaves her 'more guilty than before' (SW 1:248). The general intent behind this use of ambiguity to link law with mythic fate is the contrast the essay attempts to make between divine and mythic violence in which divine violence would have the 'good' effect of expiation and mythic violence the 'bad' effect of guilt. This opposition between the two kinds of violence seems to mirror in a dense and abbreviated form the well-developed contrast between the pejoratively coded mythic life and the venerated access to theological perception in cases of the moral decision in the essay on Goethe's novel. Although these uses of ambiguity in the violence-essay service this general polemical point regarding myth, they intend by ambiguity quite different things, which range from the deceitful pretence of universal enforcement required for submission to law, to the indeterminacy of law that induces guilt.

Admittedly, the ambiguity in his use of ambiguity may be a consequence of the essay's condensed and inelegant schema of argumentation. Among the accomplished works of his early period – such as his rejected habilitation-thesis on the *Trauerspiel*, the essay on language, his work on the romantic concept of criticism and his essay on 'Goethe's *Elective Affinities*' – the essay on violence does not stand out either as a work of significant merit on its chosen topic, or an important essay within Benjamin's early corpus. In effect, many of the key terms used in the essay are substantially meaningless without the possibility of clarifying references to other pieces from the same period. It is strange, then, that one of the prominent modes of its recent scholarly reception takes the form of commentary that brackets out other pieces from Benjamin's early oeuvre and focuses obsessively on particular phrases from the violence-essay alone. Such commentary has come at the price of distorting Benjamin's position on divine violence, as if he intended by this term to advocate non-violence.¹ Whatever might be said about the essay's conceptual unclarity, Benjamin nowhere states and defends such a position; it would behave those who advance it on his behalf to explain the omission of any statement to this effect in his essay.

In an attempt to provide a defence of the probrity of revolutionary violence that would be secure from the claim that this position was merely a partisan perspective, Benjamin's essay takes up the thesis that such violence can be purified of human interests and akin therefore to the justness of divine violence: 'For it is never reason that decides on the justification of means and the justness of ends: fate-imposed violence decides on the former, and God on the latter' (SW 1:247). The position of the essay requires that he draw connections between law and myth, on one side, and revolutionary and divine violence on the other. He intends to defend the hope that revolutionary violence is the exercise of wholly 'other violence' than the violence deployed in the means/end schema of the law (SW 1:247–8). This 'other violence', which he claims is attested to in the prosecution of just ends in cases of divine violence, would be able to depose legal violence and with it destroy too the 'bloody' mystifications of myth (SW 1:249–50). For the purpose of articulating this position, the different characteristics of the phenomena the essay pairs together are less important than the respective grades of the pairings they facilitate and the implacable quality of the opposition between them.

Divine and revolutionary violence have the virtue of clarity; mythic and legal violence the fault of ambiguity. As a corollary, perhaps we should understand the ambiguity of ambiguity as a minor casualty in the complex motivations underpinning Benjamin's articulation of his position on divine violence. On the other hand, the different ways ambiguity is used here may be the consequence of Benjamin's polemical aims regarding law, which overstep the resources he can cite in support of his position. In this case, the manifold uses of ambiguity are significant because they help build the comprehensiveness of his case against law: ambiguity has a general pejorative sense, and it is also defined as a feature of mythic fate. Hence the abundant use of the term, whatever the various specifications in its meaning one could discern, assists in building up the negative image of the law that is one of the main goals of the essay and for which the destructive force of divine/revolutionary violence is warranted. Either way, the various meanings of ambiguity in the essay service a critical position on the law and legal violence: the question to ask is whether, given the use of these different meanings within the essay, this position is warranted.

I would like to defend the thesis that Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' uses 'ambiguity' in different ways. Further, I would like to argue that the different uses of ambiguity service his essay's overarching polemical goals, but do so without the required conceptual precision. In short: his polemic against the law exceeds the grounds that support it; the seeming cogency of his position profits from an ambiguous account of the connections between law and myth. However, if we consult contemporaneous texts from Benjamin's early writing, it is possible to construct a cogent position regarding his objections to ritualized life, for which 'ambiguity' is the key marker. This position may be used to reconstruct the stakes of his polemic against the ambiguity of law. To make this case I will first provide an analytical account of the different uses he makes of ambiguity in the violence-essay. Next, I will consider the points of coordination between these various uses and the polemic against ambiguity in Benjamin's contemporaneous essay on 'Goethe's *Elective Affinities*', and specifically the opposition that is put forward there between the lack of clarity of mythic life and

the theological perception of truth in logos. Finally, I will comment on the use of the concept of ambiguity in Benjamin's later work and consider what the shift in its status tells us about Benjamin's early thinking on the topic of violence and law.

The ambiguity in Benjamin's critique of the ambiguity of legal violence

In 'Critique of Violence' Benjamin claims that the law is itself a type of mythic violence. To defend this assimilation of law to myth, Benjamin makes much of the fact that the earliest legal statutes were not written down. As a consequence it was 'uncertain' when the law was transgressed, or whether acts that did transgress it, would incur 'retribution'. The significance and 'deepest purpose' of this uncertainty lies for Benjamin in 'the sphere of fate in which it originates' (SW 1:242). The reference to the uncertainty of fate foreshadows the essay's later transposition of the components of its objections to law as objections to the features of mythic life. The theme of law's uncertainty understood as the consequence of the non-discursive status of the law raises an obvious objection. If Benjamin wishes to tie law to myth and to do so on the grounds of their shared connection to fate, how does he extend the claim of uncertainty that is the basis of un-articulated rules to the *written* law? The claim that the punitive exercise of the law is ambiguous seems to be the way that he attempts to secure this point. Benjamin argues that it is uncertain whether transgression of the law will end in violent retribution. This ambiguity over whether transgressions elicit penalty aligns law to the uncertainty of myth and through myth to fate. The key point seems to be that such uncertainty is the factor that generates anxiety and guilt.

Law has the authority to punish transgressions. However, the authority to punish what it codifies as a transgression is ambiguous since whether and when it detects the transgression is uncertain. Law exerts a menacing presence precisely in its status as a *potential* threat of detection and punishment. In his treatment of legal statutes, Benjamin draws attention to the fact that ignorance of the law warrants no exemption from the applicability of the law's punitive force. Further, despite its appearance as a neutral broker, the law understands 'equality before the law' in the same way that, as Anatole France ironically comments, 'poor and rich are equally forbidden to spend the night under the bridges' (SW 1:249). Benjamin claims that these latter ambiguities in the law align its operations to those of myth: they reign in a threatening fashion because the boundaries they police are uncertain. As he writes in his 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"': "The basic conception in myth is the world as punishment – punishment which actually engenders those to whom punishment is due" (SW 4:403). The punitive dimension of myth intensifies the existential effects of the fact that, like the law, what it prohibits is not clear (i.e., it is not articulated) and whether it punishes is not certain ('there is always hope of eluding [the] ... arm [of the law]' [SW 1:242]). This is the import of Benjamin's claim that neither myth nor legal statutes have any relation to truth. The claim rests on the status of articulation as meritorious in Benjamin's thinking. The value of truth and clarity that is attached to

the articulate word and opposed to the mystifications of the mute and the taciturn as well as the lack of clarity in 'chatter' can be unpacked in relation to Benjamin's early reflections on language.²

Legal violence, he argues, operates according to the 'impurity' or 'bastard form', of instrumental means-end logic (SW 1:252). It is alienated from the clarity of truth in much the same way as Benjamin claims that the instrumental category of bourgeois language is alienated from the creative word of God and the naming language of man. His 1916 essay on language contrasts the 'invalid and empty' ... 'bourgeois conception of language' in which the 'means of communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being', and 'the other conception of language' which 'knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication'. This 'other' language is man's communication with God: 'It means: *in the name, the mental being of man communicates itself to God*' (SW 1:65). Similarly, divine violence is pure violence in Benjamin's view because it is akin to the clarity of 'man's communication with God': it does not prosecute human interests and it annihilates therefore the partial class interests shielded by the 'neutral' operation of the law.

Although the 'Critique of Violence' does not always make the crucial connections, such as the nature of the link between myth and the law, or articulate speech and truth entirely convincing, Benjamin's description of the law as a type of mythic violence helps to specify what he objects to in myth. Myth exerts an imperious and ominous presence. Myth gives an account of nature that relies only on nature's forms to make this account. When they live in the perspective of myth and seek guidance from mythic forms, human beings are caught in a situation where they must decipher the communication of important meaning, e.g., precepts which potentially have punitive consequences, in non-discursive forms. The ambiguity of such forms as precepts is insuperable. Their non-discursive status means that any meaning can be discerned in them. The mythic life is lived in the context of guilt because it takes as the guide for answering demanding questions sensuous forms, which can only offer their inter-pretor debilitating ambiguity. Guilt is the inevitable consequence since edicts that have been issued will have been disregarded; no exculpation follows from the uncertainty about the content of these edicts and, the unintentional feature of their transgression, only the anticipation of retribution. This is the significance of the references to mythic ambiguity as the relevant frame for understanding the *potential* detection of wrongdoing by law.

The connection between ambiguity and guilt is one of the central tenets in Benjamin's characterization of the shared features of legal and mythic violence. However, the grounds for this characterization merge together the two different senses of ambiguity in the essay. For instance, Benjamin claims that one of the features of legal and mythic violence that defines its opposition to the annihilating force of divine violence, is that such violence 'is not ... destructive' (SW 1:248). He uses this phrase to describe the case of the violent retribution wrought on Niobe: the violence that 'bursts upon' her 'from the uncertain, ambiguous sphere of fate ... is not', he writes, 'actually destructive' ('*Die Gewalt bricht also aus der unsicheren, zweideutigen Sphäre des Schicksals über Niobe herein. Sie ist nicht eigentlich zerstörend*', GS 2.1:197/SW 1:248). Niobe is left behind 'both as an eternally mute bearer of guilt and as a boundary stone

on the frontier between men and gods' (SW 1:248). The annihilating force of divine violence in the case of God's destruction of the company of Korah, on the other hand, is expiatory. This must mean that what mythic violence does not destroy is what he calls, in 'Fate and Character', 'the guilt context of the living' ('*Schicksal ist der Schuldzusammenhang des Lebendigen*'; GS 2.1:175/SW 1:204).³

However, in defending this position Benjamin draws not just on the 'deliberate ambiguity' of fate that engenders guilt, but also on the 'demonic ambiguity' of the deceitful universality of the law.

Constitutional law, the establishing of frontiers, 'after all the wars of the mythic age, is the primal phenomenon of all lawmaking violence' (SW 1:248–9). Benjamin comments:

Here we see most clearly that power, more than the most extravagant gain in property, is what is guaranteed by all lawmaking violence. When frontiers are decided, the adversary is not simply annihilated; indeed, he is accorded rights even when the victor's superiority in power is complete. And these are, in a demonically ambiguous [*dämonisch-zweideutiger*] way, 'equal' rights: for both parties to the treaty, it is the same line that may not be crossed. Here appears, in a terribly primitive form, the mythic ambiguity of laws [*mythische Zweideutigkeit der Gesetze*] that may not be 'infringed' – the same ambiguity to which Anatole France refers satirically when he says, 'Poor and rich are equally forbidden to spend the night under the bridges' (GS 2.1:198/SW 1:249).

The 'line' that cannot be crossed is demonically ambiguous because it dissimulates the power differential that underpins the law, engaging in the pretence that the law is an equal broker and that 'it is the same line that may not be crossed'.

There is also another respect in which establishing frontiers is significant for understanding the law: 'Laws and circumscribed frontiers remain ... unwritten laws' (SW 1:249). This means that they can be unwittingly infringed and still incur retribution. Such unwitting infringement is the second meaning of ambiguity in the essay, that is, the 'deliberate ambiguity' of fate:

For each intervention of law that is provoked by an offense against the unwritten and unknown law is called 'retribution' (in contradistinction to 'punishment'). But however unluckily it may befall its unsuspecting victim, its occurrence is, in the understanding of the law, not chance, but fate showing itself once again in its deliberate ambiguity [*planvollen Zweideutigkeit*]. (GS 2.1:199/SW 1:249)

Benjamin's essay thus uses an ambiguous series of references to ambiguity to fuse together law and myth and then to set out his opposition between legal and mythic violence, on one side, and divine and revolutionary violence, on the other. The ambiguity in his use of ambiguity can, I will argue below, be clarified in relation to the existential stakes of fate that he attaches to ambiguity in his treatment of ritualized life in Goethe's *Elective Affinities*:

Ritual life and ambiguous forms in 'Goethe's *Elective Affinities*'

'Goethe's *Elective Affinities*', published in two instalments in *Neue Deutsche Beiträge* over 1924/5, was written between 1919–22, contemporaneously with the composition and publication in 1921 of 'Critique of Violence'. Like 'Critique of Violence', in this essay the term 'ambiguity' is given an explicitly pejorative sense. Further, as in the violence-essay, in the piece on Goethe's novel 'ambiguity' is a characteristic attributed to each member of the negatively coded side of a schema of oppositions, which in the essay on Goethe, include: ambiguity/clarity; bourgeois 'free' choice/the moral decision; the semblance/the expressionless; bourgeois civility/critical violence; silence/articulation; myth/revelation; fate/the decision. 'Ambiguity' is used more sparingly and also more consistently in the essay on Goethe's novel than it is in the essay on violence. For Benjamin, 'ambiguity' in the former piece is one of the key indicators of the vacuity of bourgeois, ritualized life. As such, the use of 'ambiguity' in 'Goethe's *Elective Affinities*' can help to clarify the breadth of strategic meanings the word communicates in 'Critique of Violence' but which that essay does not adequately expound.

Benjamin's essay on Goethe's 1809 novel puts forward the thesis that anxiety and guilt are facets of bourgeois, ritualized life. The freedom from tradition that the characters in the novel have won does not lead them anywhere. Rather, it throws these characters into lives of empty, formalized ritual, which he describes, in tandem with the perspective on myth of the essay on violence, as lives lived in the 'pallid light' of myth (SW 1:303 and 305). I will not go into all the labyrinthine detail of Benjamin's treatment of the *Elective Affinities* here. The essay has a legitimate claim to being one of Benjamin's most substantial pieces, but it is also one of his most prohibitively difficult essays. In this chapter, I am interested specifically in how Benjamin's analysis of the novel supports the general thesis that bourgeois life has the existential structure of mythic life and his contention that this structure is perceptible theologically. The pivot of this position is 'the knowledge' that the relation between myth and truth 'is one of mutual exclusion. There is no truth, for there is no unequivocalness – and hence not even error – in myth' (SW 1:326). Conversely, 'what is proper to the truly divine is the logos: the divine does not ground life without truth, nor does it ground the rite without theology' (SW 1:326). The anxiety and guilt of mythic life are presented as consequences of a life reduced to interpreting supposedly significant meaning from irreducibly ambiguous forms. For instance, he treats the category of the symbol in the essay, not as a form that radiates a benign fecundity of meaning, but as a silent form of irreducibly ambiguous significance. Taken as a source of authority, the ambiguity of the symbol traps human beings. When the essay briefly introduces the pivotal concept of the expressionless [*das Ausdruckslose*] as a guard against the seductions of the beautiful semblance, he specifies that it is the 'critical violence' of the expressionless that reduces the ambiguities of the symbol to 'a torso':

it shatters whatever still survives as the legacy of chaos in all beautiful semblance: the false, errant totality – the absolute totality. Only the expressionless completes the work, by shattering it into a thing of shards, into a fragment of the true world, into the torso of a symbol. (SW 1:340)

The violence of the expressionless, like divine violence, is destructive of ambiguity and its accompanying guilt and anxiety; it is destructive of mythic forms.

The symbol is the material form whose plenitude of meaning sustains plural interpretations. According to Benjamin's position in this essay, the hermeneutic activity that is required when material forms are given the status of guides for the conduct of human life is pernicious since the meanings they communicate are neither articulate, nor, accordingly, able to be disambiguated. When such forms are taken to be authoritative they condemn human beings to lives of anxiety and guilt. The anxiety follows from the need to work out what these forms are communicating, when any clarity on the matter is impossible. The guilt is the consequence of the belief that these forms have the authority to impart rules and that it is certain only that these rules will have been transgressed, not when or how, since what they prohibit is unclear:

Nothing but strict attachment to ritual – which may be called superstition only when, torn from its context, it survives in rudimentary fashion – can promise these human beings a stay against the nature in which they live. ... [I]t is nature itself which, in the hands of human beings, grows superhumanly active. (SW 1:303)

Ritual life is excoriated as a life that abides by the precepts of ambiguous, sensuous forms. The absence of truth in sources taken to be authoritative, such as the presumed profundity of nature's inscrutable forms in myth, is the core of the fateful life. If we consider this thesis in relation to the critique of the 'deliberate ambiguity' and 'demonic ambiguity' of law and myth in the violence-essay, it is clear that in these instances too there is an absence of truth (e.g. the 'unknown' and 'unwritten law') in sources that are taken to be authoritative. Benjamin's call for their destruction may also be understood therefore as the rejection of those institutions and practices unable to offer anything more than an uneasy accommodation with the lack of clarity that breeds anxiety and guilt.

Benjamin opposes to the life that abides by the precepts of ritualized forms, the life that disregards the captivating effects of semblance: the moral decision is the model for the destruction of the bourgeois life, which in Benjamin's view is synonymous not with the 'ease' it aims to cultivate, but with restlessness, anxiety and guilt. Benjamin's essay thus opposes two types of existence: on one hand, there is the life entranced by the free aesthetic arrangement of form that the waning force of tradition enables and which condemns humans to vain attempts to propitiate in ritual the silent forms that they presume to hold authority bearing precepts. On the other, there is the life lived in faith that there is something beyond mere life and that is willing to risk everything, even life itself.⁴ This type of life is able to destroy fate. Benjamin patterns the contrast between these two forms of life according to the contrast he sees between the lives of the characters from Goethe's novel and those of the characters of the novella that this novel contains:

It is the chimerical striving for freedom that draws down fate upon the characters in the novel. The lovers in the novella stand beyond both freedom and fate, and their courageous decision suffices to tear to bits a fate that would gather to a head

over them and to see through a freedom that would pull them down into the nothingness of choice. (SW 1:332)

It seems as if it is articulating the decision, that is, making it into the 'object of communication' that alone secures its 'moral' status.⁵ 'No moral decision can enter into life without verbal form and, strictly speaking, without thus becoming an object of communication' (SW 1:336). Hence Benjamin contrasts the novella lovers – 'The curious tale of the childhood sweethearts' [*die wunderlichen Nachbarstinder*] – who ask for their parents' blessing, with the mute conduct of the characters in the novel. Of the latter he writes:

At the height of their cultivation [these characters] ... are subject to the forces that cultivation claims to have mastered, even if it may forever prove impotent to curb them. These forces have given them a feeling for what is seemingly, they have lost the sense for what is ethical. This is meant as a judgment not on their actions but rather on their language. Feeling, but deaf, seeing, but mute, they go their way *Deaf to God and mute before the world*. Rendering account eludes them, *not because of their actions* but because of their being. *They fall silent*. (SW 1:304–5, emphases added)

Benjamin's description of the decision as 'moral' rests not just on its articulated status. Indeed it needs to be understood in relation to his opposition between fate and the moral decision, in which context the 'moral' status of the decision has the sense of unequivocal opposition to the coercive pressures of the 'cultivated', but empty bourgeois life. The life of the bourgeois is blind to 'the reality that inhabits what they fear' because they inhabit a perspective that is 'unsuited to them' (SW 1:303). The effective contestation of this perspective cannot be conducted in silent rebellion. In other essays, Benjamin argues that speaking back to fate is a release from it. Hence, in the 1932 essay on 'Gide's Oedipus' he argues that Oedipus is 'the last of the great escape artists' because he does not mutely submit to fate, but articulates his despair (SW 2:580). The status of speech in these positively coded examples does not indicate that the articulate word is, as such, an effective counter to fate. Word use can also founder in deliberate ambiguity, such as the meaningless chatter of bourgeois civility, which the violence-essay describes as the 'civilized outlook' that 'allows the use of unalloyed means of agreement' (SW 1:244).⁶ The clarity of the word is esteemed, not in the attempts to make peace with civility, but when its articulation undoes the captivities of merely material life, which is fate.

Benjamin's understanding of the relation between clarity in speech and truth is important for our topic since it can help explain how the uncertainty of the unwritten legal codes is sustained and transposed into their written status in the violence-essay.

As we saw, Benjamin refers in his violence-essay to the 'equal rights' in respect to the frontier line as 'demonically ambiguous', and he characterizes such rights as 'a terribly primitive form' of 'the mythic ambiguity of laws that may not be "infringed"' (SW 1:249). Benjamin thus uses the pejorative sense of 'ambiguity' to criticize the law-making violence of constitutional law, which, he claims, generates ambiguous frontiers. His description of the 'demonic' ambiguity of the 'frontier line' seems to

draw on the hermeneutic conception of ambiguity in the sense that a text or an image, or in this case the possession of 'equal rights' in respect to a frontier, can be interpreted in different ways. This sense is also present in Goethe's conception of the symbol [*Sinnbild*], where material forms carry symbolic meanings insofar as they sustain an unending task of interpretation.⁷ In both the essays on Goethe's novel and the essay on violence, Benjamin calls such ambiguity of meaning 'demonic'. Further, Benjamin relates demonic ambiguity to the experience of fate. What sustains the process of interpretation is not therefore, as on the hermeneutic model of ambiguity, benign fecundity of meaning, but the lack of any relation to truth in such forms. Hence what is distinctive about the vocabulary of 'equal rights' is that they dissimulate the mechanisms of 'force' that establish and maintain the frontier and which punish those who infringe it. The exclusion of such forms from truth, which Benjamin marks by calling the consequences of infringement 'retribution' rather than 'punishment', creates the conditions for guilt and anxiety, which thrive under the reign of uncertainty. This is an important point, which can be reconstructed from the pejorative discussion of myth in the violence-essay, but whose significance is only fully explained in the essay on Goethe's novel.

In his essay on violence, Benjamin attempts to link the case of Niobe, whose arrogance challenges the gods, to the principle that 'ignorance of law is no protection against punishment. This principle of law, he states, dates back to the mythic statutes in which laws and circumscribed frontiers are unwritten and can be unwittingly infringed. In such cases: "retribution" (in contradistinction to "punishment") ... however unluckily it may befall its unsuspecting victim ... is, in the understanding of the law, not chance but fate showing itself once again in its deliberate ambiguity (SW 1:249).

The uncertainty of apprehension and punishment, seeing that there is always hope of eluding the arm of law, is the aspect of the 'ambiguity' that law shares with myth, which ties them both to the 'deliberate ambiguity' of fate (SW 1:242). The uncertainty of legal punishment rules out the liberal interpretation of the law as exercising a function of deterrence. In fact, Benjamin writes, the uncertainty of apprehension 'makes [law] all the more threatening, like fate' (SW 1:242). When he discusses uncertainty in the context of myth, this sense of ambiguity as the uncertainty of fate is one that is shown to have concrete existential effects. Life lived under the pallid light of mythic ambiguity produces an anxiety-ridden state in which the fear of punishment at every turn is overwhelming. The evasion of the judgement of fate is not experienced as relief, but only as a postponement of certain, impending punishment. The cycle of transgression, guilt and punishment is closed, since there cannot be any appeal against fate. Aside from knowing that they must be guilty of some transgression because they suffer what they perceive to be 'their' punishment, nothing is known about the whole mechanism by the person who undergoes it. Indeed to reflect on the ancients' conception of fate is to be led to the "inescapable realization" that it is, in Hermann Cohen's words, "fate's orders themselves that seem to cause and bring about this infringement, this offense" (SW 1:249). There is no exit from the omnipresent threat of ruinous retribution because fate does not articulate intentions that can be scrutinized, but exerts an ambiguous, uncertain presence. This is why the diffuse sense of guilt feeds the dread of violent punishment.

The different examples that Benjamin uses in the violence-essay to depict the pernicious effects of ambiguity do not give a consistent picture of the problems he finds with mythic violence. On the other hand, his use of ambiguity to describe mythic life in the essay on Goethe's novel does show that what he objects to in the experience of ambiguous meaning is its carriage of the inscrutable punishment that comes from *fate*. There are two key instances in this essay's discussion of the novel – his treatment of the characters' reorganization of the graveyard in the churchyard and the demonic power of the still water that claims the life of the infant – in which Benjamin describes concrete circumstances where the experience of material forms as ambiguously uncertain determines a fateful existence. Benjamin understands myth as a human account (a 'traditional tale⁸) 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.⁹ 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. The modern examples of the Goethe novel make the issues at stake clearer than the mythical example of Niobe's punishment in the violence-essay.¹⁰

Benjamin describes how the friends in the novel remove the gravestones from the churchyard 'without scruple or consideration' (SW 1:302). Benjamin uses this particular example to treat the peculiar settings of bourgeois life where traditional institutions hold no authority. But the real issue in his account of this scene is what may replace tradition as the frame of meaning needed for human life. The friends attempt to substitute for tradition an aesthetic order: "See how Charlotte has beautified this funeral-ground", comments Eduard to Mitterer in the first chapter of the novel.¹¹ Aesthetic forms, in Benjamin's account, 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. Thus instead of their 'freedom' from tradition fostering an 'authentic' existence, it opens a chasm of potential dangers that crush them.¹² Myth, according to the essay on Goethe's novel, does not make nature approachable but hands over human life to unfathomable, hence threatening, tyrannical forces.

Benjamin argues that it is not natural elements per se that are demonic but their insertion into the semiotic system of myth. He refers to the 'mythic face' of sensuous nature' (SW 1:315), which is unleashed when humans are blind to the Revelation and the clarity that it gives to nature's forms. Hence 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' (SW 1:342). Benjamin opposes to the supposed freedom of 'bourgeois choice' paraded by the characters of the novel the 'moral decision' of the lovers of the novella. Salvation through faith can only be attained on the other side of uncompromising defiance of natural life. 'Because true reconciliation with God is achieved by no one who does not thereby destroy everything – or as much as he possesses – in order only then, before God's reconciled countenance, to find it resurrected' (SW 1:342). Faith in the transcendent source of life reconstitutes nature as responsive to human interests, no longer cut off from the transcendent. Humans are at home in nature only through the knowledge of the intention behind its creation, that is, the Revelation. It is this bond with the transcendent that provides a way out of material totality. Within Goethe's novel, the novella provides a vantage point that allows the destructive effects of mythic nature behind the beautiful semblance of the novel to be recognized: 'If the ambiguity thus leads into the novel's centre, still it points back again to the mythic origin of the novel's image of the beautiful life' (SW 1:341–2). What is illuminated is how the still waters of the novel embody the 'power of ambiguity': a bottomless pit of 'primeval forces that are seemingly 'contained' in a pleasurable, calm, aesthetic reflection (SW 1:341). The deceptive appearance of the water as 'reflecting, clear and clarifying' seems akin to the 'ambiguity' of law, which deceptively presents itself as neutral:

Water as the chaotic element of life does not threaten here in desolate waves that sink a man; rather, it threatens in the *enigmatic calm* that lets him go to his ruin. To the extent that fate governs, they] ... go to their ruin. Where they spurn the blessing of firm ground, they succumb to the *unfathomable*, which in stagnant water appears as something primeval. ... In all this it is nature itself which, in the *hands of human beings*, grows superhumanly active. (SW 1:303, emphases added)

Benjamin's essay shows how the deceptive presentation of the surface of the water is demonically ambiguous. When there is no anchor point outside mythic nature, natural forms become omnipotent; they dominate human life. This is the significance of the fact that 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' (SW 1:344).¹² Thus Benjamin makes the point that nature's sensuous forms can never be adequate grounds for human meaning. The novella lovers stand to the semblance of nature, as revolutionary violence stands to law and divine violence to myth. They each absolutely oppose a false totality, and do so on the grounds of practical faith in something beyond merely natural life. More than this: such practical faith dissolves the ambiguities of myth (and law) because it is attuned to the truth of the theological perception. Hence in the cases of both 'deliberate ambiguity' and 'demonic ambiguity' in the violence-essay Benjamin identifies the proliferating force of entrapment that occurs when forms that exclude truth (the line governed by the peace treaty, the statute that proclaims ignorance of the law as no exemption to punishment, the precepts of myth that take nature's forms) enjoy false authority.

Ambiguity and truth in Benjamin's late work

One of the difficult aspects of Benjamin's writing is that it does not have the type of systematic attention to a topic that one ordinarily finds in philosophy and this, together with the compressed style of argumentation and the occasional oracular pronouncements that are threaded through many of his works, makes it hard to pin it down, or at least, distil his writing into core theses or claims. The obscurities of some of his early pieces of writing – including the violence-essay – have made these texts pliable material for the agendas of his commentators. Many of the fundamental commitments of his earliest work – the association of language with the clarity of the creative word of God, i.e., the divine intention; myth with Greek mythology; and truth and revelation with the Judaic God – are skirted over in silence by many Benjamin scholars. I have argued here that the reason 'ambiguity' is coded pejoratively in his early work is because it is the sign of myth's exclusion of truth, which Benjamin understands as the real driver of fate. In bourgeois life, truth is excluded from the very forms that are consulted for guidance and the totalizing trap of the 'superhuman' mythic powers that are devoid of the clarity of divine intention is set (SW 1:303). The ambiguities in Benjamin's references to law's 'demonic ambiguity' and the 'deliberate ambiguity' of fate in his violence-essay, can be reconciled if we consider that in each case Benjamin refers to institutions and forms that exclude the clarity of truth and condemn those who follow them to anxiety and guilt.

The 'Critique of Violence' belongs to the period of Benjamin's early writing. Works from this period array a schema of oppositions: ambiguity and clarity; myth and truth; law and revolution; the semblance and the expressionless; and mythic and divine violence. The schema is weighted in his early writing by the opposition between myth and revelation (God), but the hold this opposition has on his thinking has eroded in the later work. What are the consequences of the shift away from this opposition on the terms of his early analysis of ritual life and violence?

In his *Arcades Project*, ambiguity has an equivocal value. Instead of signifying the exclusion of truth that legal violence and myth embody in the early works, ambiguity becomes something of a gateway to the perception of historical truth. For instance, in his formulation of the dialectical image a new optics for the perception of historical meaning is advocated. The dialectical image stages the possibility for the rescue or liberation of residues of meaning from the past. This occurs in a 'flash of recognition' when a moment of the past encounters its meaning in the present and comes thereby to sustain new meaning potentials. Benjamin writes that 'the relation of what has been to the now is dialectical'; it forms a constellation of a 'suddenly emergent', 'awakened' meaning (N2a, 3). The notion of emancipatory, redemptive meaning potential comes to replace the earlier excoriation of the pernicious ambiguity of forms cut off from communion with God.

Most notably, this shift in the late work resurrects and validates the concept of ambiguity, which is defined in the '1935 Exposé' for the *Arcades* contrary to its pejorative presentation in his early essays, as 'the manifest imaging of dialectic' (AP 10). The context of this reevaluation is historical: there is, he writes, an

ambiguity peculiar to the social relations and products of this epoch. *Ambiguity*

is the *manifest imaging of dialectic, the law of dialectics at a standstill*. This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image, therefore, dream image. Such an image is afforded by the commodity per se: as fetish. Such an image is presented by the arcades, which are house no less than street. Such an image is the prostitute – seller and sold in one. (AP 10, emphasis added)¹⁴

Against the value he had placed on a transparent relation to the unequivocal essence of things in his early discussion of language, the late work seems to assume that material forms do bear ambiguous meanings and that the negative meaning they carry can be converted into a positive one. Hence in the commodity form there is a negative form of meaning that gathers together the semblance characteristics needed for the exigencies of exchange reified from use and labour; but there is also a positive meaning that is emancipated from both use and exchange and resistant to any ultimate decryption. This second meaning is the meaning potential of the commodity form that is trafficked through its ruined form. The commodity becomes a site of convertible and converted meaning potentials. On this point, the *Arcades* clearly breaks with Benjamin's early critique of the pernicious effects of ambiguous meaning potential as he now expects emancipatory consequences from the fact that such potentials are housed in material forms. Indeed, if the 'Goethe's *Elective Affinities*' essay emphasizes that the anxious, guilt-ridden life is the consequence of submitting to the authoritative force of sensuous forms, such forms now become guides for historical truth.¹⁵ How should we understand the significance of this shift?

In relation to Benjamin's essay on violence the question is especially stark since it was the ambiguity of law, myth and fate that divine/revolutionary violence was scripted to destroy. His essay on Goethe's novel similarly describes the shimmering movement of the semblance as the ambiguous form that the critical violence of the expressionless cuts down. It seems to me that two points can be made in support of the thesis that there is a continuity underpinning Benjamin's seemingly altered position on the topic of ambiguity. First, the later position is consistent with the earlier concern about the pernicious effects of a hopeless hermeneutic relation to authority. After all, ambiguity may be the feature of the dialectic at a standstill, but it has this status of the 'standstill' because it does not effectively disguise the truth, but exposes it: for instance, the 'ambiguity' of the prostitute is that she is 'seller and sold in one'. Second, to the extent that it is sensuous forms that are consulted to access the historical truth of the nineteenth century, such forms are able to bear truth because they are the depository of the human wishes and ideals for emancipation. The vitiated status of these wishes is what Benjamin intends to lay bare. Hence the shift is away from divine to human revelation, even though the means of this revelation remains the theological conception of the perception of truth in the clarity of intention. These wishes are elevated beyond the partiality of human interests that he identifies in legal violence and instrumental language since they are the truth as such of human history and they are detected and 'read' in the 'historical index' of another century.¹⁶ As such, this later position is also consistent with his perspective on truth as the 'death of intention' in the *Trauerspiel*-book (OT 36), a specific formulation that is also echoed in the *Arcades* (N3,1). Like the emancipatory effect of the knowledge of the transcendent, creative

intention behind nature, the 'intentions' at stake in the *Arcades* are not transitory and partial intentions, but trans-historical and thus liberating ones. Finally, it is the citations in which wishes are lodged and articulated, rather than the sensuous forms themselves, that is the focus of the *Arcades*. This focus sustains the perspective of his early work in which language is cast against mute forms as a vehicle of emancipation.¹⁷

When the past is thought of as over and complete we are faced with entrapment in the totalizing force of the past (*The Arcades Project*). When law is the arbiter of violent retribution and the only option is submission we are asked to submit to uncertainty ('Critique of Violence'). When the semblance of the beautiful, bourgeois life is held up as the ideal that affords free choice, the mute tyranny of conformity to ritual inculcates guilt and anxiety ('Goethe's *Elective Affinities*'). And when instrumental language replaces the naming language, the reign of arbitrariness forever separates the hold of words on things and suspends the possibility of knowledge of truth ('Language as Such'). In the late work, as in the early, Benjamin advocates for the crack in forces of totality amidst the ambiguities of sensuous forms. Such perception is the crack in forces of totality that shows such forces to be false and strengthens the courage needed to contest their reign. His opposition to these forces is unwavering: his early work calls for their complete destruction. His later work nuances the militancy of this early call. In the *Arcades* Benjamin uses the resources of the ecology to look for the crack in the detritus of the past that would be able to sustain redemptive potentials. The case he makes against false totalities and the ambiguity that is their cipher in his early essay on violence can be coordinated with the various positions he takes on history, language and the complicity of bourgeois life with myth. I have argued here, however, that it is only through this coordination with other works of Benjamin's that the meaning of ambiguity in the violence-essay is intelligible. Whether ambiguity is 'deliberate' or 'demonic,' what it means for Benjamin is that which is excluded from truth; the destruction of ambiguity is also the destruction of the fear that such inscrutability generates.

Notes

- 1 An influential articulation of this position can be found in Werner Hamacher, 'Aformative, strike: Benjamin's "Critique of Violence"', in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), 108–36. Hamacher's essay is dedicated to Jean-Luc Nancy and the position he defends has more in common with the precepts of Nancy's ontology than it does with Benjamin's argument in his violence-essay. I give critical consideration to this tradition of interpretation of Benjamin's violence-essay in 'The distinction between mythic and divine violence: Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" from the perspective of "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*"', *New German Critique* 41.1 (2014): 93–120.

- 2 There are specific references to 'clarity' in the *Elective Affinities* essay (see SW 1:321, 342, 343), and the concept of clarity is also communicated in the contrast between what is 'brilliantly' 'illuminated' and 'radiant,' on one side and that which is 'dark,' 'telluric' and 'pallid' on the other (SW 1:331, 332, 303). However, the most consistent

- reference is to the intimate connection Benjamin sees between speech and clarity (SW 1:302). For this reason 'All speechless clarity of action is semblance-like, and in truth the inner life of those who in this way preserve themselves is no less obscure to them than to others' (SW 1:337).
- 3 Compare, 'Goethe's *Elective Affinities*': 'Fate is the nexus of guilt among the living' (SW 1:307).
 - 4 Regarding the vocabulary of 'faith': '[T]he certainty of blessing that, in the novella, the lovers take home with them corresponds to the hope of redemption that we nourish for all the dead. This hope is the sole justification of *the faith in immortality*, which must never be kindled from one's own existence' (SW 1:355, emphasis added).
 - 5 See Winfried Menninghaus's discussion of this point in 'Walter Benjamin's variations of imagelessness', *Critical Horizons* 14.3 (2013): 407–28, esp. 417–18, Special Issue on *The Image*, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Alison Ross.
 - 6 See the discussion of such 'means' in Ross, 'The distinction between mythic and divine violence', 117–19.
 - 7 See Tzvetan Todorov's account of hermeneutic interpretation of the symbol in his *Theories of the Symbol*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 206–7.
 - 8 See Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and History* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1979).
 - 9 This can be compared with Hans Blumenberg's treatment of this topic in his *Work on Myth*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985). Unlike Benjamin, Blumenberg sees myth as an effective way of managing anthropological deficits. Extending Blumenberg's account, we might say that what Benjamin calls 'theology' and credits with the 'truth' that he claims is excluded from myth is really just another name for the use of myth to deal with anthropological deficits. I defend this comparison with Blumenberg in Chapter 5 of *Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Image* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
 - 10 This is especially so since the contrast in the violence-essay between Niobe's punishment and the destruction of Korah is poorly handled. Niobe is left, in Benjamin's words, as a 'mute boundary stone'; her punishment thus does clearly mark the difference between the powers of the Gods and mortal life, despite Benjamin's description of the punishment of Niobe coming from 'the uncertain, ambiguous sphere of fate' and the meaning of her being rendered 'mute' as a further marker of 'ambiguity' (SW 1:248). For further analysis of the function of the Niobe myth in Benjamin's essay see Amir Ahmadi's analysis of Benjamin's distortion of the extant forms of the Greek myth of Niobe in this volume.
 - 11 J. W. von Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 33.
 - 12 Freud famously analysed the prompts for anxiety that such an un-defined field produces: like Benjamin, in Freud's account what defines anxiety is the absence of a definite object. 'Anxiety [Angst] has an unmistakable relation to expectation: it is anxiety about [vor] something. It has a quality of indefiniteness and lack of object.' Sigmund Freud, 'Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XX, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1973), 164–5.
 - 13 In his gloss on the commandment, "Thou shall not kill", in his essay on violence, Benjamin says: 'It exists not as a criterion of judgment, but as a guideline for

actions of persons or communities who have to wrestle with it in solitude and, in exceptional cases, to take on themselves the responsibility of ignoring it' (SW 1:250, emphasis added). His casual placement of the 'or' between 'persons' and 'communities' points to a problem in the essay's account of revolutionary violence: in what sense can a community, which after all is the space of politics, wrestle with the problem of violent acts 'in solitude'? (SW 1:250, emphasis added). The fudging of the parallel to the lovers' situation, whose decision is made each 'alone with God' [*sein jeder ganz für sich allein vor Gott*] (GS 1.1:184/SW 1:343), is clear. Even if this problem somehow leaves Benjamin's revolutionary moral faith in a new society intact, one must admit that it compromises the connection between divine and revolutionary violence that the argument of his essay requires.

- 14 See also for different formulations of the same insistence of the importance of ambiguity his early version of the 1935 *Exposé* (AP 896).
- 15 The essay refers to Goethe's life as the model of such an anxiety-ridden existence: 'No feeling is richer in variations than fear. Anxiety in the face of death is accompanied by anxiety in the face of life, as is a fundamental tone by its countless overtones' (SW 1:318). See also the references in this essay to 'dread' (SW 1:305).
- 16 Benjamin's *Arcades Project* refers to historical perception as a type of 'reading' of images; and to the idea that the legibility of these images comes from the 'historical index' between a past moment (i.e., the nineteenth century) and the present (i.e., the twentieth century): 'The expression "the book of nature" indicates that one can read the real like a text. And that is how the reality of the nineteenth century will be treated here. We open the book of what happened' (N4, 2). The 'legibility' of images is what makes the dialectical images genuinely historical – that is, not archaic – images' (N3, 1). 'For the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time' (N3, 1). He writes: 'In the dialectical image, what has been within a particular epoch is always, simultaneously, "what has been from time immemorial". As such, however, it is manifest, on each occasion, only to a quite specific epoch – namely, the one in which humanity, rubbing its eyes, recognizes just this particular dream image as such. It is at this moment that the historian takes up, with regard to that image, the task of dream interpretation' (N4, 1).
- 17 I develop this reading of the relation between Benjamin's early and later work in more detail in *Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Image* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

Works cited

- Blumenberg, Hans. *Work on Myth*. Translated by Robert M. Wallace. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985.
- Burkert, Walter. *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and History*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1979.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Elective Affinities*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books, 1971.
- Freud, Sigmund. 'Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety'. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XX. Translated and edited by James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1973, 77–179.

- Hamacher, Werner. 'Affirmative, strike: Benjamin's "Critique of Violence"'. In *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*. Edited by Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne. Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000, 108–36.
- Mennighaus, Winfried. 'Walter Benjamin's variations of imagelessness'. Translated by Timothy Bahr and David Hensley. *Critical Horizons* 14.3 (2013): 407–28. Special Issue on *The Image*. Edited by Andrew Benjamin and Alison Ross.
- Ross, Alison. 'The distinction between mythic and divine violence: Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" from the perspective of "Goethe's Elective Affinities"'. *New German Critique* 41.1 (2014): 93–120.
- *Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Image*. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. *Theories of the Symbol*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982.

Benjamin's Niobe

Amir Ahmadi

In the 'Critique of Violence' Walter Benjamin uses the story of Niobe to demonstrate what he terms 'mythic violence'. The ultimate concern of the essay is to show the possibility and conditions of a just revolutionary violence, the possibility of 'the existence of violence outside the law' in general. If such a

pure immediate violence is assured, this furnishes proof that revolutionary violence, the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by man, is possible, and shows by what means. Less possible and also less urgent for humankind, however, is to decide when unalloyed violence has been realized in particular cases. For only mythic violence, not divine, will be recognizable as such with certainty, unless it be in incomparable effects, because the expiatory power of violence is invisible to men. (SW 1: 252)¹

The conceptual opposition between mythic and divine violence is fundamental. Divine violence, whatever it may be in particular cases and however it may manifest itself, is, minimally, the violence that is *not* mythic. Since divine violence is 'incomparable' in its effects, the opposition to the mythic serves as the sole measure of deciding that the event may indeed be a manifestation of divine violence. In his essay on 'Goethe's *Elective Affinities*', Benjamin underlines the indispensable epistemic service mythology does for 'truth': 'where the presence of truth should be possible, it can be possible solely under the condition of the recognition of myth – that is, the recognition of its crushing indifference to truth' (SW 1:326). It is thus important to achieve clarity about myth and, as far as the essay on violence is concerned, about 'mythic violence'.

Neither divine nor mythic violence is a means, but an immediate manifestation of superhuman power that serves nothing ulterior.² One cannot evaluate them by invoking the (supposed) different ends they serve. The immediate violence 'has thoroughly objective manifestations in which it can be subjected to criticism' (SW 1:248). Divine and mythic violence can be distinguished only in their actual occurrences, in the concrete features they display. The critique of violence (and its 'justness') must rely on a phenomenology of singular events. This is the reason why the 'example' Benjamin gives of 'mythic violence' is not merely an illustration of the concept (SW 1:248); it demonstrates its applicability. Mythic violence is thought and defined in reference