

# Epistemo-Critical Prologue

The origin of German tragic drama/ Walter Benjamin; New York: Verso, 1998 (27-56 p.)

science philosophy

Neither in knowledge nor in reflection can anything whole be put together, since in the former the internal is missing and in the latter the external; and so we must necessarily think of science as art if we expect to derive any kind of wholeness from it. Nor should we look for this in the general, the excessive, but, since art is always wholly represented in every individual work of art, so science ought to reveal itself completely in every individual object treated.

22. 21. 2019  
Wolfgang  
Methode der  
Farbenlehre  
philosophie des  
Kunst

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: *Materialien zur Geschichte der Farbenlehre*

It is characteristic of philosophical writing that it must continually confront the question of representation. In its finished form philosophy will, it is true, assume the quality of doctrine, but it does not lie within the power of mere thought to confer such a form. Philosophical doctrine is based on historical codification. It cannot therefore be evoked *more geometrico*. The more clearly mathematics demonstrate that the total elimination of the problem of representation - which is boasted by every proper didactic system - is the sign of genuine knowledge, the more conclusively does it reveal its renunciation of that area of truth towards which language is directed. The methodological element in philosophical projects is not simply part of their didactic mechanism. This means quite simply that they possess a certain esoteric quality which they are unable

Wolfgang  
Benjamin  
"revelation"  
"methodological"  
"esoteric"  
"quality"

to discard, forbidden to deny, and which they vaunt at their own peril. The alternative philosophical forms represented by the concepts of the doctrine and the esoteric essay are precisely those things which were

ignored by the 19th, with its concept of system. How much as it is determined by this concept of system, philosophy is in danger of becoming a sterile activity to a signification which breathes a sterile web between separate kinds of knowledge in an attempt to ensnare the truth as if it were something which came flying in from outside. But the universalism acquired by such philosophy falls far short of the didactic truth of doctrine of habit, is to remain true to the law of its own form, as the representation of truth is not as an acquisition of knowledge, but the exercise of it.

authority →

in the system - must be accorded due importance. This exercise has imposed itself upon all those epochs which have recognized the uncircumscribable essentiality of truth in the form of a propaedeutic, which can be designated by the scholastic term treatise because this term refers, albeit implicitly, to those objects of theology without which truth is inconceivable. Treatises may be didactic in tone, but essentially they lack the conclusiveness of an instruction which could be asserted, like doctrine, by virtue of its own authority. The treatise dispenses also with the coercive proof of mathematics. In the canonic form of the treatise the only element of an intention - and it is an educative rather than a didactic intention - is the authoritative quotation. Its method is essentially representation. Method is a digression. Representation as digression - such is the methodological nature of the treatise. The absence of an uninterrupted purposeful structure is its primary characteristic. Tirelessly the process of thinking makes new beginnings, returning in a roundabout way to its original object. This continual pausing for breath is the mode most proper to the process of contemplation. For by pursuing different levels of meaning in its examination of one single object it receives both the incentive to begin again and the justification for its irregular rhythm. Just as mosaics preserve their majesty despite their fragmentation into capricious particles, so philosophical contemplation is not lacking in momentum. Both are made up of the distinct and the disparate, and nothing could bear more powerful testimony to the transcendent force of the sacred

image and the truth itself. The value of fragments of thought is all the greater the less direct their relationship to the underlying idea, and the brilliance of the representation depends as much on this value as the brilliance of the mosaic does on the quality of the glass paste. The relationship between the minute precision of the work and the proportions of the sculptural or intellectual whole demonstrates that truth-content is only to be grasped through immersion in the most minute details of subject-matter. In their supreme, western, form the mosaic and the treatise are products of the Middle Ages; it is their very real affinity which makes comparison possible.

this form - rather than its anticipatory

Vorstellen (throughout means presentation)

The difficulty inherent in this kind of (representation) proves only its peculiar quality as a prose form. Whereas the speaker uses voice and gesture to support individual sentences, even where they cannot really stand up on their own, constructing out of them - often vaguely and precariously - a sequence of ideas, as if producing a bold sketch in a single attempt, the writer must stop and restart with every new sentence. And this applies to the contemplative mode of representation more than any other, for its aim is not to carry the reader away and inspire him with enthusiasm. This form can be counted successful only when it forces the reader to pause and reflect. The more significant its object, the more detached the reflexion must be. Short of the didactic precept, such sober prose is the only style suited to philosophical investigation. Ideas are the object of this investigation. If representation is to stake its claim as the real methodology of the philosophical treatise, then it must be the representation of ideas. Truth, bodied forth in the dance of represented ideas, resists being projected, by whatever means, into the realm of knowledge. Knowledge is possession. Its very object is determined by the fact that it must be taken possession of - even if in a transcendental sense - in the consciousness. The quality of possession remains. For the thing possessed, representation is secondary; it does not have prior existence as something representing itself. But the opposite holds good of truth. For knowledge, method is a way of acquiring its object - even by creating it

in the consciousness; for truth it is self-representation, and is therefore immanent in its form. Unlike the methodology of knowledge, this form does not derive from a coherence established in the consciousness, but from an essence. Again and again the statement that the object of knowledge is not identical with the truth will prove itself to be one of the profoundest intentions of philosophy in its original form, the Platonic theory of ideas. Knowledge is open to question, but truth is not. Knowledge is concerned with individual phenomena, but not directly with their unity. The unity of knowledge – if indeed it exists – would consist rather in a coherence which can be established only on the basis of individual insights and, to a certain extent, their modification of each other; whereas unity is present in truth as a direct and essential attribute, and as such it is not open to question. For if the integral unity in the essence of truth were open to question, then the question would have to be: how far is the answer to the question already given in any conceivable reply which truth might give to questions? And the answer to this question would necessarily provoke the same question again, so that the unity of truth would defy all questioning. As a unity of essence rather than a conceptual unity, truth is beyond all question. Whereas the concept is a spontaneous product of the intellect, ideas are simply given to be reflected upon. Ideas are pre-existent. The distinction between truth and the coherence provided by knowledge thus defines the idea as essence. Such is the implication of the theory of ideas for the concept of truth. As essences, truth and idea acquire that supreme metaphysical significance expressly attributed to them in the Platonic system.

This is evident above all in the *Symposium*, which contains two pronouncements of decisive importance in the present context. It presents truth – the realm of ideas – as the essential content of beauty. It declares truth to be beautiful. An understanding of the Platonic view of the relationship of truth and beauty is not just a primary aim in every investigation into the philosophy of art, but it is indispensable to the definition of truth itself. To interpret these sentences in terms of the logic

of their system, as no more than part of a time-honoured panegyric to philosophy, would inevitably mean leaving the sphere of the theory of ideas; which is where – and perhaps nowhere more clearly than in the statements to which we have referred – the mode of existence of ideas is illuminated. The second of these pronouncements needs some amplification. If truth is described as beautiful, this must be understood in the context of the *Symposium* with its description of the stages of erotic desires. Eros – it should be understood – does not betray his basic impulse by directing his longings towards the truth; for truth is beautiful: not so much in itself, as for Eros. And so it is with human love; a person is beautiful in the eyes of his lover, but not in himself, because his body belongs in a higher order of things than that of the beautiful. Likewise truth; it is not so much beautiful in itself, as for whomsoever seeks it. If there is a hint of relativism here, the beauty which is said to be a characteristic of truth is nevertheless far from becoming simply a metaphor. The essence of truth as the self-respecting realm of ideas guarantees rather that the assertion of the beauty of truth can never be devalued. This representational impulse in truth is the refuge of beauty as such, for beauty remains brilliant and palpable as long as it freely admits to being so. Its brilliance – seductive as long as it wishes only to shine forth – provokes pursuit by the intellect, and it reveals its innocence only by taking refuge on the altar of truth. Eros follows it in is flight, but as its lover, not as its pursuer; so that for the sake of its outward appearance beauty will always flee: in dread before the intellect, in fear before the lover. And only the latter can bear witness to the fact that truth is not a process of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it. But can truth do justice to beauty? That is the innermost question of the *Symposium*. Plato's answer is to make truth the guarantor of the existence of beauty. This is the sense in which he argues that truth is the content of beauty. This content, however, does not appear by being exposed; rather it is revealed in a process which might be described metaphorically as the burning up of the husk as it enters the realm of ideas, that is to say a destruction of the work in which its external form achieves its most brilliant degree of illumination. This relationship between truth and beauty shows more clearly than anything else the great difference between

truth and the object of knowledge, with which it has customarily been equated, and at the same time it provides an explanation of that simple and yet unpopular fact that even those philosophical systems whose cognitional element has long since lost any claim to scientific truth still possess contemporary relevance. In the great philosophies the world is seen in terms of the order of ideas. But the conceptual frameworks within which this took place have, for the most part, long since become fragile. Nevertheless these systems, such as Plato's theory of ideas, Leibniz's Monadology, or Hegel's dialectic, still remain valid as attempts at a description of the world. It is peculiar to all these attempts that they still preserve their meaning, indeed they often reveal it more fully, even when they are applied to the world of ideas instead of empirical reality. For it was as descriptions of an order of ideas that these systems of thought originated. The more intensely the respective thinkers strove to outline the image of reality, the more were they bound to develop a conceptual order which, for the later interpreter, would be seen as serving that original depiction of the world of ideas which was really intended. If it is the task of the philosopher to practise the kind of description of the world of ideas which automatically includes and absorbs the empirical world, then he occupies an elevated position between that of the scientist and the artist. The latter sketches a restricted image of the world of ideas, which, because it is conceived as a metaphor, is at all times definitive. The scientist arranges the world with a view to its dispersal in the realm of ideas, by dividing it from within into concepts. He shares the philosopher's interest in the elimination of the merely empirical; while the artist shares with the philosopher the task of representation. There has been a tendency to place the philosopher too close to the scientist, and frequently the lesser kind of scientist; as if representation had nothing to do with the task of the philosopher. The concept of philosophical style is free of paradox. It has its postulates. These are as follows: the art of the interruption in contrast to the chain of deduction; the tenacity of the essay in contrast to the single gesture of the fragment; the repetition of themes in contrast to shallow universalism; the fullness of concentrated positivity in contrast to the negation of polemic.

The demand for flawless coherence in scientific deduction is not made in order that truth shall be represented in its unity and singularity; and yet this very flawlessness is the only way in which the logic of the system is related to the notion of truth. Such systematic completeness has no more in common with truth than any other form of representation which attempts to ascertain the truth in mere cognitions and cognitional patterns. The more scrupulously the theory of scientific knowledge investigates the various disciplines, the more unmistakably their methodological inconsistency is revealed. In each single scientific discipline new assumptions are introduced without any deductive basis, and in each discipline previous problems are declared solved as emphatically as the impossibility of solving them in any other context is asserted.<sup>1</sup> It is one of the most unphilosophical traits of that theory of science which, instead of the single disciplines, takes as the point of departure for its investigations certain supposedly philosophical postulates, that it considers this inconsistency as coincidental. However, far from characterizing an inferior and provisional stage of knowledge, this discontinuity in scientific method could positively advance the theory of knowledge, were it not for the ambition to grasp the truth - which remains an indivisible unity - in an encyclopaedic accumulation of items of knowledge. Systems have no validity except where they are inspired in their basic outline by the constitution of the world of ideas. The great categories which determine not only the shape of the systems, but also philosophical terminology - logic, ethics, and aesthetics, to mention the most general - do not acquire their significance as the names of special disciplines, but as monuments in the discontinuous structure of the world of ideas. Phenomena do not, however, enter into the realm of ideas whole, in their crude empirical state, adulterated by appearances, but only in their basic elements, redeemed. They are divested of their false unity so that, thus divided, they might partake of the genuine unity of truth. In this their division, phenomena are subordinate to concepts, for it is the latter which effect the resolution of objects into their constituent elements. Conceptual distinctions are above all suspicion of destructive sophistry only when their purpose is the salvation of phenomena in ideas, the Platonic τὰ φαινόμενα σώζειν.

Through their mediating role concepts enable phenomena to participate in the existence of ideas. It is this same mediating role which fits them for the other equally basic task of philosophy, the representation of ideas. As the salvation of phenomena by means of ideas takes place, so too does the representation of ideas through the medium of empirical reality. For ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of these elements.

The set of concepts which assist in the representation of an idea lend it actuality as such a configuration. For phenomena are not incorporated in ideas. They are not contained in them. Ideas are, rather, their objective, virtual arrangement, their objective interpretation. If ideas do not incorporate phenomena, and if they do not become functions of the law of phenomena, the 'hypothesis', then the question of how they are related to phenomena arises. The answer to this is: in the representation of phenomena. The idea thus belongs to a fundamentally different world from that which it apprehends. The question of whether it comprehends that which it apprehends, in the way in which the concept genus includes the species, cannot be regarded as a criterion of its existence. That is not the task of the idea. Its significance can be illustrated with an analogy. Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars. This means, in the first place, that they are neither their concepts nor their laws. They do not contribute to the knowledge of phenomena, and in no way can the latter be criteria with which to judge the existence of ideas. The significance of phenomena for ideas is confined to their conceptual elements. Whereas phenomena determine the scope and content of the concepts which encompass them, by their existence, by what they have in common, and by their differences, their relationship to ideas is the opposite of this inasmuch as the idea, the objective interpretation of phenomena - or rather their elements - determines their relationship to each other. Ideas are timeless constellations, and by virtue of the elements' being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed;

Ideas are formal objects  
 Ideas are formal objects  
 Ideas are formal objects  
 Ideas are formal objects

so that those elements which it is the function of the concept to elicit from phenomena are most clearly evident at the extremes. The idea is best explained as the representation of the context within which the unique and extreme stands alongside its counterpart. It is therefore erroneous to understand the most general references which language makes as concepts, instead of recognizing them as ideas. It is absurd to attempt to explain the general as an average. The general is the idea. The empirical, on the other hand, can be all the more profoundly understood the more clearly it is seen as an extreme. The concept has its roots in the extreme. Just as a mother is seen to begin to live in the fullness of her power only when the circle of her children, inspired by the feeling of her proximity, closes around her, so do ideas come to life only when extremes are assembled around them. Ideas - or, to use Goethe's term, ideals - are the Faustian 'Mothers'. They remain obscure so long as phenomena do not declare their faith to them and gather round them. It is the function of concepts to group phenomena together, and the division which is brought about within them thanks to the distinguishing power of the intellect is all the more significant in that it brings about two things at a single stroke: the salvation of phenomena and the representation of ideas.

"The Word as Idea"

Ideas are not among the given elements of the world of phenomena. This gives rise to the question of the manner in which they are in fact given, and whether it is necessary to hand over the task of accounting for the structure of the world of ideas to a much-cited intellectual vision. The weakness which esotericism invariably imparts to philosophy is nowhere more overwhelmingly apparent than in that particular way of looking at things which is the philosophical approach required of the adepts of all the theories of neo-Platonic paganism. The being of ideas simply cannot be conceived of as the object of vision, even intellectual vision. For even in its most paradoxical periphrasis, as *intellectus archetypus*, vision does not enter into the form of existence which is peculiar to truth, which is devoid of all intention, and certainly does not itself appear as intention. Truth does not enter into relationships, particularly intentional ones.

The object of knowledge, determined as it is by the intention inherent in the concept, is not the truth. Truth is an intentionless state of being, made up of ideas. The proper approach to it is not therefore one of intention and knowledge, but rather a total immersion and absorption in it. Truth is the death of intention. This, indeed, is just what could be meant by the story of the veiled image of Sais, the unveiling of which was fatal for whomsoever thought thereby to learn the truth. It is not some enigmatic cruelty in actual meaning which brings this about, but the very nature of truth, in the face of which even the purest fire of the spirit of inquiry is quenched. The mode of being in the world of appearances is quite different from the being of truth, which is something ideal. The structure of truth, then, demands a mode of being which in its lack of intentionality resembles the simple existence of things, but which is superior in its permanence. Truth is not an intent which realizes itself in empirical reality; it is the power which determines the essence of this empirical reality. The state of being, beyond all phenomenality, to which alone this power belongs, is that of the name. This determines the manner in which ideas are given. But they are not so much given in a primordial language as in a primordial form of perception, in which words possess their own nobility as names, unimpaired by cognitive meaning. It is to some extent doubtful whether Plato's theory of "Ideas" would have been possible if the very meaning of the word had not suggested to the philosopher, familiar only with his mother tongue, a deification of the verbal concept, a deification of words: Plato's "Ideas" are - if, for once, they might be considered from this one-sided viewpoint - nothing but deified words and verbal concepts.<sup>2</sup> The idea is something linguistic, it is that element of the symbolic in the essence of any word. In empirical perception, in which words have become fragmented, they possess, in addition to their more or less hidden, symbolic aspect, an obvious, profane meaning. It is the task of the philosopher to restore, by representation, the primacy of the symbolic character of the word, in which the idea is given self-consciousness, and that is the opposite of all outwardly-directed communication. Since philosophy may not presume to speak in the tones of revelation, this can only be achieved by recalling in memory the primordial form of perception. Platonic anamnesis is, perhaps, not far removed from this kind of

remembering; except that here it is not a question of the actualization of images in visual terms; but rather, in philosophical contemplation, the idea is released from the heart of reality as the word, reclaiming its name-giving rights. Ultimately, however, this is not the attitude of Plato, but the attitude of Adam, the father of the human race and the father of philosophy. Adam's action of naming things is so far removed from play or caprice that it actually confirms the state of paradise as a state in which there is as yet no need to struggle with the communicative significance of words. Ideas are displayed, without intention, in the act of naming, and they have to be renewed in philosophical contemplation. In this renewal the primordial mode of apprehending words is restored. And so, in the course of its history, which has so often been an object of scorn, philosophy is - and rightly so - a struggle for the representation of a limited number of words which always remain the same - a struggle for the representation of ideas. In philosophy, therefore, it is a dubious undertaking to introduce new terminologies which are not strictly confined to the conceptual field, but are directed towards the ultimate objects of consideration. Such terminologies - abortive denominative processes in which intention plays a greater part than language - lack that objectivity with which history has endowed the principal formulations of philosophical reflections. These latter can stand up on their own in perfect isolation, as mere words never can. And so ideas subscribe to the law which states: all essences exist in complete and immaculate independence, not only from phenomena, but, especially, from each other. Just as the harmony of the spheres depends on the orbits of stars which do not come into contact with each other, so the existence of the *mundus intelligibilis* depends on the unbridgeable distance between pure essences. Every idea is a sun and is related to other ideas just as suns are related to each other. The harmonious relationship between such essences is what constitutes truth. Its oft-cited multiplicity is finite; for discontinuity is a characteristic of the 'essences . . . which lead a life that differs utterly from that of objects and their conditions; and which cannot be forced dialectically into existence by our selecting and adding some . . . complex of properties which we happen to encounter in an object; but whose number is, by the same token, limited, and every single one of which must be searched for



laboriously at the appropriate place in its world, until it is found, as a *rocher de bronze*, or until the hope that it exists is shown to be illusory.<sup>13</sup> Ignorance of this, its discontinuous finitude, has, not infrequently, frustrated energetic attempts to renew the theory of ideas, most recently those undertaken by the older generation of the romantics. In their speculations truth assumed the character of a reflective consciousness in place of its linguistic character.

In the sense in which it is treated in the philosophy of art the *Trauerspiel* is an idea. Such a treatment differs most significantly from a literary-historical treatment in its assumption of unity, whereas the latter is concerned to demonstrate variety. In literary-historical analysis differences and extremes are brought together in order that they might be relativized in evolutionary terms; in a conceptual treatment they acquire the status of complementary forces, and history is seen as no more than the coloured border to their crystalline simultaneity. From the point of view of the philosophy of art the extremes are necessary; the historical process is merely virtual. Conversely the idea is the extreme example of a form or genre, and as such does not enter into the history of literature. *Trauerspiel*, as a concept, could, without the slightest problem, be added to the list of aesthetic classifications. But not as an idea, for it defines no class and does not contain that generality on which the respective conceptual levels in the system of classification depend: the average. The consequent inadequacies of inductive reasoning in artistic theory could not long remain concealed; hence the critical bewilderment of modern scholars. With reference to his study 'Zum Phänomen des Tragsischen', Scheier asks: 'how . . . are we . . . to proceed? Are we to assemble all manner of examples of the tragic, that is to say occurrences and events which are said to create the impression of the tragic, and then analyse inductively what it is that they all have "in common"? That would be a kind of inductive method which could be supported by experiment. This would not, however, lead us any further than self-observation at those moments when we are affected by the tragic. For how justified are we in accepting that what people describe as tragic is tragic?'<sup>14</sup> The attempt to define ideas

inductively – according to their range – on the basis of popular linguistic usage, in order then to proceed to the investigation of the essence of what has been thus defined, can lead nowhere. Invaluable though common linguistic usage may be to the philosopher as a pointer to ideas, it is dangerous to be misled by loose speech or thinking into accepting it, in interpretation, as the formal basis of a concept. Indeed, this permits us to say that it is only with the greatest reservation that the philosopher may adopt the habitual tendency of ordinary thinking, which is to make words into concepts embracing whole species in order to be more sure of them. And the philosophy of art has not infrequently succumbed to this temptation. When Volkelt's *Ästhetik des Tragsichen* – to take one striking example from many – includes in its analyses plays by Holz or Halbe alongside dramas by Aeschylus or Euripides, without so much as asking whether the tragic is a form which can be realized at all at the present time, or whether it is not a historically limited form, then, as far as the tragic is concerned, the effect of such widely divergent material is not one of tension, but of sheer incongruity. When facts are amassed in this way so that the less obvious original qualities are soon obscured by the chaos of more immediately appealing modern ones, the investigation in which this accumulation was undertaken – with a view to examining what these things have 'in common' – is left with nothing but some psychological data which, on the slender basis of an identity in the subjective reaction of the investigator or, at least, the ordinary contemporary citizen, are held to establish the similarity of things which are in fact quite different. In terms of the concepts of psychology it is perhaps possible to reproduce a variety of impressions, regardless of whether these impressions have been evoked by works of art; but it is not possible to express the essence of a field of artistic endeavour. This can only be done in a comprehensive explanation of the underlying concept of its form, the metaphysical substance of which should not simply be found within, but should appear in action, like the blood coursing through the body.

The reasons for the uncritical use of inductive methods have always been the same: on the one hand the love of variety and, on the other hand, in-