

# Intervention, Encroachment

## Walter Benjamin on Violence and Expiation

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**ABSTRACT** This article shows that Walter Benjamin's initial characterization of the "sphere of moral relations" as divided by two mutually exclusive poles, law and justice, without a mediating third term such as "ethical life" or "moral education," generates the basis for his critique of violence. After describing how this characterization of moral relations both reproduces and inverts the underlying schema of Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*, the article outlines the procedure whereby Benjamin's initial definition of violence as an "intervention" into moral relations is supplemented by a corresponding definition of legal "encroachment": law presents itself as a resolution or "expiation" of morally ambiguous relations; but insofar as the "sphere of moral relations" is split between the two poles of law and justice, such expiation conceals and thus intensifies the moral ambiguity of the situation on which law encroaches. The article concludes by suggesting that contemporary encroachments of law constitute a danger, akin to the growth of nihilism (in Nietzsche's sense), to which Benjamin's essay seeks to alert its readers.

**KEYWORDS** Walter Benjamin, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, legal theory, legal violence, myth

Walter Benjamin makes a remark near the opening of "Toward the Critique of Violence" that seems altogether straightforward but, on second thought, becomes rather peculiar: "With these observations something more and something different than may perhaps appear is given with respect to the critique of violence."<sup>1</sup> The remark is peculiar only because it occurs a few sentences into the essay. Having scarcely begun, Benjamin is already reflecting on the scope and consequences of certain "observations," which, as a result of this remark, function as the "data" for the ensuing argument. The data here are doubtless of a theoretical character, in contrast to the "temporal data" (§19) to which Benjamin refers in the closing paragraph of the essay; but this makes the remark in question stranger still, for it suggests that certain theoretical formulations contain in abbreviated form the program of a critique of violence—not only the argument developed in the like-named essay but also the

expansion of the argument indicated by the *toward* in its title. The preliminary aim of this article is to accept Benjamin's provocation and analyze his initial observations as the very nucleus of a critique of violence that begins by isolating a sense of the German word *Gewalt* that has little to do with the colloquial meaning of the English word *violence*. The ultimate aim of the article is to show how Benjamin's essay, in the end, recaptures the colloquial sense of violence by identifying a certain movement of law—its “encroachment”—that deceptively appears as though it were a peaceful process.

Here, then, are the observations with which Benjamin begins “Toward the Critique of Violence”:

The task of a critique of violence may be described as the presentation of its relation to law and justice. For, however effective a cause may be, it becomes violence in the impressive sense of the word only when it intervenes in moral relations. The sphere of these relations is designated by the concepts of law and justice. With regard to the first of these, it is clear that the most elementary basic relation in every legal order is the one between ends and means. Furthermore, it is clear that violence can first be sought only in the realm of means, not in the realm of ends. With these observations something more and something different than may perhaps appear is given with respect to the critique of violence. (§1)

One further observation is implied by the final one: the search for violence must *first* begin in the realm of means; but it does not have to end there—which does not imply, however, that the search concludes in the realm of ends. Such would be the case only if the fundamental and elemental character of the relation between means and ends extends beyond the legal order. This is a premise that Benjamin challenges in the course of his inquiry. The beginning of the challenge takes place in the observations themselves, the neutral quality of which is a function of the meaning Benjamin associates with certain cardinal terms of his inquiry, especially these four: *Gewalt*, which the foregoing text translates as “violence”; *das Recht*, which it translates as “law” (without either a definite or indefinite article); *sittlich*, which it translates as “moral”; and *Verhältnis*, which it translates as “relation.” Each of these translations is problematic; so, too, is Benjamin's use of the German terms. Only in the case of *Gewalt* does Benjamin clarify his use of the term; but he does so by means of the other problematic terms—without, moreover, addressing the basic ambiguity in the German word that makes it difficult to translate into many other languages, including English. *Gewalt* means not only “violence” but also “power,” “control,” “dominion,” “force,” “supremacy,” and so forth. The ambiguity can be broadly captured as a polarity: either authorized power (*potestas*) or destructive force (*violentia*). Instead of disambiguating *Gewalt* by fixing its meaning in accor-

dance with these poles, Benjamin goes to the root of the ambiguity by specifying the category from which the concepts of both *potestas* and *violentia* derive.

The category is causality. Benjamin does not further elaborate on the causal character of *Gewalt* but instead reapplies the category of causality to the word itself. The phrase with which Benjamin qualifies *Gewalt* for its ensuing critique—“im prägnanten Sinne”—could be translated as either “in the compressive sense” or “in the impressive sense,” but because “compressive” is rarely used for linguistic units, “impressive” is probably the better option, and it will be the one used here. Understood as either “impressive” or “compressive,” *prägnant* is a subspecies of causality, hence a specification of the category to which *Gewalt* in general belongs. Violence, in brief, is always causal; it produces or induces a change, but in its “impressive” sense, so Benjamin contends, it does not designate a change in bodily or psychic composition but, rather, an intervention into the sphere of “moral relations” (*sittlichen Verhältnisse*). Both of these terms are as ambiguous as *Gewalt* is. With regard to the second, *Verhältnis*, and particularly its plural form, Benjamin often uses the term as an equivalent of a technical term of his day, *Sachverhalt*, which is often translated as “state of affairs.” Averse to technical terms of this type, Benjamin simply uses *Verhältnis* and *Verhältnisse* for both abstract relations between concepts and concrete relationships among individuals or groups. The advantage of this extensive use of a single term is that it helps determine a “logical space”—here called a “sphere”—through which *Gewalt* can be disambiguated: whenever something intervenes into the sphere of moral relations—whenever, in other words, the state of moral affairs is altered—there is violence in the relevant sense. As for the term *moral*, Benjamin emphasizes its ambiguity in his very first observation, where he identifies the two poles of the moral sphere: law and justice. The relation between these two concepts transcends the relation between means and ends—which, according to the opening observations, is fundamental and elemental only within the bounds of juridical reasoning. This means, in brief, that the relation between law and justice cannot be represented as a means (law) to an end (justice). And the observations implicitly yet pointedly deny that there is any third term between law and justice that would serve as a mediating element through which law leads to justice. The sphere of moral relations is bipolar, without an “equatorial” term—with the result that the word *moral* becomes ineluctably ambiguous, oscillating between “legal” and “just.”

The absence of a third term that would help structure the sphere of moral relations is decisive, so much so that this lack establishes the task of submitting violence to critique. Why would a concept that mediates between law and justice obviate the requirement that violence be subject to a critical examination? It is because this additional term would describe a path from one pole of the sphere to the other. And from within the context of modern German thought, several such concepts

readily present themselves. For instance, Benjamin could have appealed to a Hegelian tradition and broken up the sphere of moral relations into those of *Sittlichkeit* (ethical life) and those of *Moralität* (morality). Or he could have borrowed the basic schema underlying Hermann Cohen's *Ethik des reinen Willens* (*Ethics of Pure Will*) and treated "ethics" as a progressive unfolding of *Sittlichkeit* from its starting point in law (*Recht*). In either case—and there are, of course, countless others—Benjamin could have interpolated a term associated with "ethical life" between law and justice and thus determined the course of moral development in light of such mediating concepts. To this kind of "enlightenment," however, Benjamin says no. The sphere of moral relations is rigorously bipolar, and any attempt to identify a third term for the purpose of determining how moral agency discovers a motivation to move from one pole to the other is misguided, if not delusional. This insight into the shape of moral relations is the source of the theoretical data with which "Toward the Critique of Violence" begins.

Still another way of expressing the absence of a third term that helps define the sphere of moral relations can be drawn from Benjamin's own lexicon. In conjunction with his participation in a left-wing faction of the student movement, Benjamin wrote a number of essays, including one entitled "Moral Instruction" ("Sittliche Unterricht"), which revolves around Immanuel Kant's identification of the "good will" as the only unconditional good. The question that occupies Benjamin's essay is whether the educational process can be reformed in such a way that it promotes the ideal of a good will. His answer, in brief, is no, for, as he maintains, no mechanism can be devised for this purpose: "The lever for the management of moral education [*sittliche Erziehung*] is missing. Just as the pure and alone-valid moral law [*Sittengesetz*] is inaccessible, so the pure will is unapproachable for the educator."<sup>2</sup> The impossibility of devising a means to reform moral education so that it conforms to the Kantian ideal means, in systematic terms, that there is no third term mediating law and justice. At two points in "Toward the Critique of Violence" Benjamin briefly touches on the topic of education, both of which are predicated on the same assumption: education is not only *not* a matter of legal relations; it is also originally incompatible with law, even if it attracts legal interventions whenever its use of force is seen to challenge the monopoly on violence claimed by the state (see §§6, 18). However these remarks on education may be evaluated—and they have attracted some fierce opposition—they advance an argument that would be anathema to Hegel and Cohen alike: law has no "training" function; it does not, in short, forge a path to justice.<sup>3</sup>

In this way, however, Benjamin aligns the task of criticizing violence with Kant's last and most misunderstood contribution to moral theory, *The Metaphysics of Morals*. In both "Toward the Critique of Violence" and "Moral Instruction" Benja-

min briefly suggests that the two central works of Kantian ethics, the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*, are fatally flawed: in the first case, this is because Kant represents the “good will” in psychological terms;<sup>4</sup> in the second, it is because Kant identifies only a “minimum program” for morality in his famous formulations of the categorical imperative (§9). The opening observations of “Toward the Critique of Violence,” by contrast, reproduce the basic structure of *The Metaphysics of Morals*, which divides the sphere of moral relations into two poles, one identified with an inquiry into the concept of law, the other with an inquiry into the concept of virtue. Benjamin adopts this structure root and branch. In a retrospective comparison of the Kantian system with its Hegelian to Cohenian counterparts, the absence of a transition from the *Doctrine of Law* to the *Doctrine of Virtue* is astonishing: virtue, for Kant, contributes nothing to law, and law nothing to virtue. The absence of any relation between the two parts of *The Metaphysics of Morals* is also astonishing from the perspective of Kant’s late thought, which is otherwise concerned with “transitions” across gaps and gulfs. Thus, the *Third Critique* seeks to facilitate a transition from the domain governed by the law of freedom (morality) to the domain governed by the laws of mechanical causality (nature). Similarly, in the late 1790s, Kant produced draft after draft of what he sometimes called “the science of transitions,” which, by closing a gap he had discovered in his theoretical writings, would ultimately demonstrate the continuity between the transcendental unity of apperception and an as-yet undetermined “pure physics.”<sup>5</sup> With respect to the gap dividing the two “doctrines” that comprise *The Metaphysics of Morals*, by contrast, late Kant has nothing to say.<sup>6</sup> The absence of a transition between the *Doctrine of Law* and the *Doctrine of Virtue* is precisely what links Benjamin’s critical program with Kant’s: within the sphere of moral relations, there is no transition from the concept of right to that of justice.

In comparison with the fidelity with which Benjamin reproduces the structure of *The Metaphysics of Morals*, the modifications he makes to Kant’s system are relatively minor: one pole remains the same, while the other, which Kant identifies with virtue, is split apart and displaced. Instead of identifying the second pole with virtue per se, the first of Benjamin’s observations identifies a single virtue, namely justice, which can be understood as a subjective virtue or an objective condition. Benjamin does not resolve the long-standing ambiguity of the term *justice*, but he does displace all other virtues into the heart of culture — or, as Benjamin writes, “the culture of the heart” (§12). In the exercise of virtue, so he argues, following Kant, there is no question of law or legality. Benjamin’s abbreviated doctrine of virtue makes them into individual predispositions to “non-violent resolution of conflicts” (§12). Wherever virtue prevails, law is inoperative; wherever law is operative, there may be virtuous dispositions, but they are unable to develop and are thus effectively nullified.

Just as the absence of a third term mediating between law and justice becomes evident when Benjamin's opening observations are compared with Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* or Cohen's *Ethics of Pure Will*, so another missing element becomes legible when the observations are brought into relation with the full scope of Kant's metaphysical doctrines. The missing term is *nature*. Some dozen years before Kant combined the *Doctrine of Right* and the *Doctrine of Virtue* into his last metaphysical manifesto, he published a *Doctrine of Natural Science* that constructs nature in its entirety as a system of forces.<sup>7</sup> In the second paragraph of "Toward the Critique of Violence" Benjamin briefly reflects on the concept of nature but only from the perspective of modern natural law theory, which treats *Gewalt* as a natural force—and thus contributes nothing to the critique of violence in its impressive sense. The fact that the word *nature* does not appear within his initial observations does not mean, however, that the concept of nature is absent from his critical program; still less does it indicate that he naïvely adopts the then-standard academic distinction between the "natural" and "spiritual" sciences. When he determines violence in its impressive sense as the intervention into moral relations, it may seem as though he is excluding any use of the term *violence* in the context of natural events: a thunderstorm or earthquake, for example—precisely those eruptive events, incidentally, to which Kant alludes in his elucidation of the word *Gewalt* at the beginning of his analysis of the "dynamic" sublime (K 5:260; §28). This impression, however, is mistaken, for events of this kind enter into the sphere of moral relations under the rubric of *fate*—as actions of a Zeus or a Poseidon, for example. And the impossibility of excluding any event in principle from the sphere of moral relations leads to the fulcrum of Benjamin's revision of the Kantian critical program.

By defining violence in the impressive sense in terms of its effect on moral relations, Benjamin transforms it into the inverse of freedom in Kant's "cosmological" or "transcendental" sense (K A 533; B 561). Such freedom, according to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, consists in the ability of an agent to initiate a new causal sequence, where "causal" signifies the relation of ground to consequence, such that the latter is necessarily and universally connected with the former. The initial example of freedom in the transcendental sense involves the gravity-defying action of raising oneself up from a seated position (K A 451; B 479). Wherever the causality of freedom is actualized, there is an intervention into natural relations. Wherever, by contrast—and this is Benjamin's innovation—the causality of violence occurs, there is an intervention into moral relations. In neither case can any relation be excluded from the possibility of the relevant intervention. Just as the concept of freedom in the transcendental sense is the "keystone" (K 5:3) of Kantian critique, so the concept of violence in its impressive sense is the starting point of its Benjaminian revision. If this indeed captures the relation of one critical program to another; if, in other words, Benjamin's critique is the inversion of Kant's, whereby Kant's "free

intervention into natural relations” becomes Benjamin’s “violent intervention into moral relations,” then the following conclusion seems inevitable: there should be no violence in the impressive sense of the term. Whereas free beings *should* intervene into natural relations—this is what it means to be “free”—moral relations should remain as they are: free from interference. The critique of violence, so construed, expresses itself as a manifesto of absolute nonviolence. Just as, according to one of Benjamin’s more acerbic remarks, the discipline-defining phrase “moral philosophy” is a “stupid tautology,”<sup>8</sup> so it would be an equally stupid tautology to say that no one should interfere with moral relations, for to do so would be, by definition, immoral. And if the sphere of moral relations were not divided by the two terms identified in the initial observations, *law* and *justice*, or if these terms circumscribed a uniform field, such that one term led to the other by virtue of a mediating third, then the place for an act of violence would be reduced to a dimensionless point—a situation to which Benjamin alludes in a contemporaneous fragment, where the following proposition can be found: “In the coming [world], divine non-violence [*göttliche Gewaltlosigkeit*] is higher than divine violence.”<sup>9</sup>

The decisive question around which Benjamin’s critical program forms thus concerns the structure of the sphere in which the term *violence* in its impressive sense applies. As with Kant—and in contrast to what is suggested earlier concerning “the coming world”—the two poles circumscribing the sphere of moral relations do not form a homogenous field. For Kant, the two terms are indifferent with respect to each other; Benjamin hyperbolizes this indifference by making the terms mutually exclusive: where there is justice, there is no law, and where law, no justice. The doctrine of law, for its part, cannot simply stand on its own; on the contrary, it always needs assistance, and if help cannot be found in a doctrine of virtue—or, alternatively, in the practices of “ethical life,” or in the processes of “moral education,” or even, to use a more contemporary term, in “subjectivation”—then the only remaining candidate for its application or implementation is nature, understood as a system of forces. Kant recognizes this entanglement of law with nature; indeed, it is already discernible in the spatio-dynamic character of the word *right* (K 6:232–33). The entanglement of law with nature is, for Kant, the very reason that rights are independent of virtues, and virtues of rights: virtue is a matter of inner causality, which is governed by the teleological idea of perfection, whereas law depends on external causality under the ambiguous name of “coercion.” Instead of simply observing that legal force is intermittently dependent on physical force—for who would deny this?—Benjamin makes the more provocative and comprehensive proposal that the relation between legal and physical forces should be understood as a matter of fate, the sphere of which is at once “uncertain” and “ambiguous” (§15): uncertain because legal and physical force are never perfectly coincident; ambiguous because this noncoincidence permeates every feature of fate. The sphere of

fate is thus a parody of the moral sphere: whereas the latter is split into two mutually exclusive terms, the former attains a semblance of homogeneity by making all of its relations ambiguous—neither fully moral nor fully extramoral.

The primary theoretical datum with which Benjamin begins “Toward the Critique of Violence” is, in sum, this: the relation between the concept of law and the concept of justice is disjunctive. The eventual consequence of this datum is the emergence of a third term. This term is neither *ethics* nor *moral education*, which would mitigate the disjunctive character of the relation, nor is it *nature*, whose forces are brought into the service of law, but rather *myth*. As a third term, *myth* allows this Kierkegaardian-like “either/or” to be more precisely determined.<sup>10</sup> All physical boundaries are mythic, for in nature there are none; that is, there are no nontraversable borders on the surface of the earth, which, by virtue of its spherical shape, is finite yet unbounded. In other words, all boundaries are matters of mere stipulation—a “saying,” and hence a *muthos* in the original sense of the word, that lacks a grounding in “physical geography,” to use another of Kant’s technical terms. If a theoretical demonstration of the unnaturalness of all so-called natural boundaries is needed, there is no better document than the only text by Kant that Benjamin mentions in “Toward the Critique of Violence,” namely *Toward Eternal Peace*, whose concluding clause concerning the right of hospitality is predicated on the absence of any “natural” boundaries on the earth’s surface (K 8:363–68).<sup>11</sup> The point is not that all boundaries are artificial, for the term *artificial* suggests that the art in question is governed by a purpose, whereas boundaries, to the extent that they are matters of fate, are only ambiguously purposive. Nor would it be appropriate to invoke a Kantian term and describe boundary phenomena as “transcendental illusions,” which retain their function and significance despite a recognition of their irreality. Boundaries, for Benjamin, are neither simply artificial nor simply illusory; rather, they are mythic. Whoever transgresses a “natural” (read: *mythic*) boundary alters a nexus of relations. Such “unnatural” (read: *mythic*) alterations solicit fate, which makes every relation, including so-called natural relationships, ambiguous—bordering on the sphere of moral relations, to be sure, but remaining extramoral nevertheless.

Benjamin does not describe the following passage from the final paragraphs of his essay as an observation, but it offers an additional theoretical datum through which the sphere of moral relations can be more fully described:

The act of establishing boundaries is . . . highly significant for insight into law in another sense. Established [*Gesetzte*] and circumscribed boundaries remain, at least in primeval times, unwritten laws [*Gesetze*]. A human being can transgress such laws unawares and thereby succumb to expiation [*Sühne*]. For the encroachment of law



[*Eingriff des Rechts*], summoned by the violation of the unwritten and unknown law, is called expiation as distinct from punishment. (§16)

It is not an accident that Benjamin's elucidation of the term *expiation* recalls his definition of *violence*, for each of them is a "grasping into" (*eingreifen*) an alien terrain—whether as intervention or encroachment.<sup>12</sup> It would be a mistake to assume, however, that the point of Benjamin's new observation lies in a straightforward connection between "violence and the sacred," to borrow René Girard's phrase, for violence is associated here not so much with a sacral process as with a legal event, more exactly, with the expansion of law.<sup>13</sup> Under the cover of law—not by means of its physical protection but through its terminology or, perhaps more accurately, through its ideology—those who have transgressed an "unnatural" (and hence, mythic) boundary become "moralized," which is to say, "pietized." This is why the Latinate term *expiate* precisely captures the sense of *Sühne*, as Benjamin uses the term, for the *ex-* in *expiation* is a sign of completeness or thoroughness, and *pietas* is a term for civic-social dutifulness, governed by the gods who guard the termini of "civic" rule. Law makes those who have succumbed to fate "pious," regardless of their actions. This encroachment is not exactly an intervention into moral relations, much less violence, either in its law-positing or law-preserving form. The former, as Benjamin argues, requires a perceptible and indeed celebrated boundary; the latter is predicated on an established law, in the absence of which a term like *punishment* is invalid. Rather than being a form of violence in its own right, expiation is the "pietization" viz. moralization of ambiguous relations.

But—and this, of course, derives from the first of Benjamin's observations—moralization is as ambiguous as fate, for the poles circumscribing the sphere of moral relations are mutually repugnant. The encroachment of law must therefore be recognized as a withdrawal of justice. To express this process in a dramatic fashion: fate solicits law to save transgressors from ambiguous relations; but the salvation leaves them in as ambiguous a position as before—defined by legalized relations, to be sure, but for this reason, even further from justice. Only an intervention of an utterly different kind can dissolve the two types of ambiguity. To capture this dissolution Benjamin adopts a relatively rare German word, *Entsühnen*, and transforms its value, so that it signifies the very opposite of what it generally means. To the extent that *Entsühnen* is used at all—and it should be noted that the word is nowhere to be found, for instance, in Luther's translation of the Bible—it functions as a synonym of *Sühnen*. For Benjamin, however, they are antonyms.<sup>14</sup> *Entsühnen*, in other words, means neither "atonement" nor "expiation" but rather "de-atonement" or, better yet, "de-expiation." The transvaluations of *Sühnen* and *Entsühnen* correspond with each other: the former does not

designate the restoration of transgressors to their former state but rather the reassertion of the ambiguity from which they sought resolution; the latter designates the opposite. Expiation involves no violence in the impressive sense of the word, whereas “de-expiation”—however it may happen and from whatever perspective it may be seen—is unambiguously violent, for it intervenes into moral relations by delegitimizing them.<sup>15</sup>

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“The desert grows,” Friedrich Nietzsche writes in one of his late poems.<sup>16</sup> In the final pages of “Toward the Critique of Violence,” Benjamin can be seen to revise this famous apothegm: law encroaches. Like the spread of the “desert,” understood as an image of nihilism—and unlike both the positing and the preserving of law—the encroachment of law is a quiet affair. It creeps into those circumstances and situations in which relations verge on the extramoral and are thus seen as “fateful” or “natural.” “Toward the Critique of Violence” invites its readers to recognize in the emergence of all new relations, circumstances, and states of affairs a resurgence of fate, whose lack of clarity and univocity law promises to rectify. This expiatory allure of law is the danger. At those moments in which new relations are forming, law appears as salvation, and for this reason it can slyly encroach without any violence in the impressive sense of the word. But the encroachment of law is nevertheless always accompanied by violence in the colloquial sense of the word. This is why Benjamin associates expiation with bloodshed and de-expiation with its absence.

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#### Notes

1. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:179; §1; references hereafter are to the paragraphs in Benjamin, “Toward the Critique of Violence.”
2. Benjamin, “Sittliche Unterricht,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2:49.
3. See, for example, the contribution of Axel Honneth to *Benjamin-Handbuch*, esp. 208–9.
4. Benjamin, “Sittliche Unterricht,” 2:47.
5. Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 21:642; hereafter, K. All references to Kant are to this edition except in the case of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where references are to the first (“A”) and second (“B”) editions.

6. In contemporaneous writings, most notably the middle section of *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant proposes that certain advances in legality can lead by a circuitous way to a prognosis of moral progress; but the rigorous character of the doctrinal treatises require strict separation (K 7:85–89).
7. See Kant, *Metaphysical First Principles of Natural Science* (1786), which can be found in volume 4 of the Akademie edition.
8. Benjamin, “Ethics, Applied to History” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:93.
9. Benjamin, “1) World and Time,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:99.
10. On Benjamin’s use of the Kierkegaardian-inflected “either/or,” see especially his essay “The Religious Attitude of Youth,” where the following passage can be found: “The educational path of the young generation is meaningless without [religion]. It remains empty and agonizing without the place at which it bifurcates into a decisive either-or” (*Gesammelte Schriften* 2:73); see Fenves, “Completion Instead of Revelation.”
11. Benjamin may have wanted to reflect on Paul Scheerbart in the broader “Politics” project within which a revised version of “Toward the Critique of Violence” would have been a chapter. This is because Scheerbart’s “asteroid-novel,” *Lesabéndio*, provides a contemporary version of the “science fiction” that expands and revises the planetary, cosmic, and cosmopolitan perspectives that are uneasily integrated into *Toward Eternal Peace*.
12. It should be noted that Benjamin concludes his *Origin of the German Mourning Play* in the same spirit—by naming a certain kind of interference. With help from the last quotation in the book, he explains the enigmatic phrase *ponderación misteriosa* that serves as the title of its final section in the following manner: “the intervention of God [*das Eingreifen Gottes*] into the work of art” (*Gesammelte Schriften* 1:408).
13. See Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*.
14. Benjamin has a major predecessor in this transformation of *Entsühnen* from a synonym for *Sühnen* to its opposite, namely Goethe, especially in *Iphigenia auf Tauris*.
15. It is scarcely surprising that, shortly after completing this essay, Benjamin would turn to Goethe’s exhibition of a crumbling marriage in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*) for a further inquiry into the theory of myth. Unlike “Toward the Critique of Violence,” this essay is permeated by a moral or ethical moment that appears to be an independent pole of, or equatorial line across, the “sphere of moral relations.” This is because, briefly stated, the concept of nature under investigation in the essay is precisely Goethe’s, which assumes an ambiguously moral form, already named in the title of his novel, insofar as natural “relations” (“*Verwandtschaften*,” otherwise translated as “affinities”) are invested with the moral character of “choice” or “election.” To discuss the relation between Benjamin’s two major essays from the early 1920s would require more space than is available in an endnote; but at least this much is probably clear: *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* provides Benjamin with a “modular” version of a certain bourgeois-modern configuration of the “sphere of moral relations,” allowing him to undertake an intensive investigation into its disorienting topology
16. See Nietzsche, “Unter Töchtern der Wüste,” reprinted in *Sämtliche Werke*, 6:382.

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