

Carolin Duttlinger

**Rescue Narratives: Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* and
Benjamin's 'Das Taschentuch'**

Curiously, given the central place of storytelling in his own critical writings, Walter Benjamin as storyteller remain a largely ignored figure. Benjamin was a literary historian by training, and even after he left academia and embarked on the career of a freelance journalist he continues to write about individual authors and literary history more generally, thus creating a sense of continuity between the different parts of his diverse oeuvre. But Benjamin does not only write about literature; he also uses literary, and specifically narrative, techniques to present his ideas, to make phenomena and thought-processes ‘ästhetisch erfahrbar’.¹ Alexander Honold speaks of his ‘Lust am Weglassen und Hervorheben, am Licht- und Schattenwurf, an der dramaturgisch effektvollen Umstellung oder Sistierung von Zeitabläufen’.²

This passion really comes into its own in Benjamin’s own forays into creative writing, which resulted in his memoirs *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* (1932–38), but also in shorter pieces, largely written for newspapers and magazines, which range from travelogues and city portraits to riddles, aphorisms and novellas. Nadine Werner aptly notes that these seemingly minor texts contain ‘grundlegende theoretische Einsichten: Jeder noch so kleine, scheinbar unbedeutende Gegenstand ist Benjamin eine Spiegelscherbe des eigenen Werks, der eigenen Philosophie’.³

While Benjamin thus uses literary techniques in his critical writings, his literary texts are in turn sites of theoretical reflection. This cross-fertilization is exemplified by a novella, ‘Das Taschentuch’, which Benjamin wrote in 1932, probably during his stay in Ibiza between April until July 1932. It was published on 24 November of that year in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Where ‘Das Taschentuch’ features in scholarship, it is only mentioned in passing, usually as a precursor to his essay ‘Der Erzähler’ (1936).⁴ But this approach ignores the

¹ Alexander Honold, ‘Noch einmal: Erzählen als Wiederholung – Benjamins Wiederholung des Erzählens’, in Walter Benjamin, *Erzählen: Schriften zur Theorie der Narration und zur literarischen Prosa*, ed. by Alexander Honold (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2007), pp. 303–42 (p. 308).

² Honold, ‘Noch einmal’, p. 308.

³ Nadine Werner, ‘Zeit und Person’, in *Benjamin-Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, ed. by Burkhardt Lindner (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2006), pp. 3–8 (p. 5).

⁴ For Johanna M. Gelberg, the novella contains Benjamin’s thoughts on storytelling ‘in literarisierte Form’ (*Poetik und Politik der Grenze: Die Literatur der deutsch-deutschen Teilung seit 1945* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), p. 203), while Martin Jay calls ‘Das

interconnected character of Benjamin's writings, where themes and ideas reappear in unexpected places, and where any distinction between major and minor works is not only difficult but 'völlig hinfällig'.⁵

'Das Taschentuch' occupies a central, mediating place in Benjamin's work. It harks back to earlier texts, particularly to his essay 'Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften', written in 1921–22 and published in 1924–25, while at the same time prefiguring his more explicitly political thought of the 1930s. The result is a novella which fuses storytelling and theoretical reflection, but which also reveals some of the contradictions which beset Benjamin's engagement with literature.

A core concept in Benjamin's critical vocabulary is *Rettung*, rescue from (imminent) danger. In Jewish and Christian theology, the term is synonymous with salvation and redemption, and this meaning is carried through into the historical philosophy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (by Lessing and the early Romantics) and all the way into the Weimar Republic, which saw a revival of messianism of different kinds. Another tradition casts *Rettung* as a literary practice. In the Enlightenment, the term designates a particular kind of critical exercise, which aims to salvage past writers from prejudice and misunderstanding; the young Lessing, for instance, wrote five so-called *Rettungen*, in which he criticized the misappropriation of classical authors such as Horace.⁶

Benjamin takes his cue from Lessing's project; in his essays on literature he often tries to defend writers against neglect, misinterpretation, or ideological appropriation. This agenda

Taschentuch' an 'essay' (*Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), p. 332).

⁵ Burkhardt Lindner, 'Benjamin lesen...: Über die Konzeption des Handbuchs', in *Benjamin-Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, ed. by Burkhardt Lindner (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2006), pp. ix–xiii (p. xii).

⁶ See Heinrich Kaulen's detailed analysis of the term in Benjamin's work and in the history of thought and literature more generally. 'Rettung', in *Benjamins Begriffe*, ed. by Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla, 2 vols (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), II: pp. 619–64 (pp. 625–26).

informs the essays on Johann Peter Hebel and Robert Walser as well as his Baudelaire project, where *Rettung* already features prominently from the earliest drafts (GS, VII/2, p. 739).⁷

In *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *Rettung* is contrasted with *Würdigung*, appreciation, an approach which for Benjamin does not engage with the artwork as a singular and unique entity, but understands it as the product of tradition, a stance which implicitly reaffirms the course of history as inevitable and unchangeable.⁸ Benjamin's own agenda is to put past works in a dialectical relationship with the present, to expose their subversive potential and salvage those moments which resonate with the present.

The *Deutsches Wörterbuch* defines the verb *retten* as the response to a 'drohende oder schon hereingebrochene gefahr'.⁹ This notion of sudden, lethal danger features prominently in Benjamin's later, materialist writings, but its roots lie in a much earlier text, namely his 'Wahlverwandtschaften' essay. Here, he applies his method of critical *Rettung* to Goethe – an author who, on the face of it, does not stand in any need of such attention. Benjamin's intention, however, is to defend the novel against the interpretation by Friedrich Gundolf, dominant at the time, whom Benjamin accuses of ignoring both the experiences of past suffering that are inscribed into the novel and its utopian potential.¹⁰ His own goal is to salvage the novel from such heroizing interpretations; for him, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809) depicts four people whose lives are blighted and finally destroyed by their belief in the mythical, unfathomable power of fate.

Benjamin's particular twist is to read the novel's plot against that of the novella which is contained within it. The tale about 'Die wunderlichen Nachbarskinder' is recounted by the 'Engländer', a past acquaintance of Eduard's, in Part II of the novel. Benjamin reads it as an antidote to the rest of the novel; unlike the novel, with its obsession with the destructive

⁷ Benjamin's writings will be cited from the following edition: Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1972–1989). References will be given in the text, using the abbreviation 'GS' followed by volume and page number.

⁸ See Kaulen, 'Rettung', p. 633.

⁹ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1893), VIII: p. 826.

¹⁰ See Burkhard Lindner, 'Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften', in *Benjamin-Handbuch*, ed. by Burkhard Lindner, pp. 472–93 (pp. 479–80).

power of fate, it centres on the notion of salvation, born out of an act of *Rettung* (GS, I/1, p. 171).

An unnamed boy and girl have grown up as neighbours and are destined to eventually marry each other. But even before she enters adolescence, the girl develops a growing aversion to the boy, and so the marriage plans are discarded. He goes off to make his career in the army; she stays behind and gets engaged to another man. When her former neighbour returns a decorated officer, she discovers that she has always loved him but sees no way of reversing her decision; on a boat trip, which her childhood friend has organized for her and her fiancé, she decides to drown herself to punish him for his indifference. Throwing him a wreath of flowers, she exclaims:

Nimm dies zum Andenken! [...]. Störe mich nicht! rief er ihr entgegen, indem er den Kranz auffing: ich bedarf aller meiner Kräfte und meiner Aufmerksamkeit. Ich störe dich nicht weiter, rief sie: du siehst mich nicht wieder! Sie sprach's und eilte nach dem Vorderteil des Schiffs, von da sie ins Wasser sprang. (FA, VIII, p. 476)

He has no time to hand over the helm to the old captain; 'das Schiff strandet, und in eben dem Augenblick, die lästigsten Kleidungsstücke wegwerfend, stürzte er sich ins Wasser und schwamm der schönen Feindin nach' (FA, VIII, p. 476). The water, however, is 'ein freundliches Element für den, der damit bekannt ist und es zu behandeln weiß. Es trug ihn, und der geschickte Schwimmer beherrschte es'. Having pulled her out of the river, he carries her to the cottage of a newly married young couple, where he strips her of her wet clothes; as the narrator coyly remarks: 'Hier überwand die Begierde zu retten jede andere Betrachtung', but then the narrative continues: 'Nichts ward versäumt, den schönen halbstarren nackten Körper wieder ins Leben zu rufen' (FA, VIII, p. 477). The narrator's claim regarding the hero's motivation is arguably contradicted by the subsequent sentence, which lingers over the sight of this body in some detail, taking time to record its appearance in an adjectival tricolon. Indeed, this latently erotic scene has a powerful effect, for when she awakes, the two embrace and are (re-)united. They subsequently appear, dressed in the wedding clothes of their hosts, to their astonished families, who at first do not even recognize them. 'Gebt uns Euren Segen! riefen beide [...], und wer hätte den versagen können' (FA, VIII, p. 478).

Rettung in Goethe's novella is no theoretical concept but a real event, the successful response to grave danger. Benjamin in his essay uses it in a more abstract, structural sense, when he speaks of the 'rettende Korrespondenzen, in denen mit unvergleichlich strenger Genauigkeit die zart gebildete Novelle dem Roman entspricht' (GS, I/1, p. 196). For him, the links between novel and novella are in themselves 'rettend' in that they open up a perspective

beyond the novel's desolate events. In particular, he takes this successful rescue narrative as the counterpoint to the tragic death of baby Otto, who drowns in the lake while in Otilie's charge.

In Benjamin's essay, *Rettung* thus stands for far more than the saving of an individual life. It stands, as Heinrich Kaulen writes, for the hope 'auf eine Unterbrechung aller mythischen Gewalt, auf ein "Zerreißen" des Schicksals'.¹¹ Even though *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* ends disastrously for all of its protagonists, Benjamin salvages a positive conclusion for his own reading, whose final sentence reads: 'Nur um der Hoffnungslosen ist uns die Hoffnung gegeben' (GS, I/1, p. 201). This paradoxical notion of hope for the hopeless, hope in the face of hopelessness, is an idea which he will revisit a decade later in a different, a literary register.

As Goethe's novel shows, *Rettung* can be heroically successful, but it can also fail, with disastrous consequences. Whatever the outcome, it is a motif with great dramatic potential, which is exploited by Goethe and his predecessors. One of the text's precursors is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's novel *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), in which Julie rescues her son Marcellin from drowning but then falls ill and dies herself, albeit in a serene state. Another take on this version is Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's novel *Paul et Virginie* (1788), whose two protagonists grow up together on the remote island of Mauritius. Before they get married Virginie is sent to France and introduced to polite society. Upon her return, her ship gets into a storm, but rather than take off her clothes to swim to shore, she chooses death over the shame of being seen naked.¹²

¹¹ Kaulen, 'Rettung', p. 632.

¹² For a detailed comparison of *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* and these French predecessors, see Anneliese Botond, '*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*': *Transformation und Kritik der neuen Héloïse* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006). Benjamin was familiar with both texts; he mentions *La nouvelle Héloïse* in *Deutsche Menschen*, his annotated anthology of letters, which he published in 1936 under the pseudonym Detlev Holz (GS, iv/1, p. 165), and his collection of children's books contains an 1858 edition of *Paul et Virginie*, published in the series Bibliothèque de la jeunesse chrétienne. See *Die Kinderbuchsammlung Walter Benjamin* (Frankfurt/Main: Stadt- und Universitätsbibliothek, 1987), p. 36.

Goethe's 'Wunderliche Nachbarskinder' novella is thus part of a much longer tradition of rescue narratives, and in this way reflects Benjamin's own conception of storytelling not as original invention but as the reworking of an existing tradition. And so it is only fitting that with his 1932 novella 'Das Taschentuch' Benjamin adds to the tradition of the rescue narrative, in a text which combines literary adaptation and narratological reflection.

As already mentioned, 'Das Taschentuch' is usually treated as a precursor to Benjamin's more famous 1936 essay 'Der Erzähler', subtitled 'Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows'. The novella does indeed anticipate some of the essay's core arguments, specifically its claim that the art, and craft, of storytelling is in decline, precipitated by wider socio-cultural change. In the nineteenth century, oral storytelling is replaced by the bourgeois genre of the novel, which is designed to be read in a solitude. The novel in turn paves the way for the print media, where storytelling gives way to short-lived sensationalism.

This, in a nutshell, is the argument of 'Der Erzähler', a text roughly contemporaneous with (the early versions of) his essay on 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit' (1935–39), in which Benjamin pursues a radically different agenda. Instead of a critique of the mass media combined with nostalgia for a pretechnological age, it emphatically embraces of the technical media as a vehicle of progress, and equally emphatically rejects the traditional, 'auratic' work of art for being anachronistically rooted in ritual and tradition. These two contrasting assessments of modern culture point to a fundamental ambivalence at the heart of Benjamin's thinking or, more aptly perhaps, a Janus-faced perspective, which looks at tradition with a mixture of nostalgia and critique.

Here, it is no coincidence that Benjamin's nostalgia is reserved for the *literary* part of this tradition. Although he also wrote on modernist writers such as Robert Walser, Kafka and Döblin, he was very fond of nineteenth-century authors, particularly of prose writers such as Stifter, Hebel, Keller, Gotthelf and Leskov, whose texts stay close to, and arguably simulate, an oral tradition. Indeed, for Benjamin the storyteller is more than a function of the text; he is an embodied, real-life figure – either a member of the local community, '[jemand] der, redlich sich nährend, im Lande geblieben ist und dessen Geschichten und Überlieferungen kennt', or else a traveller, for instance a 'handeltreibende[r] Seemann' (GS, II/2, p. 440). This latter figure takes the stage in 'Das Taschentuch'.

Although Benjamin's novella only runs to five printed pages, it is a complex and at times confusing tale, which oscillates between different narrative levels and voices. The story is written in the manner of a classical *Rahmennovelle*. The narrator of the frame narrative is an unnamed traveller who journeys from Ibiza to Barcelona. On board the *Bellver*, 'ein schönes, geräumiges Motorschiff', he meets 'Kapitän O... [...], den ersten und vielleicht letzten Erzähler, auf den ich in meinem Leben gestoßen bin' (GS, IV/2, p. 741). But having introduced this great storyteller, the external narrator does not immediately hand over the reins to him, and instead embarks on some lengthy reflections about the decline of storytelling, which anticipate the argument of 'Der Erzähler'; indeed, the novella's opening question – 'Warum es mit der Kunst, Geschichten zu erzählen, zu Ende geht' (GS, IV/2, p. 741) – is recast as a statement of fact – 'daß es mit der Kunst des Erzählens zu Ende geht' (GS, II/2, p. 438) – in that essay. This decline is attributed to a more general social change: 'auch darum geht es mit der Gabe, Geschichten zu erzählen, zu Ende: es wird nicht mehr gewoben und gesponnen, gebastelt und geschabt, während man ihnen lauscht. Kurz: Arbeit, Ordnung und Unterordnung muß sein, wo eine Geschichte gedeihen sollt' (GS, IV/2, p. 741). Storytelling is described as a gift, but also as something organic that flourishes ('gedeihen') in the right setting. Indeed, the text immediately adds further definitions – storytelling as an art and as 'eine Würde, wenn nicht, wie im Orient, ein Amt' (GS, IV/2, p. 741). The text's description of storytelling is evocative but rather overdetermined, while the description of a community of manual labourers is clearly idealized, a nostalgic backward projection, which serves as the backdrop for the text's critique of modernity.

Rooted in this traditional setting, storytelling is itself implicitly cast, not (only) as an art but as a craft, and indeed, the theme of materiality reappears a little later on in the text, when the narrator dwells on two objects associated with the Captain and his tale. The first is the Captain's pipe, which used to belong to his grandfather. The narrator calls this object a 'talisman' of storytelling and likens it to another object: a leather belt which is literally worn to pieces, and in the process become imbricated with stories: 'irgendwann hat im Lauf der Zeit eine Geschichte sich an ihn angesetzt'. As he adds, 'Die Pfeife des Kapitäns mußte derer schon viele kennen' (GS, IV/2, p. 742).

So far, the text's reflection on storytelling have come from the external narrator, but then the internal narrator, the Captain, also adds to this discourse. Anticipating the 'Erzähler' essay's critique of modern news reporting, he declares 'Aus den Zeitungen [...] kann man gar nichts erfahren; die Leute wollen einem ja alles erklären' (GS, IV/2, p. 743). The external narrator concurs, noting that 'die halbe Kunst der Berichterstattung' involves 'sie von Erklärungen

freizuhalten', while praising the tales of old, 'die das Geschehen sozusagen trocken legten, indem sie alle psychologische Begründung und alle Meinung daraus abfließen ließen' (GS, IV/2, p. 743). He concludes that the Captain's own stories comply with this convention, for they steer clear of superfluous explanations, 'ohne, wie mir schien, darum zu verlieren'. Of these numerous stories, the external narrator chooses one to illustrate his and the Captain's preference for tales without (psychological) explanation.

Since the external narrator has dwelt on the belt and pipe, the reader is likely to look out for these objects within the story, expecting them to form a bridge between external and internal narration. This expectation is disappointed. The novella does indeed feature a significant object, one which structures the plot in the manner of Paul Heyse's famous 'falcon',¹³ but it is not one anticipated in the frame narrative. This object is the titular handkerchief.

Handkerchiefs feature across European literature and particularly drama, whether in a more symbolic capacity, as in Molière's *Tartuffe*, or as a motor of the plot, as in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Benjamin's handkerchief forms part of this tradition. Like its predecessors, it is an emotionally and erotically charged object, which forges a connection between the two protagonists. Like Desdemona's handkerchief, it is embroidered – not with strawberries but with 'ein dreigeteiltes Wappen mit drei Sternen in jedem Feld' (GS, IV/2, p. 744). This starred coat of arms is the emblem of an older age, evoking chivalry and family tradition. More specifically, it makes this handkerchief a very Benjaminian object. The symmetrically arranged stars can be described as a constellation, a prominent term in Benjamin's thought, where it is used to describe the relationship between the relationship between a set of concepts or ideas, which do not form part of a conceptual hierarchy or philosophical system but interact with each other in a looser, mutual and more associative way. The stars embroidered on the handkerchief implies that the significance of objects is not revealed in a linear kind of reading, but by means of a thinking in constellations, the '*rettende Korrespondenzen*', of which Benjamin speaks in his Goethe essay. His novella revisits and adapts the story of 'Die wunderlichen Nachbarskinder', and it does so in a manner which echoes and develops his own argument in the 'Wahlverwandtschaften' essay.¹⁴ In particular,

¹³ Paul Heyse, *Deutscher Novellenschatz*, ed. by Paul Heyse and Hermann Kurz (Munich: Oldenbourg, [1871]), I: pp. vii–xx.

¹⁴ Richard Faber briefly touches upon the parallels between the two texts, which are connected by the theme of *Rettung*. '*Sagen lassen sich die Menschen nichts, aber erzählen lassen sie sich alles*': *Über Grimm-Hebelsche Erzählung, Moral und Utopie in Benjaminscher Perspektive* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2002), p. 31.

his story develops the theme of rescue in the face of grave danger, even hopelessness, in a way which makes it resonate with Benjamin's own times.

The handkerchief belongs to a beautiful young woman, whom the Captain met as a young officer, when he was serving on an ocean liner travelling from North America to Germany. The text tells us nothing about her past, her background or even her nationality. She remains nameless and is variously referred to as 'die junge Frau', 'das Mädchen' and 'die Fremde' (GS, IV/2, pp. 743–44). She only gets to utter two words in the entire story, two instances of 'Danke', which link two very different incidents: one commonplace, the other highly dramatic.

The first time the officer makes contact with the young woman, he performs a minor act of gallantry when he picks up her handkerchief. As he does so, he notices the embroidered crest, which he calls a 'Zeichen', and declares himself struck, 'frappiert', by this sight – arguably displacing his response to its owner onto this object. The young woman's response is equally loaded, at least in the words of the narrator: 'Einmal, als ich ihr ein Taschentuch aufhob [...] habe ich sie "Danke" sagen hören mit einem Ausdruck, als hätte ich ihr das Leben gerettet' (GS, IV/2, p. 744). Her response gives a foretaste of the dramatic climax. First, however, the officer witnesses a strange scene. On the penultimate day of the journey, the young woman is seen throwing a 'Schwarm von Zetteln und Papieren' (GS, IV/2, p. 744) into the ocean from the sun deck; his 'Gefühl der Beklemmung' turns out to be justified. As the ship is entering Bremerhaven, the officer's attention is absorbed by the landing manoeuvre

als mit einem Mal ein vielstimmiger Schrei sich erhob. Ich wandte mich um, und augenblicklich sah ich, daß die Fremde verschwunden war; an der Bewegung der Menge war abzulesen, daß sie sich hinabgestürzt hatte. Jeder Rettungsversuch war aussichtslos. Hätte man die Maschine selbst augenblicklich abstoppen können – der Schiffsrumpf war vom Quai nicht mehr als drei Meter entfernt und seine Bewegung war unaufhaltsam. Wer dazwischen geriet, war verloren. (GS, IV/2, p. 744)

The shallow river of Goethe's novella has become the Atlantic Ocean, his 'wohlausgeschmücktes Schiff' (FA, VIII, p. 475) an ocean liner. And even though Goethe's shallow river is described as 'ein gefährliches Fahrwasser' in which to steer a ship, its dangers are dwarfed by Benjamin's lethal combination of nature and technology. The narrator of 'Das Taschentuch' declares the situation to be hopeless, and yet,

Da ereignete sich das Unwahrscheinliche: Es fand sich einer, der den ungeheuerlichen Versuch unternahm. Man sah ihn, jeden Muskel angespannt, die Augenbrauen in eins gezogen, als wenn er zielen wollte, von der Reling springen, und während – zum

Entsetzen aller Beiwohnenden – der Dampfer seiner ganzen Länge nach steuerbord beilegte, kam an Backbord, das so verlassen war, daß man ihn anfangs nicht einmal bemerkte, der Retter, in seinem Arm das Mädchen, in die Höhe. Er hatte in der Tat gezielt und sie – genau, nach seiner ganzen Schwere, auf die andere stürzend, sie mit sich in die Tiefe reißend, unterm Kiel des Schiffes wieder in die Höhe tauchend – an die Oberfläche getragen. (GS, IV/2, p. 744)

Here, a comparison of the two texts again reveals both similarities and differences. Goethe's hero jumps into the river without hesitation, though he takes the time to remove 'die lästigsten Kleidungsstücke' (FA, VIII, p. 476); Benjamin's narrative, in contrast, lingers on the moment before the plunge, freezing the image of the rescuer's pose and expression. The text emphasizes the physicality of this leap: the tensing of the muscles, the concentration in the man's face, the heaviness of his body. As the repeated verb *zielen* implies, the body becomes an instrument, a weapon in the fight against nature and technology. This *Rettung* has both an instinctive and a deliberate component. The rescuer takes the plunge *despite* the hopelessness of the situation, and he succeeds against all odds. It is only with hindsight that the woman's response to this leap is recounted by the narrator: "“Als ich sie so hielt”, sagte er [the rescuer] später zu mir, “hat sie ‘Danke’ geflüstert, als hätte ich ihr ein Taschentuch aufgehoben”" (GS, IV/2, p. 744). In a chiasmic inversion, her response harks back to the earlier incident with the handkerchief, which had in turn anticipated the saving of her life.

Another notable element in this scene is the change in narrative perspective. The internal narrator recounts the moment of rescue as it was subsequently described to him by the story's hero, thereby introducing another narrative voice into his story. Or so it seems on first reading. In fact, however, Benjamin here performs a narrative sleight of hand. The leap into the water is described from the detached perspective of an onlooker, whom the reader assumes to be the young officer, and concludes with the rescuer's first-hand testimony. In fact, however, this testimony does not add a new narrative voice, but results from the splitting of the existing one. Put differently, the person who leaps into the water is none other than the young officer, the story's internal narrator. The identity of hero and narrator is only revealed right at the end of the novella, when the external narrator resumes his narration. As his ship departs from Barcelona, he discovers the Captain among the people on the quay:

Grüßend erhob er die Hand, ich schwenkte die meine. Als ich das Glas von neuem an die Augen setze, hatte er ein Taschentuch entfaltet und winkte. Deutlich gewahrte ich in einer Ecke das Zeichen. Ein dreigeteiltes Wappen mit drei Sternen in jedem Feld. (GS, IV/2, p. 745)

In the hand of the Captain, the handkerchief bridges the gap between external and internal narration, revealing the Captain's younger self to be the hero of his own story. His role in this drama is initially concealed by the narrative:

Ich wandte mich um, und augenblicklich sah ich, daß die Fremde verschwunden war; an der Bewegung der Menge war abzulesen, daß sie sich hinabgestürzt hatte. [...] Da ereignete sich das Unwahrscheinliche: Es fand sich einer, der den ungeheuerlichen Versuch unternahm. Man sah ihn, jeden Muskel angespannt [...]. (GS, IV/2, p. 744; my emphasis)

At the decisive moment, the focalization shifts from the first person to an impersonal 'man', reflecting the perspective of the crowd of onlookers. The actual experience of taking the plunge is omitted from the narrative; the only recounted emotion is the 'Entsetzen aller Beiwohnenden'.

'Das Taschentuch' considerably ups the stakes on Goethe's novella, pitting its hero not only against the elements but against the relentless momentum of technology. This makes the officer's leap into the water much more dramatic, his success an astonishing feat. Despite the concluding twist, however, the story's conclusion is somewhat underwhelming. Benjamin's hero is left with nothing but the handkerchief; no romance seems to have blossomed out of this incident. Goethe's saviour, in contrast, is rewarded first with an erotic sight (although the narrative underplays this moment) and then with marriage.

Read side by side, Benjamin's story thus appears the more dramatic but also the more bathetic of the two. On closer inspection, however, this opposition is cast into doubt.

Goethe's novella seems to end happily for its two protagonists, but once it is read within the context of the novel, it appears in more ambivalent light.

After the Engländer has finished his story, Charlotte leaves the room much moved; it turns out, she is familiar with the recounted events:

Diese Begebenheit hatte sich mit dem Hauptmann und einer Nachbarin wirklich zugetragen, zwar nicht ganz wie sie der Engländer erzählte, doch war sie in den Hauptzügen nicht entstellt, nur im Einzelnen mehr ausgebildet und ausgeschmückt, wie es dergleichen Geschichten zu gehen pflegt, wenn sie erst durch den Mund der Menge und sodann durch die Phantasie eines geist- und geschmackreichen Erzählers durchgehen. Es bleibt zuletzt meist alles und nichts wie es war. (FA, VIII, p. 479)

In a twist which resembles the ending of 'Das Taschentuch', the Hauptmann is revealed to be involved in the 'Begebenheit' recounted by the Engländer. But while in Benjamin's text, this revelation marks the text's conclusion, in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, it opens up all sorts of questions.

First of all, is the Hauptmann's role on the novella that of the former childhood friend, or the more modest part of the fiancé, who is eventually cast aside? The reference to the young woman as his 'Nachbarin' suggests the former.¹⁵ But if he is indeed the novella's hero, why does he reappear in the novel a single man? The Hauptmann is not married, and he does not seem to be widowed, a state which would surely be mentioned in a novel featuring two explicitly widowed protagonists. Though a wedding seemed imminent at the end of the novella, with the two protagonists already dressed for the occasion, this wedding apparently did not take place, raising two possible scenarios. Either the couple chose for whatever reason (a rekindled disagreement, their parents' dissent) not to get married, or could not do so.¹⁶ For in fact there is another, darker explanation for the gulf between the two narratives, one which is suggested by the novel's complex network of internal 'Korrespondenzen', a structural logic already highlighted by Benjamin, who however draws from it a very different conclusion.

A look at the rest of the novel does indeed reveal the Hauptmann to be associated with rescue missions from early on. Soon after his arrival, he begins to help Charlotte and Eduard with their project of modernizing the estate. Given the numerous 'Teiche, Gewässer und Wasserwerke', they follow his recommendation and acquire 'alles was zur Rettung der Ertrunkenen nötig sein möchte'. In this context, Eduard remarks 'daß ein solcher Fall in dem

¹⁵ Another possible inspiration for the novella, and one which prefigures this ambiguity, is an episode recorded in Goethe's *Italienische Reise*, where he records the case of a woman who is saved after falling into the water. Goethe notes various factors which make this incident 'verwickelt und interessant [...], es blieb zweifelhaft, ob sie sich in's Wasser gestürzt, um den Tod zu suchen, so wie auch, welcher von ihren Verehrern, der Begünstigte oder Versmähte, sich zu ihrer Rettung gewagt' (WA, I, XXXII, p. 124).

¹⁶ Niedermeier speculates that 'der Hauptmann zwar der geschickte Schwimmer der Novelle war, er aber nicht vermögend gewesen ist, und deshalb das Liebespaar nicht den Segen der Welt erhalten hat'. Michael Niedermeier, *Das Ende des Idylle: Symbolik, Zeitbezug, 'Gartenrevolution' in Goethes Roman 'Die Wahlverwandtschaften'* (Berlin: Lang, 1992), p. 96.

Leben seines Freundes auf die seltsamste Weise Epoche gemacht'. The Hauptmann stays silent and seems to fend off 'eine[] traurige[] Erinnerung' (FA, VIII, pp. 297–98).

Even before he is revealed to be the hero of the novella, the Hauptmann then gets to show off his rescuing credentials when during the celebration to mark Otilie's birthday and the anniversary of the tree planting, a boy falls into the lake:

Des Hauptmanns Entschluß war gefaßt, er warf die Oberkleider weg, aller Augen richteten sich auf ihn, und seine tüchtige kräftige Gestalt flößte jedermann Zutrauen ein; aber ein Schrei der Überraschung drang aus der Menge hervor, als er sich ins Wasser stürzte. Jedes Auge begleitete ihn, der als geschickter Schwimmer den Knaben bald erreichte und ihn, jedoch für tot, an den Damm brachte. (FA, VIII, pp. 369–70)

This rescue scene, which emphasizes the rescuer's strong body, the dramatic pause before the jump and the reaction of the crowd, is much closer to Benjamin's narrative than the equivalent passage in the 'Nachbarskinder' novella, where the jump into the water is described almost in passing. The boy, who seems to be dead, is soon revived by the 'Chirurgus', an expert in resuscitation.

The memory of this successful rescue scene comes to haunt Otilie when she tries, all alone on the lake, to save the drowned baby:

Sie sucht Hülfe bei sich selbst. So oft hatte sie von Rettungen Ertrunkener gehört. Noch am Abend ihres Geburtstages hatte sie es erlebt. Sie entkleidet das Kind und trocknet's mit ihrem Musselgewand. Sie reißt ihren Busen auf und zeigt ihn zum erstenmal dem freien Himmel; zum erstenmal drückt sie ein Lebendiges an ihre reine nackte Brust, ach! und kein Lebendiges. (FA, VIII, p. 949)¹⁷

Otilie tries, but fails, to bring the baby back to life: 'Die kalten Glieder des unglücklichen Geschöpfs verkälten ihren Busen bis ins innerste Herz. Unendliche Tränen entquellen ihren Augen und erteilen der Oberfläche des Erstarrten einen Schein von Wärm' und Leben' (FA, VIII, p. 494).

¹⁷ The biographical precedents for the story include a 1774 accident, when a boy drowns in the river Lahn, recounted by Goethe in a letter to Sophie la Roche of 31 July 1774 (WA, IV, II, p. 181) and Christel von Laßberg's suicide by drowning in the river Ilm on 17 January 1778. See Ulrike Enke and Manfred Wezel, 'Goethe und die Anatomie: Wißbegierde contra Menschlichkeit – Goethes ambivalentes Verhältnis zur Anatomie in seiner Dichtung', *Goethe-Jahrbuch*, 115 (1998), 155–70 (165).

This scene can be read, with Benjamin, as the tragic counterpoint to the two successful rescue narratives which both involve the Hauptmann. It can, however, be read in a different light: not as the inverse of that scene but as its echo and counterpart. For indeed, when the rescuer in Goethe's novella carries his 'schöne Beute' to shore, he discovers that 'kein Lebenshauch war in ihr zu spüren'. No physician comes his aid; once at the couple's house, he, like Ottilie, strips the lifeless body to warm it by the fire: 'Nichts ward versäumt, den schönen halbstarren nackten Körper wieder ins Leben zu rufen' (FA, VIII, p. 477). The holding of the cold, naked body pulled from the water is the exact mirror image of Ottilie holding the naked corpse to her maidenly breast. What fails to yield any response in the novel is successful in the novella, a turn of events perhaps owed to the Hauptmann's greater expertise or to his quicker intervention. In any case, the success of his efforts is related in the most cursory of terms. The narrator drily concludes: 'Es gelang'.

After the Engländer has finished, the novel's narrator immediately relativizes his account. Alluding to Charlotte's knowledge, he remarks that the recounted events happened 'nicht ganz wie sie der Engländer erzählte', but have been distorted by 'die Phantasie eines geist- und geschmackreichen Erzählers' (FA, VIII, p. 479). Indeed, even the novella's internal narrator seems strangely apologetic about his own happy tale, casting doubt on the verisimilitude of its conclusion:

Sich vom Wasser zur Erde, vom Tode zum Leben, aus dem Familienkreise in eine Wildnis, aus der Verzweiflung zum Entzücken, aus der Gleichgültigkeit zur Neigung, zur Leidenschaft gefunden zu haben, alles in einem Augenblick – der Kopf wäre nicht hinreichend, das zu fassen, er würde zerspringen oder sich verwirren. Hiebei muß das Herz das beste tun, wenn eine solche Überraschung ertragen werden soll. (FA, VIII, p. 478)

While the novella's rescue scene resembles the novel's tragic climax down to specific details, its narrator presents this happy outcome as an unlikely conclusion. The described chain of events, he suggests, exceeds reason, and requires 'das Herz', that is, a leap of faith, to be accepted. Put differently, Goethe's tale is driven not by the laws of verisimilitude, but by wishful thinking. But if the rescue scene bears all the hallmarks of a fantasy, it may conceal very different idea – 'der entsetzliche Gedanke, daß vielleicht gerade das Entscheidende an der Geschichte dieser wunderbaren Rettung nicht so war, wie es im Text stehenbleibt'.¹⁸

¹⁸ Honold, *Der Leser*, p. 143. This interpretation is shared by Wolf Kittler, 'Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften: Sociale Verhältnisse symbolisch dargestellt', in *Goethes*

Instead of his future bride, the rescuer might be left holding, like Otilie, a corpse. From lacking all signs of life, the body of the rescued young woman goes to being ‘halbstarr’, on the way to being revived – though this word can also be read to describe the onset of *rigor mortis*. The latter meaning fits in with the rest of the novel, where Eduard makes dark hints, and where the Hauptmann reappears as a single man haunted by sad memories. Indeed, that the Hauptmann’s youthful rescue mission ended in disaster is already indicated early on in the novel, when he is called a specialist in the ‘Rettung der Ertrunkenen’ (FA, VIII, p. 297). This paradoxical phrase hints at the dark reality concealed within Goethe’s novella. Like baby Otto, the subject of this attempted *Rettung* may be beyond help.

In a reversal of Benjamin’s notion of ‘rettende Korrespondenzen’ (GS, I/1, p. 196), the ‘Nachbarskinder’ novella might offer no redeeming alternative, but might instead point back ‘zum traumatischen Kern der gesamten Narration’.¹⁹ In this reading, novella and novel are mirror images of each other, even if they illustrate different responses to trauma – flight into fantasy in the one case, oblivion through self-annihilation in the other.

Benjamin’s ‘Wahlverwandtschaften’ essay, however, does not engage with these hints and ambiguities. It takes the novella’s rescue narrative at face value, and reads the novella as the redeeming ‘Gegenbild zum Roman’.²⁰ This interpretation is based on some significant

‘Wahlverwandtschaften’: *Kritische Modelle und Diskursanalysen zum Mythos Literatur*, ed. by Norbert Bolz (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981), pp. 230–59 (p. 233); and by Friedrich A. Kittler, *Dichter, Mutter, Kind* (Munich: Fink, 1991), p. 130.

¹⁹ Helmut Hühn, “‘Einsicht in einen Lichtkern erlösenden Gehalts’: Benjamins Wahlverwandtschaften-Essay im Spiegel des Goethe-Forschung’, in *Benjamins ‘Wahlverwandtschaften’: Zur Kritik einer programmatischen Interpretation*, ed. by Helmut Hühn, Jan Urbich and Uwe Steiner (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2015), pp. 319–42 (p. 330).

²⁰ Wolfgang Bunzel, “‘Jenes gewaltsame Verkennen’: Maskeraden der Gefühle, soziale Normierungen und die Glaubwürdigkeit des Erzählers: Goethes Novelle “Die wunderlichen Nachbarskinder”’, *Jahrbuch des freien deutschen Hochstifts* (2006), 101–32 (pp. 110–11). Gerhard Neumann similarly reads the novella as a ‘zweite Geburt aus dem natürlichen Element des Wassers in zurück in die Gesellschaft’. Gerhard Neumann, “‘Wunderliche Nachbarskinder’: Zur Instanziierung von Wissen und Erzählen in Goethes

omissions. For all the emphasis which he places on the novella, Benjamin pays scant attention to the actual text, from which he only cites a single sentence: ‘Hier überwand die Begierde zu retten jede andere Betrachtung’ (GS, I/1, p. 196). Commenting on the novella’s conclusion, moreover, Benjamin claims that its protagonists remain before the reader’s eye, ‘schwächer und stummer, doch in voller Lebensgröße’, before they eventually disappear ‘unter dem Bogen einer letzten rhetorischen Frage gleichsam in der unendlich fernen Perspektive’ (GS, I/1, p. 171). In fact, one of them does not disappear but is very much present within novel, though by ignoring the postscript to the novella, Benjamin misses this connection.

Indeed, he ignores not only the textual evidence but also the references to it in Goethe scholarship. Benjamin accuses the French critic André François-Poncet of ignoring novella’s central role ‘als Keimzelle des Romans’ (GS, I/3, p. 839) but in turn ignores François-Poncet’s perceptive remark that, having left the Hauptmann ‘aux bras de son ancienne ennemie’ (in the arms of his former enemy), the reader encounters him in the novel as a single man, without being told ‘par suite de quel nouveau drame son bonheur a été brisé’ (by which new drama his happiness has been shattered).²¹

In the case against Benjamin, these various oversights amount to a serious charge, raising the question why he pursued his interpretation so doggedly, in spite of all evidence to the contrary. Benjamin’s aim of rebutting Gundolf’s reading with a ‘strong’ interpretation of his own certainly played a role, but this question also leads back to the place of *Rettung* in his thought. Unlike more hard-headed critics, who have been quick to spot the inconsistencies between novel and novella, Benjamin is invested in the notion of rescue, which underpins his entire critical oeuvre. His interpretation of Goethe’s novella reflects its intellectual significance, as does his own literary adaptation. This notion gains an additional, political charge in Benjamin’s historical writings of the 1930s.

Wahlverwandtschaften’, in *Erzählen und Wissen: Paradigmen und Aporien ihrer Inszenierung in Goethes ‘Wahlverwandtschaften’*, ed. by Gabriele Brandstetter (Freiburg/Breisgau: Rombach, 2003), pp. 15–40 (p. 35).

²¹ André François-Poncet, *Les Affinités électives de Goethe: essai de commentaire critique* (Paris: Alcan, 1910), p. 187. See Hühn, “Einsicht”, pp. 328–29.

With its frame narrative, ‘unerhörte Begegnheit’, concluding twist and symbolic object, Benjamin’s narrative pays homage to the great storytellers of old and to the tradition of the German nineteenth-century novella in particular. And yet ‘Das Taschentuch’ is, for all its talk of belts and pipes, of weaving and spinning, no traditional story. In his narrative Benjamin hugely ups the stakes on his literary predecessor(s) when he suggests that humans are powerless, and rescue impossible, in the face of technology. In fact, with its hyperbolic setting and (melo-)dramatic plot, Benjamin’s novella is closer to the sensationalist newspaper reports he decries elsewhere – or indeed to a film script. Ships are an enduringly popular cinematic setting. They are places of transit and transition, microcosms of society, but also disconnected from social conventions, which makes them an ideal setting for a transgressive love story. Early examples include *Die Abenteuer des Kapitän Hansen* (Germany 1917, dir. Harry Piel); Howard Hawks’s *A Girl in Every Port* (USA 1928), which brought Louise Brooks to fame in Europe; *Monkey Business* (USA 1931), the Marx Brothers’ third feature; and *One Way Passage* (USA 1932, dir. Tay Garnett), a doomed love story between Dan, a convicted murderer, and Joan, a terminally ill woman, who meet on board an ocean liner; at one point, Dan jumps into the sea to escape custody but returns to the ship when he spots Joan among the passengers.

In writing his story, then, Benjamin is swimming not so much against as with the current of his time. Indeed, his novella not only references popular genres but also reflects experiences of a personal as well as a political nature. The framing narration is set on a ship journey from Ibiza to Barcelona. For Benjamin, his stay in Ibiza from April until July 1932 became a precursor to his Paris exile. Having left Ibiza on 17 July, he arrived in Nice a week later, where on 27 July he made detailed preparations to end his life, writing four farewell letters and his will. In this he was probably motivated by a combination of political factors – on 20 July the reactionary German chancellor Franz von Papen had deposed of the social democrat government, paving the way for fascist rule – and his own dwindling professional opportunities. The plan was aborted at the eleventh hour.²²

Where Goethe gives us a detailed insight into his heroine’s state of mind before she jumps, the motives of Benjamin’s suicidal protagonist remain in the dark – a blind spot which suggests that this experience was too close to the author’s own life to be embroidered on in fiction. True to the external and internal narrators’ shared dislike of psychological narration,

²² See Michael W. Jennings and Howard Eiland, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 377–79.

the novella focuses on external events, and specifically on the rescue mission, and it does so in terms which very much resonates with Benjamin's critical projects of the time. 'Das Taschentuch' provides a narrative as well as a conceptual template for his later writings, and in particular for his method of historical materialism, in which *Rettung* features as a radicalized form of critical intervention.

Benjamin's brand of historical enquiry does not want to write history as a teleological narrative, but to engage with specific moments as they appear to the present-day observer. This highly situated engagement tries to salvage moments which are excluded from official narratives, which are predominantly written by the victors, the survivors. *Rettung* plays a key part in this undertaking, which does not bridge the gap between past and present but leaves it wide open, requiring an imaginative leap to bridge this divide. This undertaking cannot be accomplished from a safe distance but requires courage and decisiveness – 'universale Aktionsbereitschaft' and an ethos of 'Bereitsein', in the words of Benjamin's text on Marxist pedagogy (GS, III, p. 208). This readiness, which is so dramatically embodied in 'Das Taschentuch', is a stance also required of the materialist historian.

Benjamin uses the physical image of the leap to illustrate this engagement, in terms which again echo his novella:

Entscheidend ist weiterhin, daß der Dialektiker die Geschichte nicht anders denn als eine Gefahrenkonstellation betrachten kann, die er, denkend ihrer Entwicklung folgend, abzuwenden jederzeit auf dem Sprunge ist. (GS, v/1, p. 587)

The stakes associated with this project could not be higher. In the *Passagenarbeit*, Benjamin writes that 'Die Rettung [des Gewesenen] läßt immer nur an dem, im nächsten Augenblick schon unrettbar verlornen [sich] vollziehen' (GS, v/1, p. 592). In the light of 'Das Taschentuch' we can revise this statement. As the novella so dramatically illustrates, the readiness to intervene is a stance required not only in the moment *before* the situation has become 'unrettbar', but *beyond* the point of no return. In times of grave danger, Benjamin suggests, *Rettung* remains our only option precisely when it has become impossible.