

**In Defence of Aesthetic Attachment:
A Response to Walter Benjamin's Critique of Calderón
de la Barca**



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SHORT ABSTRACT

This doctoral thesis makes its case for an aesthetics of attachment. The argument is made against Walter Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1925), which endeavours to obstruct the immersive experience of its readers. According to Benjamin, the Catholic and "Romantic" dramas by Calderón de la Barca epitomise the dangers of aesthetic attachment. Indeed, he reads the playwright through the lenses of Romantic writers such as A.W. Schlegel, who identify in Calderón's works the sacred world of magic and religion that the Enlightenment had allegedly repressed. For Jena Romantics, Calderón became the emblem for the fight against what they took to be a "disenchanted" version of everyday life.

Benjamin tells us that such a Romantic endeavour to recreate the divine in the arts is uncritical and irresponsible. He compares Calderón's dramas with Counter-Reformation buildings, in which the ornamentation — according to Benjamin — mesmerises visitors and obfuscates their ability to appreciate the edifice's keystone. Hence the danger of aesthetic attachment, in this argument, is that it hinders our critical abilities. As an alternative, Benjamin champions the "ruined" — that is, fragmentary — aesthetics of German Baroque drama. *Ursprung* therefore recreates a neo-Baroque rhetoric which schools its readers into the position of detached interpreters — the objective being, of course, to hinder feelings of immersion.

This thesis goes back to the Spanish *comedia* and to the debates about the dangers of fiction in early-modern Spain in order to dismantle Benjamin's assumptions about Calderón as well as to make a case for popular art. The engagement with Calderón underscores the fact that aesthetic attachment cannot be dispelled and, therefore, that it also plays a central role in Benjamin's book. Finally, through close readings of *La vida es sueño* and *La dama duende*, I show that Calderón calls forth feelings of identification and immersion whilst remaining both critical and thought-provoking.

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LONG ABSTRACT

This doctoral thesis sets out to cover a major gap in the study of Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1925), i.e., the fact that the Romantic interpretation of Calderón, which plays a major role in the book's argument, has been overlooked by Benjamin scholars. Already in 1989 Uwe Steiner decried the lack of rigour with which Benjamin's theory of the Baroque had been researched: *Ursprung* has been subject to a myriad of philosophical interpretations, and yet Benjamin scholars have seldom taken into account Baroque theatre, its primary object of analysis. In the case of German and English Baroque drama, the gap has been covered since then; most prominently, by Jane Newman's *Benjamin's Library: Modernity, Nation, and the Baroque* (2011) and by Daniel Weidner in a series of articles and chapters published from 2010 to 2019. In the case of Spanish drama, however, only a couple of articles have been published; and Sofie Kluge is the only scholar who has thoroughly researched the topic in *Baroque, Allegory, Comedia: The Transfiguration of Tragedy in Seventeenth-Century Spain* (2010).

Building on Kluge's work, I began by studying and reconstructing the argument of *Ursprung* whilst paying special attention to Benjamin's scattered, albeit consistent, references to Calderón; and I also analysed his early unpublished essays that lay the groundwork for his analysis of Baroque theatre. Benjamin's claim, in a letter written to Gerschom Scholem in 1924, that Calderón represents the "virtuelle Gegenstand" (virtual subject) is wholly justified: Calderón provides a counter-image against which *Ursprung* builds its aesthetics of fragmentation, which are instead inspired by the model of the *German* Baroque. This is key to understanding the book's argument: the analysis of Benjamin's Calderón explains why *Ursprung* champions the aesthetics of German playwrights such as Andreas Gryphius and Daniel Casper von Lohenstein.

In order to understand the argument, then, the Romantic roots of Benjamin's Calderón must be unearthed. This is the subject of Chapter One, which details the Romantic reading of Calderón and its afterlives in the literary tradition of Benjamin's generation. It argues, through close readings of Benjamin's letters to Hugo von Hofmannsthal, that this is the version of Calderón that matters in *Ursprung*. Ultimately, the reason why Benjamin critiques Calderón has more to do with Romantic aesthetics than with Calderón's dramas in their seventeenth-century context. In Chapter Two, I then argue that Benjamin finds the Romantic assumption that Calderón recreates the divine on stage and that his dramas celebrate the glory of creation problematic. The awe and wonder that Calderón elicits are taken to be irresponsible, uncritical, and ethically dangerous aesthetical feelings; these amount to no less than the misleading Tridentine reaction to Luther's critique of good works, which permanently severs the relationship between immanence and transcendence. Overall, Benjamin argues that Spanish drama blinds its audiences to the meaninglessness of 'the modern condition' and instead insists on sacralising worldly matters. Chapter Two highlights that much is at stake in this interpretation, since Benjamin believes that such a sacralisation clears the path for the theological vindication of Germany's war-efforts, which appealed to the sacredness of the nation's destiny.

Having reconstructed Calderón's place in *Ursprung*, Chapter Three questions Benjamin's suspicion of aesthetic attachment. Although it recognises Benjamin's attempt to deter the feeling of immersion in his readers, it also argues that attachment finds an alternative route. The reader who successfully finds her way through Benjamin's neo-Baroque rhetoric will necessarily feel what I call "the spell of research", that is, a fascination towards the practices of discovering, and bringing back to life, rare, unknown, and precious cultural artifacts. As I show, the strength of *Ursprung* lies in that it projects such a fascination towards questioning the hierarchy

and appearance of continuity of the West's literary canon. Nonetheless, Benjamin disguises his own fascination; the book's rhetoric schools the reader into taking the position of a detached decipherer. Indeed, *Ursprung*'s narrator positions himself in a state of constant vigilance, which is why he remains wary of aesthetic attachment and narrative absorption — the assumption being that these encourage uncritical attitudes which are prone to ideological manipulation. I claim that the narrator's suspicion of attachment, as well as his endeavour to hide behind a mist of melancholy, runs against *Ursprung*'s project of dismantling the canon. Benjamin's Baroque cannot but be sorrowful and melancholy since these are the feelings, from Aristotle onwards, that the learned require to discuss "serious" matters.

The final chapter of the thesis turns to the poetics of the Spanish *comedia* and to Calderón with the aim of dismantling Benjamin's suspicion of aesthetic attachment. I believe that here lies the significant value of this thesis: since Benjamin's suspicion of attachment has often been mythologised, especially within academic circles, to dismantle such a suspicion opens up new paths for criticism. Contra *Ursprung*, I argue that the ethically-responsible critic should *not* cover up her attachments, but rather acknowledge and cultivate them. Furthermore, I question *Ursprung*'s unacknowledged divide between "low" and "high" culture by showing ways in which the poetics of Calderón are entertaining, emotional, appeal to a wide audience, and are critical and thought-provoking as well. In doing so, I also challenge the traditional interpretation of the Spanish *comedia*, which has more often than not been read as the epitome of *Ancien Régime* values and as the aesthetic afterlife of the "regressive" Middle Ages. All in all, this chapter builds on Chapter Three to show that aesthetic attachment cannot be simply dispelled and that it is therefore misleading to dismiss feelings of attachment and identification as ideological or politically suspicious.

Following Barry Ife, the chapter begins by reconstructing the debates about fiction and its dangers in early-modern Spain. It describes the main worries of critics of fiction, who made their case based on overlapping moral and metaphysical arguments of a neo-Platonic nature. In moral terms, they allege that literature sets a “bad example” and encourages “vicarious experience”; in metaphysical terms, it was looked down on as a “counterfeit form of reality” which undermines, through its techniques of verisimilitude, the authority of truth.¹ On the other side of the debate, Spanish neo-Aristotelian defenders of fiction appealed to the rhetorical figure of allegory to make their case. Imaginative fiction, from their perspective, may be morally and metaphysically dangerous, but this is only if the reader is incapable of seeing through the cortex of the fable so as to unveil its core or hidden truth.

Despite the lack of influence, there are close parallels between the position of early-modern Spanish neo-Aristotelians and that of Benjamin: both assume that truth lies behind beautiful appearances, and that the work of dismantling such appearances is slow and painful. *Ursprung*’s labyrinthine rhetoric, as well as the narrator’s argumentative jumps, obliges the reader to become an intellectual decipherer. Consequently, the reader who successfully navigates her way through the book must acknowledge that the ‘harmonious’ and ‘totalizing’ artforms of (the Romantic) Calderón are misleading. Only the fragmented aesthetics of the German Baroque uncover the appearance of beauty and, by doing so, contribute to the task of criticism, i.e.: to see through the cortex of totality so as to unveil the hidden truth about the decay and transience of worldly matters.

Building on Ife’s study, I show that the Spanish *comedia* developed a response to critics of fiction which overcomes the limitations of both the Benjaminian and the

¹ Barry Ife, *Reading and Fiction in Golden Age Spain: A Platonist Critique and Some Picaresque Replies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 24.

neo-Aristotelian position. In fact, playwrights such as Calderón acknowledge and encourage the aesthetic experience of feeling carried away, indeed immersed or absorbed in the work, while also challenging the audience in thought-provoking ways. With the aim of delineating the aesthetics of the *comedia*, I first consider Lope de Vega's epistolary exchange with scholar Diego de Colmenares about Luis de Góngora, in which they discuss the nature of poetry and rhetoric. Lope mockingly claims that Colmenares' defence of rhetorical obscurity no less than betrays his passion for that which he does not understand. The playwright therefore emphasises that both Góngora's aristocratic public and his own lay public are drawn and attached to art, but that his public at least acknowledges their attachments; accordingly, he ironically plays with academic assumptions and defends the value of popular art. I also briefly turn to Fray Manuel Guerra y Ribera's obituary on Calderón: like Lope, the friar insists that the clear and direct emotional appeal of the *comedia* does not obstruct, but rather encourages, critical thinking.

The final sections of Chapter Four undertake close readings of Calderón's dramas *La vida es sueño* and *La dama duende*, which have been chosen for specific reasons. First, because the metaphor of the world as stage which structures *La vida es sueño* plays a central role in *Ursprung*'s theological remarks about Baroque drama, and Benjamin makes explicit references to this play. Calderón himself considered the play to be his best, and thus it is the first he included in the edition of his complete works.² I argue that the "world as stage" metaphor does *not* reinforce the status quo, but rather that it contributes to Calderón's aesthetics of *admiratio*, which sets up expectations that are ultimately disappointed; in doing so, it forces the audience to consider reality from different perspectives. Second, because *La dama duende* provides a case in point of

² See Jonathan Thacker, *A Companion to Golden Age Theatre* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2010), p. 104.

Ursprung's limitations: as mentioned earlier, the book's insistence on melancholy reinforces the genre elitism of the literary canon, which has mythologised the value of tragedy. It is therefore unsurprising that *Ursprung* refers to the *comedia de capa y espada* — the subgenre to which *La dama duende* belongs — as a facile and uncritical artform. In contrast, my analysis underscores a powerful comedic technique which Benjamin overlooked, namely, to craft highly imaginative worlds which turn the order of things upside down and thereby underscore, in an entertaining way, the limitations and contradictions of our everyday practices and behaviours.

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“Now we come to another, quite important question: that of conviction. When we read an author (and we may be thinking of verse, we may be thinking of prose—it is all one), it is essential that we should believe in him.”

Jorge Luis Borges, “Thought and Poetry”, in *This Craft of Verse*, ed. by Călin-Andrei Mihăilescu, The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 1967-1968 (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 77-97 (p..92).

INTRODUCTION

This doctoral thesis argues that the value of aesthetic attachment lies in its capacity to move, captivate us, and to encourage our critical abilities; and that this value should be acknowledged, cherished, and cultivated. The argument is made against one of the very points of reference for twentieth- and twenty-first- centuries critiques of attachment, Walter Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928), which endeavours to obstruct the immersive experience of its readers.³ The Romantic interpretation of Calderón that importantly shapes Benjamin's reading explains why Benjamin is suspicious of aesthetic attachment. For August Wilhelm Schlegel, Calderón's dramas embody Catholic doctrine and thereby — according to Schlegel — infuse the audience with awe and wonder for the glory of creation; the dramas reassure the audience that redemption remains available and that God has not abandoned humanity. In the framework of *Ursprung* this is problematic, since it means turning a blind eye to what the book considers to be the desolate and melancholy nature of the modern condition.

Benjamin's argument relies on three main assumptions: first, that artforms reflect the spirit of any given epoch; second, that totalizing forms recreate the illusive union between immanence and transcendence; third, that the work of criticism should commit itself to what is called the "Mortifikation des Werkes" (*Ursprung*, p. 357; mortification of artworks). *Ursprung* posits that there is an intimate connection between beauty and truth in art, but that the latter can only be unveiled if the appearance of the beauty is stripped away. Benjamin's criticism aims to perform such a work of stripping

³ I henceforth quote from Walter Benjamin, "Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels", in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols in 14 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974-91), I/1: *Abhandlungen* (1974), pp. 203-430 (henceforth *Ursprung*). For the translations, Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, transl. by Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2019) (henceforth *Origin*).

away, and the book claims that the truth lying underneath is the inescapable presence of ruins and rubble in the world-stage of history, i.e., the decay of worldly matters.⁴

Building on these three assumptions, Benjamin constructs a theory of the Baroque origins of Modernity that stands against aesthetic immersion. The clause “Baroque origins of Modernity” is meant to express Benjamin’s dissatisfaction with the dominant interpretation of modernity in his own times. In contrast to the theologically-justified nationalism of the German Empire, he unearths an alternative vision of Germany through his reading of Baroque dramas. Ultimately, the reason why *Ursprung* endeavours to dismantle awe-inducing aesthetic experiences is because, in the book’s argument, these prepared the way for the theological justification of Germany’s war efforts.⁵

Throughout this thesis the experience of being aesthetically attached is referenced with different terms; most prominently, *admiratio*, spell of fiction, immersion, identification, and bewitchment. Despite the nuances, all these describe a feeling of absorption in which the borders between art and the self are blurred. The danger, in *Ursprung*’s framework, is clear: to surrender ourselves to the spell of fiction means to abandon our critical abilities. For a fleeting moment, so the argument goes, the reader forgets the intrinsic decay, melancholy, and god-forsaken nature of the modern

⁴ “Kritik ist Mortifikation der Werke [...]. Und ist es fraglich, ob die Schönheit, welche dauert, so noch heißen dürfe, —fest steht, daß ohne Wissenswürdiges im Innern es kein Schönes gibt. [...] Es ist der Gegenstand der philosophischen Kritik zu erweisen, daß die Funktion der Kunstform eben dies ist: historisches Sachgehalte, wie sie jedem bedeutenden Werk zugrunde liegen, zu philosophischen Wahrheitsgehalten zu machen. Diese Umbildung der Sachgehalte zum Wahrheitsgehalte macht den Verfall der Wirkung in dem von Jahrzehnt zu Jahrzehnt das Ansprechende der früheren Reize sich mindert, zum Grund einer Neugeburt, in welcher alle ephemere Schönheit vollends dahinfällt und das Werk als Ruine sich behauptet” (*Ursprung*, p. 357-58; “Criticism is the mortification of works. [...] And though it is questionable whether the beauty that endures still deserves the name, it is nonetheless certain that nothing is beautiful unless there is something worth knowing in its interior. [...] It is the object of philosophical criticism to show that the function of artistic form is precisely this: to make historical material content, such as lie at the basis of every significant work, into philosophical truth contents. This transformation of material contents into truth contents entails the weakening of effect whereby the attractiveness of the earlier charms diminishes decade by decade, providing the basis for a rebirth in which all ephemeral beauty completely falls away and the work asserts itself as a ruin”, *Origin*, p. 193-94).

⁵ See Jane Newman, *Benjamin’s Library: Modernity, Nation, and the Baroque* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

condition and, instead, revels in the delight of the Romantic celebration of creation. This is, in theological terms, no less than a sin, for it leads the reader to forget *Ursprung*'s point that, from early modernity onwards, the relationship between the divine and the profane has been severed for good. The gap between immanence and transcendence cannot, and should not, be bridged in aesthetics, which is precisely what Calderón accomplishes—according to Jena Romantics—in his dramas.

Benjamin posits his modernist aesthetics of ruins and fragmentation as a “solution” to the issue of aesthetic immersion. Hence *Ursprung* schools the reader into the position of a detached intellectual decipherer. It does so through its rhetoric, which is modeled upon the neo-Baroque concept of the labyrinth: motifs from the myriad fields of aesthetics, intellectual history, politics, and theology are intertwined with the aim to disorient the reader; to make matters more complicated, the book's narrator embeds his argument within a massive archive of quotations and delights in abrupt argumentative jumps.⁶ The reader who commits herself to the task of finding *Ursprung*'s Ariadne thread will eventually realise that this is not simply a difficult task, but ultimately an endless one too—the scattered pieces of the book's rhetorical puzzle do not add up to form a conclusive whole. This makes sense within its framework: should the puzzle be solved, then the reader would finally feel the Romantic *admiratio* that haunts Benjamin's aesthetics of fragmentation.

From a rhetorical standpoint, however, Benjamin's “solution” against aesthetic attachment is deceptive. To begin with, the reader's final recognition embodies the narrative trope of *anagnorisis*; or, to put it in a Baroque terminology, that of *desengaño* (“disillusionment” but also “awakening”).⁷ In its Spanish Baroque iteration the term is

⁶ See, amongst others, Malte Kleinwort, “Zur Desorientierung im Manuskript der Vorrede zu Benjamins Trauerspielbuch”, in *Benjamin Studien* 2, ed. by Daniel Weidner and Sigrid Weigel, 3 vols (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2008), pp. 87-111; and Ursula Marx, *Walter Benjamins Archive: Bilder, Texte, und Zeichen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006).

⁷ For a study which argues that *anagnorisis* should be seen as “the most strictly literary of all topics in poetics”, see Terence Cave, *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990).

especially revealing because it always describes a transformation from a less authentic to a more authentic version of reality: when a character experiences a *desengaño*, she wakes up from the slumber of inauthenticity. Benjamin's use of this trope betrays his skillful storytelling: as much as *Ursprung* endeavours to resist the spell of fiction, this doctoral thesis argues that immersion finds an alternative route.

It goes without saying, however, that the immersive experience of *Ursprung*'s reader is of a special kind. Benjamin crafts his narrative with a specific audience in mind, namely, the mandarin elites and the learned literary republic of Interwar Germany. As Jane Newman has shown, Benjamin scholars have seldom contextualised *Ursprung* within the 1920s, not least within the academic debates about the Baroque that were taking place at the time. Consequently, "[*Ursprung*] has been variously seen as the 'tragic' beginning of the end of the possibility of an academic career [...], as an articulation of Benjamin's 'avant-garde theory' and of his 'micrological' thinking and 'messianic' philosophy of history [...], and, finally, as a performance of his theories of allegory [...] and constructivism" (Newman, *Benjamin's Library*, p. x).⁸ The common denominator is that all these philosophical approaches fail to recognise the book's original audience, its primary focus of concern — i.e., learned discussions about Baroque drama in the Weimar Republic —, and the standpoint of Benjamin's narrative persona.

It is only once the importance of these topics is acknowledged that *Ursprung*'s version of aesthetic attachment comes to the fore: radicalising academic conventions of

⁸ Some of the references provided by Newman to back up her claims are the following: Burkhardt Lindner, "Habitationsakte Benjamin: Über ein 'akademisches Trauerspiel' und über ein Vorkapitel der 'Frankfurter Schule' (Horkheimer, Adorno)", *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik*, 53-4 (1984), 147-65; Momme Brodersen, *Spinne im eigenen Netz: Walter Benjamin; Leben und Werk* (Bühl-Moos: Elster, 1990); John Pizer, *Towards a Theory of Radical Origin: Essays on Modern German Thought* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995); Winfried Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980); and Detlev Schöttker, *Konstruktiver Fragmentarismus: Form und Rezeption der Schriften Walter Benjamin* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999).

its time, Benjamin's theory of the Baroque appeals to readers who share his fascination with the narrative *topos* of the Library. Such dwellers of libraries will doubtless feel absorbed and elated by the mammoth challenge of entering the neo-Baroque maze of *Ursprung*, the content and structure of which mirrors their own world. By way of example, the scholarly delight at the discovery of unknown cultural artifacts parallels the book's invocation of unknown editors and writers; and, to make matters more fascinating, in the world of *Ursprung* such remote cultural artifacts turn out to carry utmost importance for contemporary political issues. As the reader eventually discovers, these contribute to the scholar's political task of tearing down the nationalistic and totalizing narrative of the West's cultural tradition. Hence, in *Ursprung*, the only permissible attachment is that which is indebted to Benjamin's own version of scholarly work. To put it briefly, one could argue that the "spell of fiction" becomes the "spell of research". From such a standpoint, it is difficult to accept Benjamin's suspicion of aesthetic attachment.

Despite Benjamin's deceptive inveighing against attachment, this thesis also identifies and champions his valuable contribution to intellectual history. His fascination with the rare, precious, and unknown urges readers to acknowledge that the process of building a literary canon is highly crafted and artificial, and that it is contaminated by political biases and interests. Indeed, the book's insistence on ruins and debris is part of its earnest attempt to tear down ideological reappropriations of the past. Building on Benjamin's legacy, in the last chapter of the thesis I turn to Calderón with a similar aim in mind, namely: dismantle the Romantic appropriation of the Spanish writer. The aim is to show that his artwork is not regressive, uncritical, or ideological, and also to vindicate his aesthetic appeal to feelings of attachment such as identification, narrative tension, and *admiratio*.

To this end I first reconstruct the debates about the dangers of fiction in early modern Spain as well as Lope de Vega's popular poetics, both of which strongly inform Calderón's dramas. Neither Lope nor Calderón suspects that aesthetic attachment might obstruct the critical capacities of their audiences. On the contrary: they are highly aware of the ways in which the spell of fiction critically engages the audience and leaves them in a state of *suspensión* ("paralysis"). As I show through close readings of *La vida es sueño* and *La dama duende*, Calderón calls for the audience's *admiratio* with a twofold aim: to produce *desengaños*—which encourages the audience to view reality from different perspectives—and to entertain. This ensures that the task of awakening becomes delightful rather than painful and, therefore, that the audience will cherish the experience instead of shying away from it.

From the perspective of the West's Literary History, the Romantic interpretation of Calderón has been extremely influential and has enthroned the Spanish playwright as a major figure of the canon. Indeed, the success of the Romantic Calderón has made it very difficult for scholars to approach the playwright from a different perspective; as late as in 1994, Harold Bloom still insisted that Calderón's drama should be understood through the prisms of religion, and that he was an *avant-la-lettre* Romantic.⁹ In this chapter, I begin by explaining the reasons why Romantic writers such as A.W. Schlegel turned to Calderón and placed him at the centre of their aesthetics. For Jena Romantics, Calderón became the ultimate artist of transcendence. They championed his dramas as the epitome of art's potential to overcome the limitations of the Enlightenment.¹⁰ I argue that this is the version of Calderón that Benjamin's generation inherited, as made evident, amongst others, in the work of Ernst Robert Curtius (1886-1956).¹¹ In early-twentieth century Germany, Calderón's dramas embodied a version of modernity dear to the Romantic project and became embedded within broader debates about the legacy of the Enlightenment. Benjamin's approach to Calderón, whom he refers to as the

⁹ Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York, NY; San Diego, CA; and London: Harcourt Brace, 1994), p.51, p. 74: shorturl.at/eAGSY.

¹⁰ Jane Newman has acknowledged the importance of the Romantic Calderón for Benjamin, but her own research instead focuses, amongst other things, on the afterlife of the Romantic Shakespeare in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. See *Benjamin's Library: Modernity, Nation, and the Baroque* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); and "»Hamelt ist auch Saturnkind«: Citationality, Lutheranism, and German Identity in Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*", in *Benjamin-Studien I*, ed. by Weidner and Weigel, 3 vols (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2008), I, pp. 175-94.

¹¹ See "Exkurse XXII: Theologische Kunsttheorie in der spanischen Literatur des 17. Jahrhunderts" and "Exkurse XXIII: Calderóns Kunsttheorie und die *artes liberales*", in *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter* [1948], 8th ed (Bern: Francke, 1973), pp. 530-40, 541-51. See also Max Kommerell, *Die Kunst Calderons*, Das Abendland: Forschungen zur Geschichte europäischen Geisteslebens, 5, rev. 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1974) and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Der Turm: ein Trauerspiel in fünf Aufzügen* [1925], Schulausgaben moderner Autoren (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1952). For secondary bibliography, see Ritchie Robertson, "Calderón's European Reception from Romanticism to the Twentieth Century", in *A Companion to Calderón de la Barca*, ed. by Jonathan Thacker and Roy Norton (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2021), pp. 284-300; and Henry Sullivan, "From the Weimar Republic to the Third Reich", in *Calderón in the German Lands & the Low Countries: His Reception and Influence, 1654-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 341-75.

“virtuelle Gegenstand” (virtual subject) of *Ursprung*, only makes sense when contextualised within such debates.¹² In the last section of this chapter, I then highlight Benjamin’s association between Calderón and Romanticism through an analysis of two letters written by the literary critic to Hugo von Hofmannsthal.

From A.W. Schlegel to Ernst Robert Curtius

In his lectures on art and dramatic literature, A.W. Schlegel vindicates Calderón’s dramas as a model for writers seeking to break down the borders between philosophy, religion, and the arts.¹³ He makes his argument by focusing on the tantalising attraction of Calderón’s metaphors, which—in his argument—not only unite the aforementioned disciplines, but also infuse new life into what Schlegel perceived as the dull and artificial forms of the Enlightenment:

Calderon blühte noch, als man sich in anderen Ländern Europas schon stark zu dem manierten Geschmack in den Künsten und zu den prosaischen Ansichten in der Literatur neigte, die im achtzehnten Jahrhundert so allgemein einrissen. Es ist in seinen Werken alle Pracht derselben verschwendet, so wie man bei einem Feuerwerke die buntesten Farben, die glänzendsten Lichter und wunderlichen Figuren der feurigen Springbrunnen und Kreise für eine letzte Explosion aufzusparen pflegt (*Ueber dramatische Kunst*, p. 374).

Calderón was still flourishing when in other European countries there was already a strong tendency towards the mannered taste in the arts and the prosaic view in literature, which became widely accepted in the eighteenth century. It is in his works that all their splendour is squandered, just as in fireworks it is customary to save the brightest colours, the most brilliant lights and the tantalising figures of the fiery fountains and circles for a last explosion (unless specified, translations are mine).

Schlegel’s rhetoric betrays his effort to model Calderón. Just as, for the German critic, Calderón’s plays mesmerise their audience, so Schlegel wants to mesmerise his readers through the vivid images he paints. The fascination he imagined seventeenth-century Spanish audiences must have felt in watching a Calderonian drama is the intended effect

¹² Benjamin, *Briefe I*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, 2 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966), I, § An Gerhard Scholem, Berlin, 22. Dezember 1924 (p. 366): <https://www.kritiknetz.de/walterbenjamin-gesammelte-schriften-und-briefe>.

¹³ August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Ueber dramatische Kunst und Literatur, Vorlesungen*, 2 vols (n.p.: Mohr & Zimmer, 1811).

of his own German prose. This is conveyed through the starkly visual component of fireworks in the above quotation. According to Schlegel, the dramas of Calderón represent the dynamite behind this last explosion of creativity in Western literature; an explosion which he attempts to recreate in writing. Following the model of Calderón, Schlegel's use of metaphor betrays an effort to break down the borders between philosophy and poetry as well as to vindicate the potential of art in the human quest for knowledge.

Schlegel contrasts the flourishing of Calderón with the artificiality of eighteenth-century taste (i.e. the Enlightenment), which he characterises in derogative terms. This becomes obvious in the narrator's passionate yet nostalgic reference to the Spanish playwright: just as fireworks explode and then die forever, it is implied that Calderón's world has not survived him. Instead, in this narrative, the imposition of eighteenth-century aesthetics has devaluated the richness of human experience and sapped the vitality out of 'modern' life. Nevertheless, the nostalgic mood is at odds with the rather celebratory and engaging forms of the passage's rhetoric which, following Calderón, relies heavily on a visual metaphor. The intended effect is to astonish the reader in an effort to rekindle the fireworks, that is, to re-enchant the world—the implicit assumption being that the Enlightenment had previously 'disenchanted' it.

In Schlegel's argument, eighteenth-century taste lacks the beauty, strength, power, vitality, and even magic, associated with fireworks and with the 'pre-modern' Calderón. Yet the nostalgia of the passage is transformed into the enthusiasm and fascination of Schlegel's prose, which suggests that, through metaphor, Calderón's world can be brought back to life, if only in the arts.¹⁴ All in all, Schlegel's argument is that the power and magic of religion, which had been silenced and suppressed in the

¹⁴ Robertson explains in detail that the Romantics admired what they took as Calderón's emphasis on the supernatural, which deviates from neo-Classical aesthetic conventions ("Calderón's European Reception", pp. 287-92).

Enlightenment, can make its claim back in the modern world in the form of Art.

Aesthetics becomes the alternative, in the Romantic version of modernity, which brings back to life those silenced voices of magic, passion, and religion that a Protestant and Enlightened modernity had censured — aesthetics is therefore imbued with redemptive power. If Calderón points the way forward, this is because, following the logic of Jena Romanticism, he already succeeded, in his own time, in transforming the theological anxieties of the Reformation into an artistic celebration of creation.

In addition to Schlegel's passionate tone, the strength of his argument also lies in his attention to detail. Indeed, Schlegel focuses on the rhetorical techniques through which Calderón, in his own view, reconstructs a world of magic and religion. Schlegel points out that Calderón's metaphors weave together the most minute and the most grandiose, that is, the most disparate realms and elements of nature, as if they could be all united in the form of a precious and elaborate object. The implication, of course, is that Calderón's craftsmanship channels God's creativity and reconstructs, in the realm of aesthetics, the unity and harmony of the whole:

Wenn er das Entfernteste, das Größte und Kleinste, Sterne und Blumen zusammenstellt, so ist der Sinn aller seiner Metaphern der gegenseitige Zug der erschaffnen Dinge zueinander wegen ihres gemeinschaftlichen Ursprungs, und diese entzückende Harmonie und Eintracht des Weltalls ist ihm wieder nur ein Widerschein der ewigen alles umfassenden Liebe (*Ueber dramatische Kunst*, p. 374).

When he assembles the most distant, the largest and the smallest, stars and flowers, the meaning of all of his metaphors is the mutual pull of created things towards each other due to their common origin, and this delightful harmony and unity of the universe is for him once again only a reflection of the eternal and all-encompassing love.

Schlegel provides no textual evidence for his claim, but it inspired generations of scholars and enthroned Calderón as *the* Western artist of transcendence.¹⁵ Following Calderón's example, the Romantic version of modernity endows the arts with

¹⁵ This is the image that Ernst Robert Curtius re-elaborates in the early twentieth century: echoing Schlegel, he tells us that the Spanish Baroque provides a *Blick in den Himmel* (glimpse into heaven); see Curtius, "Exkurse: XXII. Theologische Kunsttheorie in der spanischen Literatur des 17. Jahrhunderts", p. 539.

redemptive power; they rekindle all those divine energies allegedly repressed by the Enlightenment. Hence, according to Jena Romantics, Calderón's metaphors point a way out of what they perceived to be the ills of the Protestant 'disenchantment' of the world.¹⁶

The project of Jena Romanticism, however, was not simply concerned with aesthetics. It has been argued that it also encouraged a reactionary political and religious ideology, standing against the liberalism of the Enlightenment and the republicanism of the French Revolution in favour of Absolute Monarchy.¹⁷ Within this framework, Jena Romantics took Calderón as their exemplary model through which to spell out an alternative to the politics of their contemporaries.¹⁸ Indeed, they argued that, as consequence of Spain's 'brave' wars against the Moors, the Spanish nation was 'strong enough' to fight against the corrupting forces of the Enlightenment that the French Revolution had unleashed (Iglesias Feijoo, p. 150-01). Likewise, Ritchie Robertson has highlighted that, in their view, this constant religious struggle "prolonged the medieval spirit of chivalry amongst [the Spanish] people" ("Calderón's European Reception", p. 288). Hence Jena Romantics found in an alleged Spanish 'character' the last fortress for the worldview of the Middle Ages in modernity, the backbone of which was Tridentine

¹⁶ The Romantic association between Catholicism and an 'enchanted' view of the Middle Ages, and between Protestantism and a 'disenchanted' — and thereby industrialised — version of modernity, has been extremely popular and influential. See, amongst others, Max Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist der Kapitalismus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1934). Nevertheless, the thesis has been convincingly contested by Jacques Delacroix and François Nielson, "The Beloved Myth: Protestantism and the Rise of Industrial Capitalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe", *Social Forces*, 80 (2001), 509-53; and by Robert Green, *Protestantism, Capitalism and Social Science: The Max Weber Controversy*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Heath, 1973).

¹⁷ See Paul van Tieghen, *Le romantisme dans la littérature européenne* (Paris: A. Michel, 1948); Luis Iglesias Feijoo, "Calderón, ayer y hoy. Sobre el origen romántico de la visión actual de Calderón.", in *Congreso Internacional Proyección y Significados del Teatro Clásico Español: Homenaje a Alfredo Hermenegildo y Francisco Ruiz Ramón*, ed. by José María Díez Borque, José Alcalá-Zamora, and Queipo de Llano (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal para la Acción Cultural Exterior, 2004), pp. 139-59; Ethel Matala de Mazza, "Romantic Politics and Society", in *The Cambridge Companion to German Romanticism*, ed. by Nicholas Saul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 191-208; and Dieter Sturma, "Politics and the New Mythology: The Turn to Late Romanticism", in *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. by Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 219-38.

¹⁸ See Donald Shaw, "Spain/Romántico—Romanticismo—Romanesco—Romanesco—Romancista—Románico", in *'Romantic' and its Cognates: The European History of a Word*, ed. by Hans Eichner (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), pp. 341–72.

Catholicism and *Ancien Régime* ideology. In opposition to Protestantism, Counter-Reformation Spain came to represent the vanished world of medieval times, in which magic, the supernatural, chivalry, and honour find their last refuge. The following passage from Schlegel confirms his fascination with what he understands to be Calderón's love of religion:

[Calderóns] Gemüt [...] spricht sich am meisten in der Behandlung der religiösen Gegenstände aus. Die Liebe schildert er nur mit allgemeinen Zügen, er redet ihre dichterische Kunstsprache. Die Religion ist seine eigentliche Liebe, das Herz seines Herzens. Nur für sie erregt er die erschütterndsten bis in die innerste Seele dringenden Rührungen. Bei bloß weltlichen Begebenheiten scheint er dies vielmehr nicht gewollt zu haben. Sie sind ihm, wie trübe sie auch an sich sein mögen, schon durch die religiöse Ansicht bis zur Klarheit aufgehell't. Dieser Glückselige hat sich aus der labyrinthischen Wildnis der Zweifel in die Burgfreiheit des Glaubens gerettet, von wo aus er die Stürme des Weltlaufs mit ungestörter Seelenruhe ansieht und schildert; ihm ist das menschliche Dasein kein düsteres Rätsel mehr. [...] Seine Poesie, was auch scheinbar ihr Gegenstand sein möge, ist ein unermüdlicher Jubelhymnus auf die Herrlichkeiten der Schöpfung (*Ueber dramatische Kunst*, pp. 372-73).

The mind of Calderón [...] is most distinctly expressed in his engagement with religious subjects. Love he only depicts in broad strokes; he talks in its poetic voice. Religion is his actual love, the heart of his heart. Only for it he stirs the most harrowing emotions, reaching the deepest corners of the soul. It seems that for merely worldly matters he had been unwilling to provide anything similar. To him, however turbid they may be in themselves, they are clarified by the religious perspective. This happy man escaped from the labyrinthine wilderness of doubt into the stronghold of belief from where, with undisturbed tranquility of soul, he beheld and portrayed the storms of the world; to him human life is no longer a dark riddle. [...] His poetry, whatever its apparent object, is an unremitting hymn of jubilation upon the glory of creation.

Schlegel identifies harmony as the key characteristic of Calderón's poetics. Religious zeal grounds the harmonious unity of his plays, through which the modern "labyrinthische Wildnis der Zweifel" (labyrinthine wilderness of doubt) is dispelled. In opposition to the paralysing world of Reason, Schlegel believes that faith invigorates Calderón's universe. This allows him to unfold, in all their splendor, the joys and majesties of creation: "Seine Poesie [...] ist ein unermüdlicher Jubelhymnus auf die Herrlichkeiten der Schöpfung".¹⁹ In this narrative, Calderón remains alien to any sense

¹⁹ August Wilhelm's younger brother, Friedrich, also held a similar view about Calderón: as Robertson tells us, he believed that the Spaniard's dramas "resolv[e] the riddle of life" ("Calderón's European Influence", p. 289).

of modern paralysis: his worldview is far away from the Cartesian, and Enlightened, questioning of reality that inaugurates modernity.²⁰

For A.W. Schlegel, the Protestant and Enlightened version of modernity is characterised by an anxious and endless questioning, in scientific fashion, of the world we inhabit. By going back to Calderón, he is implicitly suggesting a way out from what he considers to be the limitations of the Enlightenment, that is, its stultifying emphasis on Reason and its subsequent cold landscape, inhabited by detached individuals who have become alienated from one another.²¹ And yet Schlegel's Calderón, we must remember, is not simply a theologian; he is first and foremost an artist inspired by religious passion. Due to his faith-driven artistic zeal, Schlegel calls him the pinnacle of Romantic poetry: "der letzte Gipfel der romantischen Poesie" (*Ueber dramatische Kunst*, p. 374). Art, in the project of the German Romantics, remains the last fortress for all those human energies which have no place in the 'rationalistic' world of the Enlightenment. Calderón sings the swan song of the Middle Ages: he discovered that art could take the place of theology whilst, in the rest of Europe, a prosaic and mannered taste had become the norm. Hence why A.W. Schlegel beautifully compares the playwright's aesthetics with fireworks (*Ueber dramatische Kunst*, p. 374). His plays represent, in this interpretation, the last vindication of the world as God's artistic creation before the coming of modernity proper. Within the disenchanted landscape of modernity, only the creative impulse of artists makes men and women equal to God.²²

²⁰ This narrative about modernity and secularisation has been starkly questioned. See, amongst others, Bruno Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: essai d'anthropologie symétrique* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991); Rodney Stark, "Secularization: RIP", *Sociology of Religion*, vol. 60.3 (1999), 249-273; and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

²¹ More recent studies on the Enlightenment, however, have emphasised the role of religion in the period. See, for instance, Robertson, *Enlightenment and Religion in German and Austrian Literature* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017).

²² On the philosophical worldview of the Romantics, see also Friedrich Schlegel, *Transcendentalphilosophie*, ed. by Michael Elsässer (Hamburg: Meiner, 1991); and *Schriften zur Kritischen Philosophie*, ed. by Andreas Arndt and Jure Zovko (Hamburg: Meiner, 2007).

Schlegel's aesthetic lectures were extremely influential. They made a significant contribution to the establishment of the modern canon, which set the terms for the interpretation of literary history for generations.²³ When Benjamin began his training as a literary critic, the Romantic canon was, in fact, the established literary canon of the West. Given that the available translations of Calderón were those made by the Romantics themselves, it is not at all surprising that the afterlives of Calderón in Germany embody Romantic assumptions.²⁴ Calderón therefore stands, in the German tradition, as the Western artist of transcendence; and also epitomises the worldview of the Counter-Reformation and the *Ancien Régime*. Overall, he stands in opposition to the political project of the Enlightenment and to its neo-Classicist aesthetics. The work of Ernst Robert Curtius (1886-1956), born only six years before Benjamin, confirms that this interpretative predisposition toward Calderón was still in fashion in early-twentieth century Germany.

Curtius discusses the work of Calderón in depth in two appendixes of his landmark *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948), both dealing with the new status of art in early modernity.²⁵ The book has become an undisputed classic of literary scholarship, amongst other things due to its touching plea for a united Europe against the threat of Fascism. Deviating from the neo-Romantic historiography of his time, Curtius rejects nationalist approaches to the Western tradition and instead vindicates its shared Judeo-Christian origins. Yet, precisely because of his effort to overcome the shortcomings of Romanticism, it is disappointing that his reading of the Spanish Baroque remains utterly Romantic. Just like Schlegel, Curtius reads Calderón as *the* artist painting man's relationship to God:

²³ See John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formations* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

²⁴ Benjamin read Calderón's dramas in the translations of A.W. Schlegel and Johann Diederich Gries. See Benjamin, "Verzeichnis der gelesenen Schriften", in GS, VII, p. 437.

²⁵ See Curtius's aforementioned "Theologische Kunsttheorie" and "Exkurse XXIII. Calderóns Kunsttheorie und die *artes liberales*", in *Europäische Literatur*, pp. 530-40, 541-51.

In der Dichtung eines Luis de León wie in dem mit nichts vergleichbaren “Welttheater”, das die spanische *Comedia* in ihrer Gesamtheit darstellt, wie in der Malerei den Zurbarán, Valdés Leal, Greco wird uns das Menschliche immer in seiner Bezogenheit auf Gott gezeigt und über allen Wirrungen der Erde wird uns ein Blick in den Himmel geöffnet. Der tiefste Gehalt von Lopes wie von Calderóns Dichtung wird erst in dieser Perspektive faßbar (“Theologische Kunsttheorie”, p. 539).

In the poetry of a Luis de León, as in the Spanish drama [as in the “World theatre” trope that the Spanish *Comedia* represents and which cannot be compared with anything else], as in the paintings of a Zurbarán, Valdés Leal, Greco, the human is always shown to us in relation to God, and above all the confusions of this earth, we are given a glimpse into heaven.²⁶

Curtius tells us here that *all* artistic feats of sixteenth *and* seventeenth-century Spain can be subsumed under the same explanation: Spanish art, in which transcendence reigns, provides a glimpse of heaven into earth. In the following page, he repeats the argument and adds the emphasis, reminiscent of the Romantics, that this divine inspiration accounts for the vigour of Golden Age Spanish art:

Wenn alle Künste ihren Ursprung in Gott haben, dann gewinnt damit die Kunst selbst eine neue Freiheit und Unschuld. Sie ist ein Spiel vor Gott und damit ein Symbol des Lebens selbst als des *gran teatro del mundo*, dessen Rollen, Gott verteilt (“Theologische Kunsttheorie”, p. 540).

If all arts, in the final analysis, have their own origin in God, then art itself gains a new freedom and innocence. It is a play performed in the presence of God, and thereby a symbol of life itself as the *gran teatro del mundo* whose roles God distributes (“Theological Art-Theory”, p. 558).

Just like Schlegel, then, Curtius frames Calderón as *the* Western artist of transcendence. In the narrative of both critics, the playwright re-creates the divine in the realm of aesthetics; and he does so, Curtius tells us, with a liberty and innocence unparalleled in the rest of Europe (“Theologische Kunsttheorie”, p. 540).

When Benjamin avows that Calderón represented the “virtuelle Gegenstand” (virtual subject) of *Ursprung*, he is in fact referring to such a Romantic version of the Spanish playwright. The aesthetics of Calderón, as we will see, allows Benjamin to

²⁶ “Theological Art-Theory in the Spanish Literature of the Seventeenth-Century”, in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, transl. by Williard R. Trask, Bollingen Series, 36 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 547-58 (p. 558).

spell out his disagreement with the project of Jena Romanticism. Ultimately, the point is that the Romantic vindication of aesthetic unity, completion, and harmony cannot be divorced from their regressive and reactionary politics. To further delineate the Romantic assumptions of Benjamin's Calderón, I now turn to his own references on the Spaniard in his private correspondence with Hugo von Hofmannsthal.

Calderón in Benjamin's Letters to Hofmannsthal

In 1925, Benjamin responds to Hofmannsthal's friendly request for him to share his thoughts on his latest work, *Der Turm*, which had been recently published: "Ihr letztes Schreiben machte mir [...] die freundliche Ermunterung, vom Eindruck Ihres Werks auf mich zu schreiben" ("Your last letter provided [...] the friendly encouragement to write back about the impression of your latest work").²⁷ In a clear, scholarly, and respectful tone, Benjamin tells Hofmannsthal that he has indeed asked the most appropriate person. *Der Turm*, after all, takes Calderón's *La vida es sueño* as its model and develops many Baroque tropes, which Benjamin had been investigating in depth in preparation for *Ursprung*:

Sie werden es mit Nachsicht aufnehmen, wenn ich die Meinung gestehe, für diese Rechenschaft etwas besser vorbereitet zu sein als ein beliebiger anderer Leser und darum werde ich Ihnen meine Freude vertrauen dürfen, in ihm einen geistigen Bereich mir immer deutlicher eröffnet zu sehen, an den meine letzten Studien ganz nah mich herangeführt hatten (*Briefe*, p. 385).

You will consider my words with leniency when I admit the opinion that I am slightly better prepared to render an account than any other arbitrary reader, and that is why I will be able to confide to you my joy in seeing that it [the play *Der Turm*] opens up to me a spiritual area to which my most recent studies have led me ever closer.

The passage should not be simply understood as the efforts of a younger scholar to make a good impression on Hofmannsthal, already a well-established writer in the German republic of letters of the time. In a later correspondence, as we will see,

²⁷ *Briefe*, I, § 143 An Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Grunewald, 11.6.1925, I, 384-90 (pp. 384-85).

Benjamin openly admits that he does not know enough about Shakespeare to satisfy Hofmannsthal's questions. But, in the case of *Der Turm* and Calderón, Benjamin feels justified to elaborate his point in detail: in addition to his continued research on the Baroque, he confesses that he has repeatedly read Hofmannsthal's play. Benjamin therefore feels confident enough, and quite happy indeed, to share his thoughts on the matter.

The first thing that stands out in the letter is that *Der Turm* has opened up a "geistiger Bereich" (spiritual area) that resonates well with Benjamin's research on the Baroque. Going straight to the point, Benjamin tells Hofmannsthal that he understands the play as the purest and even most canonical form of a *Trauerspiel*: "In Wahrheit sehe ich in Ihrem Werk ein Trauerspiel in seiner reinsten, kanonischen Form" (*Briefe*, p. 385; "in truth, what I see in your work is a mourning play in its purest, canonical form"). This represents a defence and even a vindication of Hofmannsthal as an artist, since — in terms reminiscent of Nietzsche's initial defence of Wagner — he is framed within a wider narrative of the renaissance of German drama in general and the *Trauerspiel* ("mourning play") in particular:

Und zugleich empfinde ich die außerordentliche dramatische Kraft, deren diese Form [die Trauerspiele], der verbreiteten Bildungsmeinung zum Trotz, in ihren höchsten Repräsentationen fähig ist. Ein Vergleich mit Ihren übrigen Werken steht mir an dieser Stelle nicht zu: aber vielleicht empfinde ich recht, wenn ich dieses letzte als eine Krönung ihrer Erneuerung und Wiedergeburt jener deutschen Barockform ansehe und als ein Werk von höchster Autorität für die Bühne (*Briefe*, p. 385).

And at the same time, I feel the extraordinary dramatic power of which this form (the mourning play), widespread educated opinion notwithstanding, is capable in its highest expressions [Repräsentationen]. At this point I am not entitled to make a comparison with your other works — but perhaps I have the correct feeling when I see your last work as the pinnacle of the renewal and renaissance [Wiedergeburt] of that German Baroque form and as a work of the highest authority for the stage.

Benjamin's emphasis on the "Wiedergeburt jener deutschen Barockform" (renaissance of the German Baroque form [mourning play]) is the key to this passage, and it sheds light on the project of *Ursprung* too. Jane Newman has shown that Benjamin's vindication of

the German Baroque is embedded within debates about the cultural heritage of the German nation: just as the scholarly study of the Renaissance had been used to justify the nation-building project of Spain, England, and Italy, Benjamin champions the Baroque as the source or origin of a truly German Renaissance.²⁸ Benjamin's analysis of mourning plays is indeed driven by his desire to unearth an alternative modernity, i.e.: a modernity that champions Germany's cultural heritage, but which, at the same time, also distances itself from the nation's involvement in the Great War (see Chapter Two). He finds such an alternative modernity in Hofmannsthal's *Der Turm*, which is said to bring back to life the old-fashioned forms of the German *Trauerspiel*.

Benjamin is well-aware, however, that it may sound contradictory to unearth the renaissance of the *German* mourning play in none other than in Hofmannsthal's *Der Turm*, which after all reworks Calderón's *La vida es sueño*. In contrast to *Ursprung*, Benjamin uses a much clearer prose in his personal correspondence and swiftly addresses this issue. He tells Hofmannsthal that *Der Turm* is only indebted to Calderón at the level of content; it reworks its material, yet it structures it within an altogether different form:

Es hat mich Studium und Überlegung dahin geführt, daß ich mit einem gewissen Grade von Sicherheit glaube vermuten zu dürfen, daß Sie mit Calderon nicht mehr als den puren Stoff der Sage teilen und teilen wollen. Und darum schiene ein Wort des Vergleiches mir wenig angebracht (*Briefe*, p. 386).

Study and thorough reflection have led me to this point that I believe I may assume with a certain degree of certainty that you do not share and want to share with Calderón anything but the pure content of the legend. And that is why a word of comparison would not appear appropriate to me.

The poetic renaissance embodied by *Der Turm* should be not traced back to Calderón. Instead, the passage reiterates the point above that the play is indebted to the *German* forms of the Baroque. Benjamin makes an effort to further emphasise the differences

²⁸ Newman, "Inventing the Baroque: A Critical History of Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Debates", *Benjamin's Library*, pp. 24-79.

between Calderón and *Der Turm* by first focusing on Calderón's poetics, which are then compared to Hofmannsthal's own treatment of the material.

Wohl aber darf ich Ihnen vielleicht sagen, daß ich mir Calderons in diesem wie fast in jedem Drama höchst merkwürdiges und philosophisches Vorgehen verdeutlichte: er kristallisiert, fast im Sinne der Moralitäten, das Tiefste als Formel; die wendet er hin und her und in dem facettierten Inbegriff reflektiert sich bedeutsam ein sehr unbekümmert, leicht und flüchtig aufgebautes Spiel (*Briefe*, p. 386).

But I may perhaps tell you that I have clarified to myself Calderón's most peculiar and philosophical procedure in this as in almost every drama: he crystallises, almost in the sense of morality plays [Moralitäten], the most profound as formula; this he turns back and forth and in the multi-faceted embodiment [Inbegriff] a very carefree, light, and fleetingly constructed play reflects itself.

Benjamin's reading here resonates well with passages from *Ursprung* that will be analysed in depth in Chapter Two; the main point is that Calderón's totalizing metaphors point towards a carefree, light, and fleetingly-structured play: "ein sehr unbekümmert, leicht und flüchtig aufgebautes Spiel". Benjamin reads this emphasis on play as a sign of Calderón's re-sacralisation of earthly matters, for it provides the playwright's dramas with a formal sense of harmony and closure. Ultimately, as we shall see, this means that Calderón's aesthetics, in Tridentine fashion, appease the theological anxieties of the seventeenth century.

In contrast, Hofmannsthal shapes the material of *La vida es sueño* in a completely different form, and in so doing aligns himself with the dramatic tradition of the *German* Baroque. Unlike the Calderón of Jena Romanticism, who offers false promises of redemption (or glimpses into heaven, as Curtius would have put it), Benjamin argues that *Der Turm* underscores the banality of all earthly matters and the infinite distance between this world and the divine. Hence he tells Hofmannsthal that the Sigismund of *Der Turm* represents, in a much more radical sense than Calderón's Segismundo, a *Creatur* (*Briefe*, p. 386; "creature").

To a modern lay reader, this might seem an obscure remark, but Benjamin is here building on the German tradition, in which creaturely life, as Daniel Weidner has

explained, represents a mode of being in the world at the crossroad between the *übernatürlich* (“supernatural”) and the *untermenschlich* (“subhuman”).²⁹ *Ursprung* describes creaturely life as a life bereft of spirit awaiting an otherworldly redemption, which will most probably never come (Weidner, *Kreatürlichkeit*, p. 391-92).³⁰ This is confirmed by Benjamin’s closing remarks on *Der Turm*:

Unterliegen muß ja der Prinz [Sigismund] Ist es im Grund nicht nur die wiederkehrende Gewalt der toten Dinge, des Schweins, mit dem er eines zu werden fürchtete, der er unterliegt? In der Beschwörung, welche da zumeist in Trauerspielen nichts als Intermezzo ist, vernichtet dieses Kind, das sie auf Kinderweise als sein letztes Mittel handhabt, sich selbst. Die Geister, die dem Trauerspiele obligat sind, verbinden hier sich innigst mit der Kreatur (*Briefe*, p. 387)

The Prince [Sigismund] must succumb [unterliegen]. Is it basically not simply the recurring force of dead things, of the pig with which he feared to become one, to which he succumbs? In the evocation, which is mostly nothing but an Intermezzo in mourning plays, this child, who uses it in a childish manner as a last resort, destroys himself. The ghosts, which are obligatory in mourning plays, are here most intimately connected with the creature.

Benjamin’s letters to Hofmannsthal reinforce *Ursprung*’s defence of *German Baroque* mourning plays, contrasted as they are to the forms of Spanish Baroque dramas. The laudatory tone towards Hofmannsthal’s drama betrays the hope that a different artform might develop in Benjamin’s own times; an artform which rises up to the challenges of his own times and which rejects the mesmerizing aesthetics of the Romantic Calderón.

²⁹ Daniel Weidner, “Kreatürlichkeit. Benjamins Trauerspielbuch und das Leben des Barock”, in *Profanes Leben. Walter Benjamins Dialektik der Säkularisierung*, ed. by Weidner (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2010), pp. 120-38, p. 121. For a study of the connotations of the term creatureliness in the German tradition, see also Eric Santner, “On creaturely life”, in *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Sebald, and Benjamin* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 1-42; Helmut Lethen, “VI. Die Kreatur”, in *Verhaltenslehre der Kälte: Lebensversuche zwischen den Kriegen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994), pp. 245-270; Sigrid Weigel, “Die Kreatur und das Heilige: Benjamins Umgang mit der Säkularisierung”, in *Walter Benjamin: die Kreatur, das Heilige, die Bilder* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2008), pp. 27-56; and Barbara Maj, “Allegory, Metonymy and Creatureliness: Walter Benjamin and the Religious Roots of Modern Art”, in *The Early Frankfurt School and Religion*, ed. by Margarete Kohlenbach and Raymond Geuss (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 85-99, DOI: 10.1057/9780230523523593.

³⁰ On Benjamin and redemption/salvation, see, amongst others, Willen van Reijen, ‘Innerlichkeit oder Begriffsarbeit? Die Barockrezeption W. Benjamins und Th. W. Adornos’, in *Allegorie und Melancholie*, Neue Folge 704 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), pp. 17-31; Newman, *Benjamin’s Library*, pp. 141-2; Michael Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Literary Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 24-82; Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1982); Jürgen Habermas, ‘Bewußtmachende oder rettende Kritik: die Aktualität Walter Benjamins’, in *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins: Aus Anlaß des 80. Geburtstag von Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), pp. 173-225; Heinrich Kaulen, “Rettung”, in *Benjamins Begriffe*, ed. by Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla, 2 vol. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000), II, 619-665; Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981).

Benjamin's defence of the German *Trauerspiele* embodies a wake-up call for his contemporaries.

A few months later, Benjamin makes another reference to Calderón's metaphors in another letter to Hofmannsthal. Dated 28 December 1925, it begins with an apology: Benjamin confesses that he does not feel confident enough to write at length about Shakespeare, about which Hofmannsthal had enquired, because he has only approached him at a distance and periodically: "Ich bin im Shakespeare nicht eigentlich zu Hause sondern nur in Abständen, vereinzelt an ihm herangetragen" (*Briefe*, p. 406; I am not really acquainted with Shakespeare but have only intermittently, sporadically engaged with his work). He also expresses his sadness about Florens Christian Rang's death; it was only in his company that he had truly felt comfortable with Shakespeare (*Briefe*, p. 406).³¹ Nevertheless, Benjamin feels compelled to express his critical intuitions to Hofmannsthal, and he does so through another telling comparison to Calderón:

Jedenfalls hat Calderon eine blendende Metaphorik, dir mir von der Shakespeares höchst verschieden scheint: ist dies der Fall, so würden beide sich gewiß als die bedeutesten polaren Ausprägungen der barocken Bilderrede zu erkennen geben (Shakespeares Bild als "Gleichnis und Figur" der Handlungen und des Menschen, das Calderonsche als romantische Potenzierung des Redens selber) (*Briefe*, p. 406).

In any case, Calderon has a dazzling imagery that seems to me very different from Shakespeare's: if this is the case, then both would certainly reveal themselves as the most important polar expressions of baroque imagery [Bilderrede] (Shakespeare's imagery [Bild] as "Likeness and Figure" of the actions and of humanity, Calderón's as romantic potentiation of speaking itself)

Benjamin's emphasis on form in his literary criticism sets a scholarly tone to his letters, for it summons the literary skills of a professional reader. The reader is told that a close investigation of Calderón and Shakespeare leads us toward "die barocke Bilderrede" (Baroque pictorial speech), which turns out to be the authentic issue behind both playwrights. The assumption here, as throughout Benjamin's studies on the Baroque, is

³¹ On Benjamin's relationship to Rang, see Carrie L. Asman, "Theater and Agon/Agon and Theater: Walter Benjamin and Florens Christian Rang", *Modern Language Notes*, 107.3 (1992), 606-24. DOI: 10.2307/2904948.

that the form of artworks provides material expression to the spirit of any given age; and that the skilled attention of the literary critic is necessary in order to unearth the true spiritual situation of the Baroque. In the case of Calderón, the attention is therefore paid to his metaphors, which are said to reflect the “romantische Potenzierung des Redens selber” (Romantic potentiation of speech and aestheticism itself). Although enigmatic, the claim points towards the sacred connotation of language in the Romantic tradition.³² Furthermore, Benjamin’s description of Calderón’s metaphors as “blendend” (dazzling) parallels Schlegel’s comparison of Calderón’s metaphors to fireworks. Hence Calderón represents a truly ‘Romantic’ writer. Taking the lead from the Romantic interpretation, Benjamin argues that Calderón’s plays sacralises earthly matters through the artistic wonders of his metaphors. But this insight is not further explored in the letter, and Benjamin instead changes the subject to Proust.

In a nutshell, this chapter has shown that the Romantic interpretation of Calderón was still prevalent in Benjamin’s time. Indeed, *Ursprung*’s discussion on Baroque drama should be understood as a response to the aesthetic and political project of Jena Romanticism, in which Calderón represents the emblem for the fight against what they took to be a ‘disenchanted’ version of everyday life. It is against such a Romantic version of what it means to be ‘modern’ that Benjamin builds his defence of *German* Baroque drama. The following chapter reconstructs in detail Benjamin’s argument as from the structuring dialectic between Spanish vs. German Baroque drama and Catholic vs. Protestant theology.

³² See A.W. Schlegel, “Sprache und Poetik” and “Die Kunstlehre”, in *Kritische Schriften und Briefe*, ed. by Edgar Lohner, 2 vols (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1962).

MODERNITY II: WALTER BENJAMIN'S THEORY OF THE BAROQUE ORIGINS OF MODERNITY

In 1989, Uwe Steiner decried the lack of philological rigour with which Walter Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* had been interpreted. Despite the rising popularity of the philosopher and literary critic at the time, his obscure theory of the Baroque had not much impact on philologist experts in the seventeenth-century; whereas philosophers and cultural critics, who did not engage with Benjamin and were enthused by his more abstract ponderings, rather surprisingly overlooked the analysis of *Trauerspiele* ("mourning plays"), the book's primary field of enquiry.³³

The extent to which Steiner hits the spot is evinced by the publication, also in 1989, of Susan Buck-Morss's *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Seeking confirmation for her Marxist-Kabbalistic reading, Susan Buck-Morss claims that the Protestant theological solution to the problem of allegory of German Baroque drama is not affirmed but critiqued by Benjamin — a rather dubious assertion once we philologically reconstruct the book's argument.³⁴ As mentioned in the Introduction, the gap in the scholarship has been gradually filled in since then. In 2011, Jane Newman contextualised the *Trauerspiel* study within the debates about the Baroque in Weimar Germany, offering close readings of the afterlives of *Hamlet* and *Catharina von Georgien* at the time; and, from 2010 to 2019, Daniel Weidner has published a series of essays and chapters on Baroque martyr-plays which engage with Benjamin's theory of the Baroque. The work of both scholars underlines Benjamin's

³³ See Uwe Steiner, "Allegorie und Allergie. Bemerkungen zur Diskussion um Benjamins Trauerspielbuch in der Barockforschung", *Daphnis*, 18.4 (1989), 641-701, DOI: 10.1163/18796583-90000474; and Claude Haas and Daniel Weidner, (eds.) "Einleitung", in *Benjamins Trauerspiel: Theorie, Lektüren, Nachleben*, *LiteraturForschung*, 21 (Berlin: Kadmos, 2014), pp. 7-25 (p.7).

³⁴ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989) goes to the extent of claiming that "the outline of [Benjamin's] critique [against the allegorists of German Baroque drama] might remain unnoticed by the naïve reader" (p. 174). Rita Felski brilliantly spells out, in her *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, IL, and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015) the limitations of derogatorily building an argument against the backdrop of such a "naïve" reader.

defence of seventeenth-century German drama within a theological framework of important political implications.³⁵

Building on Newman and Weidner's work, this chapter delineates the place of Calderón de la Barca in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. The Spaniard has been barely taken into account by Benjamin scholars, even though he constitutes a recurring theme as the complex counterpoint of the literary critic's argument. From the standpoint of modern research practices, however, it makes sense that Benjamin's reading of Calderón has barely been studied, since the fields of early modern Spanish Studies and German Thought have traditionally remained separated in both method and content, despite a few notable exceptions.³⁶ From the standpoint of intellectual history, this gap remains unjustifiable: Calderón's afterlife in Jena Romanticism is central to understanding Benjamin's thesis.³⁷ Benjamin himself acknowledged the significance of the Spanish playwright in a letter written to Gerhard Scholem in 1924: "Der virtuelle Gegenstand der Abhandlung wird Calderon sein" (*Briefe I*, p. 366; "The virtual subject

³⁵ See Newman, *Benjamin's Library: Modernity, Nation, and the Baroque* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Daniel Weidner, "Kreatürlichkeit: Benjamins Trauerspielbuch und das Leben des Barock" in *Profanes Leben: Walter Benjamins Dialektik der Säkularisierung*, ed. by Weidner (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010), pp. 120-38; "Gespielte Zeugen. Der Schauspieler-Märtyrer auf dem Barocktheater", in *Grenzgänger der Religionskulturen. Kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zu Gegenwart und Geschichte der Märtyrer*, ed. by Silvia Horsch and Martin Treml (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2011), pp. 259-79; "Sagen, Glauben, Zeigen. Politik der Repräsentation in Martyrologien der Reformation", in *Zeugnis und Zeugenschaft: Perspektiven aus der Vormoderne*, ed. by Wolfram Drews and Heike Schlie, Trajekte (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2011), pp. 167-98; "'Schau in dem Tempel an den ganz zerstückten Leib, der auf dem Kreuze leiget': Sakramentale Repräsentation in Gryphius' *Leo Armenius*", *Daphnis*, 39.1-2, (2010), 287-312, DOI:10.1163/18796583-90000798; Claude Haas and Daniel Weidner, "Einleitung", in *Benjamins Trauerspiel: Theorie, Lektüren, Nachleben*, ed. by Haas and Weidner, *LiteraturForschung*, 21 (Berlin: Kadmos, 2014), pp. 7-25; and Weidner, "Aufführung des Wortes: Theater und Sakrament", in *Sakramentale Repräsentation: Substanz, Zeichen, und Präsenz in der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Stefanie Ertz, Heike Schlie, and Daniel Weidner (Leiden: Brill and Wilhelm Fink, 2019), pp. 177-207. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30965/9783846752487>.

³⁶ On Benjamin and the Spanish Baroque, see Anthony Cascardi, "'Comedia' and 'Trauerspiel': On Benjamin and Calderón", *Comparative Drama*, 16.1 (1982), 1-11; Sofie Kluge, *Baroque, Allegory, Comedia: The Transfiguration of Tragedy in Seventeenth-Century Spain*, Teatro del Siglo de Oro: Estudios de Literatura, 114 (Kassel: Reichenberger, 2010); and Gerhard Poppenberg, *Psyche und Allegorie: Studien zum spanischen auto sacramental von den Anfängen bis zum Calderón* (Munich: Fink, 2003). On the afterlives of Baltasar Gracián in early twentieth-century Germany, see Helmut Lethen, 'Die Wiederkehr der »kalten persona« des Jesuiten Gracián', in his *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte: Lebensversuche zwischen den Kriegen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), pp. 53-70.

³⁷ Buck-Morss misconstrues *Ursprung's* argument because she overlooks the book's contrast between German and Spanish Baroque drama.

of the treatise will be Calderón”). This chapter argues that, once we reconstruct Benjamin’s argument about Calderón, the assumptions behind *Ursprung*’s aesthetics of ruins, rubble, destruction, and fragmentation come more clearly to the fore.³⁸

Sofie Kluge and Gerhard Poppenberg are the only scholars who, taking seriously Benjamin’s aforementioned letter to Scholem, have researched in depth Spanish Baroque drama in light of his theory of the Baroque. Whereas Poppenberg investigates the *auto sacramental* following Benjamin’s remark that early modern drama is best contextualised within the tradition of religious mystery plays rather than within Ancient Greek poetics (a claim I consider more in depth in this chapter), Kluge sets out Calderón’s place in Benjamin’s theory from the very beginning of her book on the Spanish *comedia*. She explains that, in *Ursprung*, the Spanish dramatist is dialectically opposed to German Baroque drama. Although both German and Spanish Baroque drama react to the same socio-historical and theological crisis, Benjamin argues that Spanish Baroque drama — epitomised in the work of Calderón — represents an aesthetically superior yet ethically inferior answer to the problems of the day (*Ursprung*, p. 263).³⁹ Contra Benjamin, Kluge identifies in Calderón a version of modernity in which ethics, metaphysics, and secularism are not at odds (*Baroque, Allegory, Comedia*, p. 202). Her research remains a poignant reminder that melancholy is not the only available affect with which to authentically and ethically inhabit our everyday lives, as is otherwise the case in *Ursprung*.

With the aim of reconstructing Benjamin’s argument on Calderón, then, this chapter begins by considering the poetics of the new theatre that developed at the turn

³⁸ For a historical contextualisation of the fascination with destruction and apocalypse in Weimar Germany, see Jürgen Brokoff, *Apokalypse in der Weimarer Republik* (Munich: Fink, 2001), especially the chapter ‘Die apokalyptische Dekonstruktion des Rechts: Walter Benjamins Theorie der Gewalt’, pp. 53–74, https://digi20.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/fs1/object/display/bsb00041078_00003.html. See also Nitzan Lebovic, “Benjamin’s Nihilism”, in *Benjamin Studien 2*, ed. by Daniel Weidner and Sigrid Weigel, 3 vols (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2011), pp. 145–60.

³⁹ See Kluge, “Benjamin’s Baroque Study”, in *Baroque, Allegory, Comedia*, pp. 18–28.

of the seventeenth century. It does so by briefly turning to Lope de Vega's *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo* (1609) — the first European poetic statement which disrespects neo-Aristotelian doctrine — alongside Benjamin's unpublished essays on Baroque drama "Über das Mittelalter", "Trauerspiel und Tragödie", and "Die Bedeutung der Sprache in Trauerspiel und Tragödie", all written in 1916.⁴⁰ This initial discussion establishes the assumptions of Benjamin's approach to Baroque theatre, which play a major role in the argument of *Ursprung*. Likewise, the chapter also considers Georg Lukács' *Die Theorie des Romans* (1920), for it spells out the meaning of *das Dämonische* ("the daemonic") in the German early-twentieth century academic tradition; as I show, this is a key term to understand Benjamin's theological remarks on Baroque drama.⁴¹ It then argues that *Ursprung* begs the question whether Baroque drama recreates the divine on stage; and that Benjamin points out that this theological matter can be traced back to the medieval mystery play tradition. From the source of medieval theatre, two opposite developments are highlighted. On the one side, the ideologically misleading path of Calderón and the Romantics, tainted by the aesthetics of the Counter-Reformation; on the other, that of Gryphius, Lohenstein, and other lesser-known Baroque dramatists, embodying the alternative modernity for which the book makes its case in political, theological, aesthetic, and even ethical terms.

History Enters the Stage: The New Drama of the Baroque

In 1609, the Academia de Madrid became the stage of history when Lope de Vega, by then a well-known and acclaimed dramatist, read aloud, before a learned academic

⁴⁰ "Über das Mittelalter", "Trauerspiel und Tragödie", "Die Bedeutung der Sprache in Trauerspiel und Tragödie", *GS*, II/1: *Aufsätze, Essays, Vorträge*, pp. 132-33, 133-37, 137-40. For the translations, see "Trauerspiel and Tragedy" and "The Role of Language in Trauerspiel and Tragedy", in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 1913-1926*, transl. by Rodney Livingstone and others, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA; London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), vol 1, pp. 55-59, 59-62.

⁴¹ The concept of the daemonic in the German tradition finds its roots in Goethe. See Angus Nicholis, *Goethe's Concept of the Daemonic: After the Ancients* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006).

audience, a panegyric entitled *El arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo* (“New rules for writing plays in this time”).⁴² Against the poetic practices of the elites, Lope unabashedly and as a provocation proclaims that his poetics are indebted to the “vulgo”. In the Spanish Baroque, the noun “vulgo” referred, with negative connotations, to the lay public; but in the *Arte nuevo* the playwright uses it ironically by creating an echo with “justo” (just) and “gusto” (taste), the overall aim being to persuade his audience whilst also making fun of their erudition. The new practices of seventeenth-century drama, Lope proclaims, are not of his invention: he is only catering to the modern “gusto” of the “vulgo” (masses). For Lope, this could not be more “justo” (appropriate), since theatres and indeed his own livelihood depend on their money. The new audiences of early modern drama demand a theatre which mixes comedy and tragedy, disregards neo-Aristotelian unities of time and place, and is based upon emotion, identification, and dramatic tension.⁴³ Lope mockingly justifies himself before the Academia de Madrid in saying that he has not created the new theatre; he is just its mouthpiece.

Nevertheless, a sense of dignity, an aura indeed, still surrounded neo-Aristotelian doctrine: in opposition to the new consumer public, academics and moralists alike fought to maintain their place as regulators of public taste.⁴⁴ For Lope, to resist this transformative process meant to uproot art from its true context, that is, from the public who not only paid to see his dramas, but who also embodied the attachments and detachments that his plays aimed to elicit.⁴⁵ Indeed, Lope reminds his learned

⁴² Lope de Vega, *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias*, ed. by Felipe B. Pedraza and Pedro Conde Parrado ([Cuenca]: Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2016).

⁴³ “[el escritor de comedias] describa los amantes con afectos / que muevan con extreme a quien escucha; / los soliloquios pinte de manera / que se transforme todo el recitante / y, con mudarse a sí, mude al oyente.” vv. 272-76.

⁴⁴ See Emilio Cotarelo y Mori, *Bibliografía de las controversias sobre la licitud del teatro en España* [Madrid, 1904], preliminary study by José Luis Suárez García (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 1997); Federico Sánchez Escribano and Alberto Porqueras Mayo, *Preceptiva dramática española del Renacimiento y Barroco*, Biblioteca románica e hispánica, IV, 3 rev. 2nd edn (Madrid: Gredos, 1972).

⁴⁵ “Porque considerando que la cólera / de un español sentado no se templa / si no le representan en dos horas / hasta el Final Juicio desde el Génesis, / yo hallo que, si allí se ha de dar gusto / con lo que se consigue es lo más justo” (vv. 205-10). On attachment as an aesthetic category, see Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago, IL, and London: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

audience at the *Academia de Madrid* that customs changed.⁴⁶ The playwright's position implies that movement, not stillness, is the fundamental state of the world.

Three hundred years after Lope's poetic statement, Benjamin, speaking to a scholarly audience, still felt it necessary to justify his point that Baroque drama could not simply be read with neo-Aristotelian lenses.⁴⁷ The tradition behind Baroque drama, in his argument, has been fundamentally misread by Weimar Classicism, which insisted in classifying it as a lesser form of Aristotelian tragedy. Benjamin would have agreed with Lope's emphasis on the transience of customs and with his claim that neo-Aristotelians fail to grasp the reality of Baroque drama. According to the literary critic and philosopher, the stark historical consciousness of this theatre shapes it in ways that set it apart from the framework of Aristotelian tragedy. For an adequate understanding of what is at stake in Baroque drama, Benjamin points out that we have to turn to medieval mystery plays, defined by the problem of historical time.⁴⁸

In the Spanish context, it was not until 1975 that this connection was made and fully researched: in Ronald Surtz's landmark study of the birth of theatre in Spain, the medieval religious ritual of the Mass is singled as a major source of and influence on the commercial theatre inaugurated by Lope.⁴⁹ It bequeathed, so Surtz tells us, a tension between the otherworldly and the profane, between timelessness and finitude (*The Birth of a Theater*, p. 41). The origins of this tension are to be found in the paradoxes that came along with the allegorisation and theatricalisation of the Mass. As ritual, the Mass

⁴⁶ See the highly ironical verses "Mas porque, en fin, hallé que las comedias / estaban en España, en aquel tiempo, / no como sus primeros inventores / pensaron que en el mundo se escribieran, / mas como las trataron los bárbaros / que enseñan al vulgo sus rudezas; / y así, se introdujeron de tal modo / que, quien con arte agora las escribe, / muere sin fama y galardón, que puede / entre los que carecen de lumbré, / más que razón y fuerza, la costumbre" (vv. 22-32).

⁴⁷ Benjamin, "Einfluß des Aristoteles bedeutungslos", in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (GS I/1: *Abhandlungen*, pp. 240-2).

⁴⁸ Haas and Weidner, *Benjamins Trauerspiel*, p. 9. See also Hans Jürgen Scheuer, "Die Körper des Königs und der Leib des Herrn. Barockes Trauerspiel und mittelalterliches Fronleichnamsmysterium", *Benjamins Trauerspiel*, pp. 123-141; and Weidner, "Kreatürlichkeit", pp. 120-138, esp. p. 126.

⁴⁹ Ronald Surtz, *The Birth of a Theater: Dramatic Convention in the Spanish Theatre from Juan de la Encina to Lope de Vega* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 41.

belongs to timelessness. Nevertheless, “the original sacrifice is neither represented nor commemorated, but actually made present in the here-and-now of the congregation” (p. 41). Yet, as the participants began to play out roles from the history of salvation, a linear sense of time, based on sacred history, entered the stage; the ritual became ambiguous, in-between a finite and an eternal sense of time. Allegorisation and theatricality calls for narrative development, which clashes with the eternal presence of the Mass as a ritual; the mixture between both temporalities trains its participants to move in and out of time and timelessness (Surtz, *The Birth of a Theatre*, p. 41).⁵⁰ The intense engagement elicited by the Mass, its public being accustomed to shifting from role play back to being the actual audience of the priest’s liturgy, explains the stark sense of self-awareness of the *comedia*. In this framework, tragedy and tragic poetics simply have no place.⁵¹

Benjamin contrasts the terms *Tragödie* (“tragedy”) and *Trauerspiel* (“mourning plays”) to describe his understanding of these two distinct theatrical traditions, the key difference being the implicit understanding of time in both genres: “An ihrer unterschiedlichen Stellung zur historischen Zeit scheiden sich Trauerspiel und Tragödie” (“*Trauerspiel und Tragödie*”, p. 134; “Tragedy is distinguished from *Trauerspiel* through the different ways they relate to historical time”, “*Trauerspiel and Tragedy*”, p. 242). In Ancient Tragedy a “full” notion of time reigns sovereign, whereby

⁵⁰ On Spanish medieval drama, see Charlotte Stern, “The Medieval Theatre: Between *Scriptura* and *Theatrica*”, in in *The Cambridge History of Spanish Literature*, ed. by David T. Gies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 115-34, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521806183>; and her *The Medieval Theater in Castile*, Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies, 156 (Binghamton, NY: State University of New York, 1996).

⁵¹ Hence the endless discussions about the tragic potential of early modern Spanish drama simply lose their meaning; building on the work of Marc Vitse, this point has been also recently raised by María José Caamaño Rojo in her ‘Introducción’ to Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *El mayor monstruo del mundo y El mayor monstruo, los celos*, ed. María J. Caamaño Rojo, Biblioteca Áurea Hispánica, 114 (Madrid: Iberoamericana-Vervuet, 2017), pp. 21-27. For a recent attempt to vindicate Spanish tragedy, see Frederick A. de Armas, Luciano García Lorenzo, and Enrique García Santo-Tomás (eds.) *Hacia la tragedia áurea: lecturas para un nuevo milenio*, Biblioteca Áurea Hispánica, 55 (Madrid: Iberoamericana-Vervuet, 2008); and Henry W. Sullivan, *Tragic Drama in the Golden Age of Spain: Seven Essays on the Definition of a Genre* (Kassel: Reichenberger, 2018).

the death of the main tragic heroine paradoxically secures her immortality; even the smallest of her mistakes and moments of passive rest are inscribed in a wider network of significance, which ultimately boils down to the heroine's fight against the mythic forces that oppose her ("*Trauerspiel und Tragödie*", pp. 134-5).⁵² The magnitude of this opposition is what constitutes the tragic core; ultimately, the heroine can only rise victorious by giving up her life. And yet, for Benjamin, her death secures her immortality and destabilises the old regime of power—even to the point of clearing the ground for a new political order. This is no longer the framework of the early modern world nor, for that matter, of the Middle Ages.

Benjamin's early literary criticism works with the assumption that art captures the spirit of any given epoch. He follows a Hegelian approach to literature that is well-established in the German tradition and which, in his time, found an influential and clear expression in Georg Lukács' *Die Theorie des Romans* (1920).⁵³ Like Benjamin in *Ursprung*, Lukács identifies the key difference between the old and the modern world in modernity's meaninglessness and lack of cohesiveness, which should be honoured and respected in art.⁵⁴ From early modernity onwards, Lukács tells us, any attempts to restore order, to re-create the totality of life in art, is bound to fail; and this is why he posits that the novel, defined by the quest for meaning, has become the characteristic form of the epoch: "Die Roman ist die Epopöe eines Zeitalters, für das die extensive

⁵² See Eli Friedlander, "Time", in *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 60-73.

⁵³ For Lukács' influence on Benjamin, see Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* [1982], Weimar and Now, 7 rev. edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 21.

⁵⁴ Lukács focuses on the transition from the epic genre to the novel, and posits that Cervantes' *Don Quixote* inaugurates the homelessness of the modern condition. See Georg Lukács, *Die Theorie des Romans: ein geschichtsphilosophischer Versuch über die Formen der großen Epik* [Berlin: Cassirer, 1920], 3 rev. edn (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1971). The first edition of the text can be found online: <https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_LshnAAAAIAAJ/>. For the translation, see Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historical-philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, transl. by Anna Bostock (London: The Merlin Press, reprint. 1971). Like Benjamin's reading of Calderón, Lukács' reading of Cervantes is also indebted to the Romantic tradition. See Anthony Close, *The Romantic Approach to Don Quixote: A Critical History of the Romantic Tradition in Quixote Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

Totalität des Lebens nicht mehr sinnfällig gegeben ist, für das die Lebensimmanenz des Sinnes zum Problem geworden ist, und das dennoch die Gesinnung zur Totalität hat (*Theorie des Romans*, p. 47; “The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, yet which still thinks in terms of totality”, *Theory of the Novel*, p. 56).

Lukács assumes that the modern subject is irredeemably alienated from the world, which he defines as a state of “transzendente Heimatlosigkeit” (*Theorie des Romans*, p. 52; transcendental homelessness). Hence, he argues, the novel faces two dangers: either it overlooks the divide between immanence and transcendence and therefore recreates the “Idyllenhafte” (i.e. a totalizing and illusive ideal), or it can altogether forget the quest for meaning and become mere entertainment (*Theorie des Romans*, p. 61). As a consequence of such dangers, Lukács calls the form “daemonic”, by which he means that it carries an essential ambiguity that cannot be solved.⁵⁵

Der Roman ist die Epopöe der gottverlassenen Welt; die Psychologie des Romanhelden ist das Dämonische; die Objektivität des Romans die männlich reife Einsicht, daß der Sinn die Wirklichkeit niemals ganz zu durchdringen vermag, daß aber diese ohne ihn ins Nichts der Wesenlosigkeit zerfallen würde (*Theorie des Romans*, p. 77).

The novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God. The hero's novel psychology is daemonic; the objectivity of the novel is the mature's man's knowledge that meaning can never quite penetrate reality, but that, without meaning, reality would disintegrate into the nothingness of inessentiality (*Theory of the Novel*, p. 88).

The term “das Dämonische” (the daemonic) captures what Lukács identifies as the crux of modernity, which traps individuals between a rock and a hard place; as much as the modern subject might yearn for meaning, any attempt to construct such meaning is doomed to failure. The only solution available, as Kluge emphasises, remains a “negative mysticism” that is achieved through Lukács’ invocation of Romantic irony, which allows the artist to at least acknowledge the absence of metaphysical meaning.

⁵⁵ See Kluge, “Georg Lukács’ *Theory of the Novel*”, in *Honest Entertainment, Transcendental Jest* [2006], transl. by Gaye Kynoch, *Problemata Literaria*, 81 (Kassel: Reichenberger, 2017), pp.108-43 (pp. 120-2).

But this is not the place to unpack in full the implications of Lukács' argument. The objective is to highlight that, in *Ursprung*, Benjamin follows the same assumption that literary forms reflect the aporias of 'the modern condition'; that totalizing artforms betray the delusive efforts to overlook the epoch's alienation and meaninglessness; and that the 'demonic' refers to an illegitimate mixture between the orders of immanence and transcendence.⁵⁶

Rather than focusing on the novel, *Ursprung* focuses on the western theatrical tradition. The change of genre allows the philosopher and literary critic to highlight the importance of theology for his theory of modernity, as critics such as Wolin have pointed out (*Walter Benjamin*, p. 21). This is because the issue of sacred representation is central to Baroque theatre; in Benjamin's argument, this drama epitomises the theological anxieties that differentiate the ancient and the modern world.⁵⁷ Whereas *Tragödie* ("tragedy"), representing the ancients, does not problematise the sacred/profane relationship, *Trauerspiele* ("mourning plays"), representing the moderns, employ the allegorical technique of metafiction to express its deep anxiety and uncertainty about sacred matters.⁵⁸ Benjamin tells us that, from early modernity onwards, the rejection of such anxieties paints deceitful appearances of totality. This is why he takes the German mourning plays as his model for an alternative modernity: in their failed allegories, the form of such Baroque dramas embraces the impossibility of finding redemption in the modern world. In the next section, I spell in more depth out

⁵⁶ See Weidner, "Thinking Beyond Secularization: Walter Benjamin, the "Religious Turn", and the Poetics of Theory", *New German Critique*, 37.3 (2010), 131-48 (p. 142): "As every reader of Benjamin knows, this predicate is crucial for his entire work. Especially in his earlier texts, and more explicitly in his discussion with Scholem, the "demonic" signifies an illegitimate mixing of the different spheres and is therefore essential for the question of the boundaries of his thought."

⁵⁷ See Daniel Weidner, Stefanie Ertz, and Heike Schlie, *Sakramentale Repräsentation: Substanz, Zeichen, und Präsenz in der frühen Neuzeit* (Leiden: Brill and Wilhelm Fink, 2019). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30965/9783846752487> Weidner, 'Schau in dem Tempel an', p. 289: "Das Theater ist für die Frage nach der Sakramentalen Repräsentation der Frühen Neuzeit schon durch die schlichte Tatsache so interessant, dass es als Verbund von Zeichern, Bildern und Gesten in größter denkbarer Nähe zur Liturgie steht."

⁵⁸ As mentioned above, the rhetorical contrast between the ancient and the moderns has often been questioned — amongst others, by Rodney Stark and Bruno Latour.

the theological implications which shape, in Benjamin's theory, the framework of the Ancient World, the Middle Ages, and of (Early) Modernity, in turn corresponding to the dramatic genres of tragedy, mystery plays, and mourning plays.

Benjamin's Theory of Drama: Tragedy, Mystery Plays, and Mourning Plays

Written in 1916 and unpublished during his lifetime, Benjamin's early essay "Über das Mittelalter" explains, from the perspective of intellectual history, why the framework of tragedy is no longer adequate to describe the dramatic tradition of the Middle Ages and its afterlife in Early Modernity. In medieval mystery plays, it is argued, the agon of *Tragödie* ("tragedy") disappears because the Ecclesia has become the undisputed ruler and legislator of the sacred ("Über das Mittelalter", pp. 132-33).⁵⁹ This is indeed an unwarranted assumption; medievalists have repeatedly argued against the biased view of the Middle Ages as an obscure epoch of religious homogeneity, ruled by the Church's all-encompassing power.⁶⁰ But it helps Benjamin make his point that the medieval and early modern relationship to the sacred is fundamentally different to that of the Ancient World.⁶¹ In the Middle Ages, the essay further tells us, a desire for the unmediated absolute clashes with the Church's allegedly-unquestioned authority, as evinced by the belief in relics and icons and in the epoch's obsession with practices of

⁵⁹ In the essay, Benjamin refers repeatedly to the concept of 'the Absolute' ('das Absolute'), which was highly indebted to his reading of Friedrich Schlegel in his doctoral dissertation *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* [1921] (GS I/1: *Abhandlungen*, pp. 7-122). On Friederich Schlegel's ideas on allegory, irony, and subjectivity, see Manfred Frank, "Allegorie, Witz, Fragment, Ironie. Friederich Schlegel und die Idee des zerrissenen Selbst", in *Allegorie und Melancholie*, ed. by Willem van Reijen, Neue Folge 704 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), pp. 124-46.

⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the Church's authority was in fact starkly questioned during the medieval ages; amongst others, and perhaps more famously, by the mystical movements that spread throughout the continent. See Grado Giovanni Merlo, "Christian Experiences of Religious Non-Conformism", in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Christianity*, ed. by John Arnold (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 437-53; and Hsia, "Conclusion: Looking Back from the Reformation", in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Christianity*, pp. 551-61. See also Ben Morgan, *On Becoming God: Late Medieval Mysticism and the Modern Western Self*, Perspectives on Continental Philosophy (Fordham University Press, 2013).

⁶¹ See Bettine Menke, "Trauerspiel und Tragödie", in *Benjamin Handbuch: Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, ed. by Burkhardt Lindner (Stuttgart: Springer, 2011), pp. 212-15.

magic. The fight over sacred legislation is then won by the Church, which annihilates the gods that legitimised such magical practices in the first place (“Über das Mittelalter”, p. 132). A melancholy mood emerges inasmuch as those relics and icons now become but empty formal embodiments of the Absolute — unfulfilled promises of a world that *could have been*.⁶² Hence humanity’s relationship to the sacred becomes mediated by authority and hierarchies, which trump the hero’s personal agon. It is within this tradition that Benjamin’s account of Baroque drama should be understood: as opposed to Ancient Tragedy, in medieval mystery plays and in mourning plays there is no direct confrontation between the tragic heroine and the gods nor between the profane and the sacred, which are instead allegorically interrelated.

In “Trauerspiel und Tragödie” (1916), written during the same months as “Über das Mittelalter”, Benjamin insists that the mystery play is shaped, through the allegorical form of metatheatre, by the tension between finitude and infinitude; that is, between two different notions of time — finite and eternal — which correspond to the worldly and the otherworldly realms (p. 132). Surtz’s aforementioned study provides an historical explanation for this insight: as argued above, the tension should be seen in terms of the audience’s shifting role in liturgy, both as figures of the history of salvation and the audience of the religious ritual. This tension anticipates the theological anxiety of the Baroque; Benjamin tells us that the chasm between the sacred and the profane became increasingly manifest in the period because, as a consequence of Luther’s critique of good works, uncertainty about religious matters became predominant.

⁶² On Benjamin and melancholy, see, amongst others, Ilit Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy: Benjamin’s Early Reflections on Theater and Language*, Cultural Memory in the Present, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Willem van Reijen (ed), *Allegorie und Melancholie*, Neue Folge 704 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), especially the chapter Uwe Steiner, ‘Traurige Spiele – Spiel vor Traurigen. Zu Walter Benjamins Theorie des barocken Trauerspiels’, pp. 32-63; and Cornelia Wild, ‘Gegen die Erfahrung abgedichtet: Benjamin nach der Melancholie’, in *Benjamin-Studien I*, ed. by Weidner and Weigel, 3 vols (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2008), I, pp.147-60.

Within Benjamin's framework, this is why mourning plays, in opposition to mystery plays, portray miracles much more ambiguously; and faith, which calls for belief no matter the evidence, plays a central role in the new drama (Weidner, "Gespielte Zeugen." p. 261, 279). Hence why *Ursprung* focuses on drama: the genre is well fitted to describe the new theological reality because metatheatre and the anxieties of Baroque theology are intimately linked. Benjamin points this out when he repeatedly describes the structure of Baroque drama in terms of *Wiederholung* ("repetition"). Unlike the fight against, and demise of, the old mythic regime in Ancient Tragedies, in Baroque dramas the world is thought to mimic, rather than confront, otherworldly reality. Furthermore, the events depicted could well happen again because they are inscribed into the natural cycle of life and death — when mourning plays end, Benjamin tells us, a new order is *not* established. The artform remains "open": the possibility of true resolution is explicitly relegated to an otherworldly realm — one *beyond* the dramatic world ("Trauerspiel und Tragödie, pp. 136-37). The implication, of course, is that such an endless repetition carries with it a melancholy mood. When heroines die, they no longer achieve immortal status, but rather reappear in the form of ghosts or of the undead.

It is in these terms that Benjamin understands the metaphor of the world-as-a-stage that populates seventeenth-century theatre; as a playwright, God writes the tragicomedy of human life, in which men and women play out their assigned roles. The resulting mirror game between Heaven and Earth can be easily recognised as a central characteristic of Baroque poetics. For Benjamin, it represents yet another example of the way that the relationship between the sacred and the profane in the Baroque is framed not in direct opposition, as in Greek Tragedy, but rather allegorically. This means that every sign within a play can indeed be read as a *figura* of the sacred—of the play that awaits us once the curtain closes. Yet the actual meaning of these signs can never be

fully established, for the beyond always remains inaccessible, indeed *beyond* the dramatic performance. Hence Baroque drama represents, in this reading, an uncertain maze of symbols that emphatically begs the question whether we can ever achieve true knowledge about otherworldly reality.

In “Die Bedeutung der Sprache in Trauerspiel und Tragödie”, which further elaborates the ideas of the aforementioned unpublished essays, Benjamin emphasises the melancholy of Baroque drama, already tacitly present in “Über das Mittelalter” and “Trauerspiel und Tragödie”. To make his point, and building on the Romantic tradition, Benjamin analyses the role of language in both genres: in tragedy, so the argument goes, the confrontation between the sacred and the profane is reflected in dialogue.⁶³ Antigone’s determination to bury her brother, in accordance with sacred lore, is opposed to Creon’s allegiance to the profane realm of human-made laws—a dialogical confrontation embodied in stichomythia. Benjamin misses the opportunity to discuss the central role of the chorus in Ancient Tragedy, and yet the opposition allows him to claim that two distinct voices clash against each other. The tragic hero, in his interpretation, voices her firm rejection against “die waltende Macht” (the sovereign power) that opposes her (“Die Bedeutung der Sprache”, p. 137); and Creon’s prohibition on burying Polynices represents the State’s sovereignty to legislate over life after death, against which the heroine reacts. As an individual, Antigone succumbs before this power. Yet she also rises victorious; in committing suicide, she reclaims her own power to legislate over life and death. In Benjamin’s compelling interpretation of the tragic, then, Antigone’s death comes to embody her refusal to engage in dialogue with the mythic forces of the State and therefore her unshakable opposition against Creon. This grants her immortality in the form of remembrance. In her silence, moreover, the heroine both claims her individuality and is paradoxically united to the

⁶³ See Friedlander, “Language”, in *Walter Benjamin*, pp. 9-36.

wider community, for she has managed to destabilise the regime of sovereignty threatening all.

The literary critic insists that the ontological constellation of language in tragedy is different to that of mourning plays. If tragedies are based on the opposition silence versus dialogue, mourning plays would instead be based on iteration. Iteration is key because it undermines the heroine's tragic disposition, in which each dialogue and each silence is decisive, each word and action immediately understood ("Die Bedeutung der Sprache", p. 137-38). In their iteration, words lose the stability of their meaning and hence their tragic core. Benjamin's distinction in fact parallels the theory of the symbol and allegory that he would later elaborate in *Ursprung*: in opposition to the symbol, which relates the universal to the particular without mediation ("unmittelbar"), in allegory this relationship is now mediated and has thereby been starkly problematised.⁶⁴ Likewise, as opposed to tragedies, which relate the divine to the profane without mediation, in mourning plays this relationship has become much more uncertain because of its manifold layers of interpretation; reality can always turn out to be yet another play-within-the-play.

Benjamin repeatedly emphasises that mourning plays differ from tragedies because mediation is fundamental to their poetic universe.⁶⁵ As already mentioned, this is embodied in the technique of metatheatre, which has fascinated many a modern

⁶⁴ Ilit Ferber explains that "the theatrical equivalent of these mirror images, symbol and allegory, are, of course, tragedy and *Trauerspiel*, respectively" (*Philosophy and Melancholy*, p. 87). In his re-evaluation of allegory, Benjamin is once again arguing against Weimar Classicism and, more specifically, against Goethe's distinction between symbol and allegory; see Goethe, *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit*, ed. by Klaus-Detlef Müller (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2007).

⁶⁵ Bettine Menke, "Die »Äußerlichkeit« der Trauerspiel-Dramaturgie, Komik und Zufälle der *Intrigue*. Mit Calderón und Shakespeare zu Grenzen und zum Nachleben des Trauerspiels", in *Benjamins Trauerspiel: Theorie, Lektüren, Nachleben*, ed. by Claude Haas and Daniel Weidner, pp. 29-57, makes the point that, in mourning plays, theatricality and repetition contributes to suggest a sense of endlessness and openness: "Ist mit Benjamin das Trauerspiel die wiederholte Tragödie, die mit ihrer Wiederholung suspendiert, die an ihre Unabschließbarkeit ausgesetzte Tragödie, die als wiedergelesene oder deren Allegorie betrauerte und verloren gegebene Tragödie, so ist es auch die *als* Theater gesehene Tragödie" (p. 30).

critic.⁶⁶ Without metatheatricality, tragedies remain closed in formal terms: even if heroines die, they become subsumed within the dramatic unity and narrative. Metatheatrical reflection instead allows playwrights to point toward a beyond which cannot be represented on stage — be it by directly addressing the audience or by evoking the “world-is-a-stage” trope. In other words, metatheatre is not only concerned with the events taking place *inside* the dramatic universe, but also with the world outside — and hence the boundaries between life and fiction become much more unstable. Since Baroque drama opens up a reality beyond the stage, a limitless number of new worlds can be recreated — which may, on closer inspection, reveal itself as yet another deceitful play-within-the-play. Meaning, in this new theatre, is said to lose its firm basis, for the relationship between this world and the beyond is no longer self-evident. Moreover, the suggested sense of infinite repetition undermines the possibility of tragic closure, even despite the fact that the dramatic possibilities are playfully enhanced. The possibility of redemption has therefore become highly uncertain on such Baroque stages.

Benjamin elaborates in detail the motifs of his unpublished early essays in *Ursprung*, which also assumes a version of intellectual history that distinguishes between the ancient and the moderns, with the Middle Ages standing in between. Hence the connection between theatre and theology is the key to understanding the book’s interpretation of Baroque drama: the argument is made that this new artform finds its origin in, and indeed develops from, the theologically charged medieval tradition of the mystery play. Benjamin makes this explicit in his analysis of the Baroque subgenre of tyrant plays, which has often been read exclusively with Neo-Stoic lenses.⁶⁷ Yet he tells

⁶⁶ See Lionel Abel, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1963); in the Spanish context, Emilio Orozco Díaz, *El teatro y la teatralidad del Barroco: ensayo de introducción al tema* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1969); and, more importantly, Jonathan Thacker, *Role-Play and the World as Stage in the ‘comedia’* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002).

⁶⁷ In the Spanish context see, amongst others, J. M. Ruano de la Haza, “The Meaning of the Plot of Calderón’s *El mayor monstruo del mundo*”, *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 58.3 (1981), 229-40;

us that a closer study of the form of these plays reveals a much more fundamental question, namely, the secularisation of medieval mystery plays:

Denn niemand wird die stoische Moralität, in welche das Martyrium des Helden mündet, oder die Gerechtigkeit, die das Wüten der Tyrannen auf Wahnsinn hinausführt, für ausreichend erachten, die Spannung einer eigenen Dramenwölbung zu begründen. Eine massive Schicht von ornamentaler, wahrhaft barocker Struktatur verdeckt ihren Schlüsselstein und einzig die präzise Erforschung ihrer Bogenspannung errechnet ihn. Es ist die Spannung einer heilsgeschichtlichen Frage, wie die Säkularisierung des Mysterienspiels, die nicht unter den Protestanten der schlesischen und nürnbergischen Schule allein, sondern genauso unter den Jesuiten und Calderon sich vollzog, ins Ungemessene sich dehnen ließ (*Ursprung*, p. 257-8).

For no one will consider the stoic morality in which the martyrdom of the hero culminates, or the justice that directs the tyrant's fury towards madness, as adequate to sustain the tension of a proper dramatic arc of the action. A massive layer of ornamental, truly baroque stucco-work overlays its keystone, and only a careful examination of the tension spanning its arch can discover it. It is the tension of a question concerning salvation history: how the secularization of the mystery play, which took place not only among the Protestants of the Silesian and Nuremberg schools, but also in like manner among the Jesuits and with Calderón, meant an extension into the immeasurable (*Origin*, p. 65).

As usual in *Ursprung*, the narrator's argument is determined by its rich web of allusions which, albeit central to the point he is trying to make, remain implicit. This mysterious rhetoric accounts for one of the many reasons why generations of readers have been fascinated with the book, as well as for the lasting impression it leaves on intellectuals, academics, and scholars. For the lay reader, the architectonic references may embellish the passage, but their role remains unclear. These references become comprehensible only for anyone who first researches Benjamin's theory of literary criticism, in which the form of artworks plays an essential role in capturing their historically-situated truth.⁶⁸ The task of the literary critic, according to Benjamin, is to remain attentive to

"Introducción bibliográfica y crítica", in Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *La vida es sueño*, ed. José M. Ruano de la Haza, Clásicos Castalia, 208 (Castalia, 1994), pp. 48-49; and Paul Lewis-Smith, *Calderón de la Barca, La vida es sueño*, Critical Guides to Spanish Texts, 63 (London: Grant & Cutler, 1998). Jeremy Robbins's excellent studies on the Spanish Baroque also tend to overemphasise the role of Neo-Stoicism in the period. See, for instance, *The Arts of Perception: The Epistemological Mentality of the Spanish Baroque, 1580-1720*, BSS, 82.8 (2005), DOI: [10.1080/1475382052000345894](https://doi.org/10.1080/1475382052000345894).

⁶⁸ See Michael W. Jennings, "Benjamin as a Reader of Hölderlin: The Origins of Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism", *The German Quarterly*, 56.4 (1983), 544-66; and *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987);

the form of artworks, which shapes and indeed *gives form* to the anxieties and hopes of the epoch in which they were crafted.⁶⁹

Benjamin claims that mourning plays are shaped by the tensions related to the Church's schism and puts at the same level Calderón's dramas with those of the Protestant schools: the consequences of the Reformation could indeed be felt, according to *Ursprung*, at a pan-European level. This essential theological tension, however, remains hidden and masked by the excessive ornamentation of (Spanish) Baroque poetics. To recognise this central keystone ("Schlüsselstein") now becomes the task of the literary critic, for which a commitment to destruction becomes a requisite. Otherwise, as the reader learns further on in the study, she will fall prey to the allures of awe inducing Baroque ornamentation and indeed believe, in Tridentine fashion, that the divine can be recreated in this world. *Ursprung* argues that, in dialectical contrast with German Baroque dramas, Calderón remains a better craftsman, albeit a rather irresponsible one, since he erects solid poetic constructions which provide the appearance of theological unity and harmony. The experienced scholar, so the argument goes, will learn to appreciate the fragmentation and incompleteness of the German Baroque, which remind the audience of the need to tear down false walls and other decorative motifs that cover up truth — i.e., the 'modern' divide between immanence and transcendence.

Theological Motifs in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*

In *Benjamin's Library*, Jane Newman repeatedly emphasises that *Ursprung* carries important theological and political implications. She explains this through a brilliant

⁶⁹ The cultural and intellectual tradition between this assumption about literary forms and their relationship with history has been brilliantly reconstructed in Fritz K. Ringer, "6. From the Revival to the Crisis of Learning, 1890-1920", in *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890-1933* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 305-366.

contextualisation of Benjamin's studies within both Weimar Baroque scholarship and theological debates about the future of the German nation; and she has shown that *Ursprung* vindicates an alternative path for the German nation that stands against contemporary apologies of the Great War.⁷⁰ Benjamin spells out his alternative path through the opposition between Protestant melancholy and Catholic *admiratio*, which takes the form of *Wunder* ("wonder"). The opposition is indebted to Hegelian approaches to literature in general and in particular to Hermann Ulrici's *Über Shakespeare's dramatische Kunst und sein Verhältnis zu Calderon und Göthe* (1839).⁷¹ The afterlife of Ulrici's Shakespeare in *Ursprung* has also been researched by Newman.⁷² She explains that Benjamin follows Ulrici in reading Shakespeare with nationalistic and theological lenses; both critics claim that the bard's spiritual home is none other than Germany (*Benjamin's Library*, p. 145). Yet Newman does not consider in depth Ulrici's reading of Calderón and its influence on Benjamin, who takes Calderón to represent the misleading theological position of Tridentine nations.⁷³

Ulrici repeatedly emphasises that Calderón embodies the quintessential example of 'Spanishness' because his dramas champion the reactionary values of the Counter-Reformation. Consequently, he allegedly remains true to a medieval notion of honour that sacralises the duties and obligations of the king. In a nationalistically inspired

⁷⁰ Benjamin's theological motifs in *Ursprung* are reminiscent of Karl Barth, who also became a staunch opponent of the nation's war-efforts. See Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief* [1922], 13th ed. (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1984). Newman has emphasised the similarities between Benjamin and Barth's theologies (*Benjamin's Library*, pp. 147-49, 167-68); see also Michael Jennings, "Towards Eschatology: The Development of Walter Benjamin's Theological Politics in the early 1920s", in Carolin Duttlinger, Ben Morgan, and Anthony Phelan (eds.), *Walter Benjamins anthropologisches Denken*, Rombach Wissenschaften: Reihe Litterae, 115 (Freiburg, Berlin, and Vienna: Rombach, 2012), pp. 41-58; and Rudy Koshar, "Where is Karl Barth in Modern European History?", *Modern Intellectual History*, 5.2 (2008), 333-62.

⁷¹ "Calderon und Göthe in ihrem Verhältnisse zu Shakespeare, in *Ueber Shakespeares dramatische Kunst und sein Verhältnis zu Calderon und Göthe* (Halle, Eduard Anton, 1839), pp. 504-93. <<https://books.google.co.mz/books?id=pBdRAAAcAAJ>>.

⁷² "Benjamin's Hamlet in the Crossroads of War Theology", in *Benjamin's Library*, pp. 143-154 (p. 145); see also her "»Hamlet ist auch Saturnkind«".

⁷³ Newman, *Benjamin's Library*, p.124. Benjamin quotes Ulrici in his early essay "»El mayor monstruo, los celos« von Calderon und »Herodes und Mariamne« von Hebbel: Bemerkungen zum Problem des historischen Dramas", in *GS*, II/1, 246-76 (pp. 259-60).

literary criticism, Ulrici explains Calderón's representation of honour with reference to the "Charackter und [...] Geschichte des [Spanischen] Volks" (*Ueber Shakespeares dramatische Kunst*, p. 520; character and history of the [Spanish] people). Furthermore, he is happy to read the artistic expression of such a "Spanish" character in exclusively theological terms, that is, as an extension or embodiment of Catholic ideology.⁷⁴

Calderón's drama epitomises, within his framework, the re-sacralisation of the world characteristic of the Spanish Counter-Reformation and of its politico-aesthetic programme:

Die Transcendenz des Göttlichen aber wird von Calderon wiederum meist ganz äußerlich objektiv abgefaßt. Sie zeigt sich nicht sowohl in der inneren Kräftigung und Erhebung des menschlichen Geistes, als in himmlischen, übernatürlichen Offenbarungen, Zeichen und Wundern, ganz wie in der katholischen Kirche selbst (p. 515).

The transcendence of the divine, however, is for the most part expressed objectively by Calderón. It does not show itself so much in the inner strengthening and exaltation of the human spirit, as in heavenly, supernatural revelations, signs and wonders, just as in the Catholic Church itself.

Ulrici's claim about Calderón echoes throughout *Ursprung*. Whereas Spanish Baroque drama is said to represent the divine on stage, German Baroque drama, faithful to Luther's critique of good deeds, rejects any attempt to reconcile immanence and transcendence. Hence Benjamin rejects Calderón because his plays are said to embody that infinite and reflective energy of the universe which, in Romantic thought, art evokes in a totalizing fashion.⁷⁵ Calderón's poetics, within this framework, cover up, in Counter-Reformation fashion, the growing uncertainty provoked by the Church's schism.⁷⁶ Instead, German Baroque drama is adamantly vindicated due to its

⁷⁴ Ulrici's study had a rich afterlife in Weimar Germany and his assumptions indeed inform the work of German Hispanists and Baroque scholars of the time: among others, Karl Borinski, Ernst Robert Curtius, and Max Kommerell on Calderón.

⁷⁵ See Benjamin, "II. Die Bedeutung der Reflexion bei der Frühromantikern", in *GS I/1: Abhandlungen*, pp. 26-40. For an analysis of Benjamin's doctoral dissertation, see Uwe Steiner, *Die Geburt der Kritik aus dem Geist der Kunst: Untersuchungen zum Begriff der Kritik in den frühen Schriften Walter Benjamins*, Epistemata: Reihe Philosophie, 57 (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1989).

⁷⁶ This is, of course, closely linked to the Romantics' image of Spain as a pre-modern, almost medieval country, in which the theological changes of the Reformation would have not been felt. See Margaret

commitment to destruction, fragmentation, and incompleteness.

Benjamin's defence of German Baroque should therefore be understood in stark contrast to Counter-Reformation theology. And yet, despite the influence of Ulrici's nationalistic literary criticism, the argument of *Ursprung* is more nuanced. On the one hand, it does read German and Spanish Baroque drama through commonplace assumptions about national character and religion; on the other, it makes an effort to tear down the Romantic ideology of the nation State. Hence the less canonical status of German Baroque playwrights enables their *resistance* against totalizing narratives of any kind, and especially against the nationalistic narrative of Jena Romanticism and Weimar Classicism. Contra the Western literary canon, which disregards German Baroque aesthetics, Benjamin reads the fragmentation and incompleteness of the Baroque dramas as the signs of their ethical strength. In other words, the argument is made that the aesthetics of failure of the *German* Baroque makes the genre unsuitable for nationalist propaganda.⁷⁷

Benjamin's project could be dubbed nationalistic only inasmuch as it unearths a model for the German nation from within the German literary heritage; yet it stands firmly against Romantic versions of nationalism which sacralise politics, that is, which justify political decisions with appeals to the allegedly sacred destiny of any particular nation. This is a key point of Benjamin's literary analysis in *Ursprung*. In German Baroque drama, Benjamin discovers an artform that acknowledges the distance between immanence and transcendence:

Wo das Mittelalter die Hinfälligkeit des Weltgeschehens und die Vergänglichkeit der Kreatur als Station des Heilswegs zur Schau stellt, vergräbt das deutsche Trauerspiel

Greer, Walter Mignolo et al (eds.), *Rereading the Black Legend: The Discourses of Religious and Racial Difference in the Renaissance Empires* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁷⁷ On Calderón, Romanticism, and nationalism, see Luis Iglesias Feijoo, "Calderón, ayer y hoy. Sobre el origen romántico de la visión actual de Calderón.", in *Congreso Internacional Proyección y Significados del Teatro Clásico Español: Homenaje a Alfredo Hermenegildo y Francisco Ruiz Ramón*, ed. by José María Díez Borque, José Alcalá-Zamora, and Queipo de Llano (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal para la Acción Cultural Exterior, 2004), pp. 139-59.

sich ganz in die Trostlosigkeit der irdischen Verfassung. Kennt es eine Erlösung, so liegt es mehr in der Tiefe dieser Verhängnisse selbst als im Vollzuge eines göttlichen Heilsplans. Die Abkehr von der Eschatologie der geistlichen Spiele kennzeichnet das neue Drama in ganz Europa; nichtsdestoweniger ist die besinnungslose Flucht in eine unbegnadete Natur spezifisch deutsch. Denn Spaniens Drama — das höchste jenes europäischen Theaters — in welchem die barocken Züge so viel glänzender, so viel markanter, so viel glücklicher sich im katholisch kultivierten Land entfalten, löst die Konflikte eines gnadenlosen Schöpfungstandes gewissermaßen spielerisch verkleinert im höfischen Umkreise eines als säkularisierte Heilsgewalt sich erweisenden Königtums (*Ursprung*, p. 260).

Where the Middle Ages exhibits the precariousness of worldly events and the transitoriness of the creature as stations on the road to salvation, the German trauerspiel wholly buries itself in the desolation of the earthly estate. Such redemptions as it knows will lie more in the depths of these vicissitudes themselves than in the fulfilment of a divine plan of salvation. The repudiation of eschatology in religious plays [medieval mystery plays] is characteristic of the new drama throughout Europe; nevertheless, the headlong flight into a nature without grace is specifically German. Spain's drama—the supreme form of European theatre, in which Baroque features develop so much more brilliantly, so much more sharply and successfully, in the land of Catholic culture—resolves the conflicts of a graceless Creation playfully reduced, so to speak, within the compass of the court and of a kingship that proves to be a secularized power of redemption (*Origin*, p. 68).

Benjamin's argument resembles that of Lukács' *Theorie des Romans*: the meaninglessness of the modern condition — here expressed through the reference to the “Abkehr von der Eschatologie” (repudiation of eschatology) that characterises the transition between medieval mystery play and early modern drama — is falsely resolved in those plays which provide an impression of totality and worldly redemption. Like Lukács too, Benjamin argues that the only possible aesthetic “solution” in modernity is to acknowledge such meaninglessness, which is indeed what he finds in German Baroque drama. In the above passage, however, there is no reference to how this strand of the German tradition demonstrates the gap between immanence and transcendence; but Benjamin explains this in his analysis of the Baroque character types of the martyr, the tyrant, and the plotter, to which I now turn.⁷⁸

Ursprung characterises the martyr and the tyrant with a fascinating metaphor that is well-known to Benjamin scholars: “Tyrann und Märtyrer sind im Barock die

⁷⁸ An overview of these three character types can be found in Menke, “Tyrann und Märtyrer” and “Dramaturgie der Intrige”, in *Benjamin Handbuch*, pp. 217-18.

Janushäupter des Gekrönten” (*Ursprung*, p. 249; “Tyrant and martyr in the Baroque age are the two Janus faces of the crowned head”, *Origin*, p. 54). With the image of Janus – the two-faced God of time, beginnings, and endings —, Benjamin interprets both martyr and tyrant as the two extremes of kingship. If martyrs claim sovereignty over their body, tyrants claim sovereignty over the body politic; whilst martyrs do so by willingly enduring pains like those of Christ’s Crucifixion, tyrants impose their will through brute force. Yet both share in common the attempt to overcome nature’s decay, be it by redeeming the body’s decomposition or by imposing order on the body politic.

German martyr plays exemplify well Benjamin’s position because they depict ambiguously the contact with the divine: as I show in the next section, these plays put their emphasis on faith, since the sanctity of martyrdom becomes ambiguous, dependent as it is on an inaccessible *beyond*. Indeed, and despite the unshakable will of martyrs, German Baroque mourning plays depict the issue of their sanctity with uncertainty.⁷⁹ As for tyrants, their fight against the decay of worldly matters cannot resist the intrinsic transiency of the profane and hence they eventually fall from power (*Ursprung*, p. 250).⁸⁰

Denn wird im Herrscher da, wo er die Macht am rauschendsten entfaltet, die Offenbarung der Geschichte und zugleich die ihren Wechselfällen Einhalt tuende Instanz erkannt, so spricht für den im Machtrausch sich verlierenden Cäsaren dieses Eine: er fällt als Opfer eines Mißverhältnisses der unbeschränkte hierarchischen Würde, mit welchem Gott ihn investiert, zum Stande seines armen Menschenwesens (*Ursprung*, p. 250).

For if in the ruler, and precisely at the point where he unfolds power most deliriously, there is recognized the revelation of history and, at the same time, the authority that calls a halt to its vicissitudes, then this one thing speaks for the Caesar who loses himself in the intoxication of power: he falls victim to a misrelation between the unlimited hierarchical dignity with which God has invested him and the state of his poor human nature (*Origin*, p. 55-6).

⁷⁹ See the aforementioned Weidner, “Schau in dem Tempel an”; “Gespielte Zeugen”; and Newman, “Melancholy Germans”.

⁸⁰ Benjamin is here reworking a point he had already made in his early essay on “El mayor monstruo, los celos”, in which he highlights that early modern audiences found delight in seeing that even the sovereign, the most sacred of beings, remains tied to the decay of earthly things as much as they do (“El mayor monstruo”, p. 253).

The contrast between the sacredness of tyrants and the profane nature of his flesh and blood precipitates the demise of the King, who cannot but fall as a victim of this disproportion.⁸¹ This is indeed what is at stake in mourning plays: a heightened contrast between two incompatible temporalities, in which decay and finitude always trump—in the argument of *Ursprung*—the King’s illusions of sacredness and eternity.

Standing a step back from both martyr and tyrant, plotters are, as mentioned above, the comic figures who weave the plays-within-the-play of courtly intrigue; whose actions parallel, if without all earnestness, the main storyline. They are the characters who more often address the audience directly, as if capable of distinguishing between fiction and reality.⁸² For Benjamin, plotters represent the secularisation of the figure of the Devil in medieval mystery plays, and is initially characterised as an official: “Es ist der Säkularisierung der Passionen im Drama des Barock nur angemessen, wenn darin die beamtete Person den Platz des Teufels einnimmt” (*Ursprung*, p. 305; “the secularization of the passions in the drama of the Baroque is served only if the character of the official takes the part of the devil”, *Origin*, p. 125). Like the Devil, these figures constantly weave convoluted narratives that obfuscate the meaninglessness and profanity of this world: their totalizing narratives pre-empt the

⁸¹ Benjamin’s remarks on Baroque political theory raises thought-provoking parallels to Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* [1957], intr. by Chester Jordan and Conrad Leyser (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2016), which was based on Kantorowicz’s PhD dissertation *Kaiser Friedrich der Zweite* (Berlin: G. Bondi, 1927). For secondary bibliography on Benjamin’s political theology, see, amongst others, Victoria Kahn, “Sacred Kingship and Political Fiction: Ernst Kantorowicz, Carl Schmitt, Ernst Cassirer, and Walter Benjamin”, in *The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), pp. 55-82; Irving Wohlfarth, “‘Immer radikal, niemals konsequent...’: Zur theologisch-politischen Standortsbestimmung Walter Benjamins”, in *Antike und Moderne: Zu Walter Benjamins „Passagen“*, ed. by Norbert W. Bolz and Richard Faber (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1986); and Achim Geisenhanslüke, “3. Die zwei Körper der Königin: Lohensteins *Sophonisbe*”, in *Trauer-Spiele: Walter Benjamin und das europäische Barockdrama* (Paderborn: Fink, 2016), pp. 89-115.

⁸² The ideal Baroque plotter is to be found, according to Benjamin, in Baltasar Gracián’s writings (*Ursprung*, p. 276-77). His aphorisms address an ideal plotter who wishes to navigate the world of deceit surrounding him, and even encourages him to use appearances to his advantage and to build an intricate web of courtly machinations. I therefore refer to the plotter with the masculine pronoun, even if many plotter-like figures, especially on the Spanish stage, were in fact women: see, for instance, Calderón’s *La dama duende*.

audience from recognising God's inscrutability and most radical otherness; like the devil, they try to appropriate this world, make it theirs in spite of God.

Benjamin's esoteric remark about the official is explained at length in the sentences which follow, in which the official is equated to the comic figure of Baroque drama. In the Spanish tradition, this accounts for the *gracioso*; in the English, he is the fool; and, in the German, the *Hanswurst*. Already in the fifteenth century, this rogue figure takes a decisive role in the development of the play, which he maintains in Baroque secular dramas (*Ursprung*, p. 305). However, Benjamin identifies a key difference between the treatment of this comic figure in the English and Spanish tradition vis-à-vis that of Germany. Whereas in the first two the fool provides a counterpoint to the melancholy of the king, German Baroque drama ends up relinquishing the comic aspect: "Weniges bezeichnet die Grenzen in der Kunst der deutschen Barockdramas so unerbittlich, als daß es die Ausprägung dieses bedeutenden Verhältnisses dem volkstümlichen Schaustück überließ" (*Ursprung*, p. 306; "Hardly anything else reveals the limitations of the art of the German Baroque so inexorably as the fact that it relinquished the expression of this important relation to popular theatre", *Origin*, p. 125). This is a fundamental difference, for the interplay between the merriment and melancholy is described with reference to the aforementioned concept of the "daemonic": "Wenn aber beide, die Trauer des Fürsten und die Lustigkeit seines Ratgebers, so nahe beisammen sind, so ist es zuletzt nicht deswegen, weil in ihnen die beiden Provinzen des Satanreiches sich darstellen" (*Ursprung*, p. 306; "But if these two things, the mourning of the prince and the gaiety of his counselor, are so closely joined together, in the end it is only because the two provinces of the satanic realm were represented in them", *Origin*, p. 125). Benjamin's continual reference to the Devil points out the dangers haunting Spanish (and English) Baroque drama, namely, that the divine might still be successfully, albeit misleadingly, represented on stage. Hence the

inclusion of comic elements not only harmonises the fragmentation of melancholy, but it also turns the rogue into a *Räsonneur* (“reasoner”), that is, a character who takes a step back from the desolation on stage and instead becomes a puppet within the larger world-as-stage (*Ursprung*, p. 306).⁸³ The point is that to inhabit early modernity authentically we should dismiss the sacralisation of the profane and instead embrace the fact that the certainty of salvation is nowhere to be found.

Benjamin emphatically warns, throughout *Ursprung*, against all temptations of the Devil. As in Lukács’s argument, the realm of the Satanic unites both immanence and transcendence without uncertainty and ambiguity.⁸⁴ The foremost example of such a temptation can be found in the art of Calderón: although his plays acknowledge the fallenness of earthly existence, Benjamin tells us that they also recreate a worldly apotheosis that reinscribes fallenness within a framework of redemption (see “Calderón’s Seven Artistic sins”). Indeed, the most dangerous and alluring temptation of them all is the belief, which Calderón represents in his dramas, that the decay of earthly existence can in and of itself be sacralised. Such a ‘satanic’ danger sheds light on the following well-known yet enigmatic passage of *Ursprung* about the allegory of resurrection, in which Benjamin describes the landscape where Baroque allegorists perform their deeds:

Denn gerade in Visionen des Vernichtungsrausches, in welchen alles Irdische zum Trümmerfeld zusammenstürzt, enthüllt sich weniger das Ideal der allegorischen Versenkung denn ihre Grenze. Die trostlose Verworrenheit der Schädelstätte, wie sie als Schema allegorischer Figuren aus tausend Kupfern und Beschreibungen der Zeit herauszulesen ist, ist nicht allein das Sinnbild von der Öde aller Menschenexistenz. Vergänglichkeit ist in ihr nicht sowohl bedeutet, allegorisch dargestellt, denn, selbst bedeutend, dargeboten als Allegorie. Als die Allegorie der Auferstehung. Zuletzt springt in den Todesmalen des Barock – nun erst im rückgewandten größten Bogen und erlösend – die allegorische Betrachtung um. Die sieben Jahre ihrer Versenkung sind nur ein Tag (*Ursprung*, pp. 405-06).

⁸³ See Joel Morris, “Graves, Pits, and Murderous Plots: Walter Benjamin, Alois Riegl, and the German Mourning Play’s Dreary Tone of Intrigue”, in *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin & Charles Rice (Melbourne: re.press, 2009): “the Baroque stage is the space where the dark intrigue of murderous calculations is enacted and, at the same time, it is the potential terminal space of those calculations: the grave” (p.98).

⁸⁴ See the aforementioned Nicholls, *Goethe’s Concept of the Daemonic*.

For it is precisely in visions of the intoxication of destruction, visions in which everything earthly turns to rubble, that there is revealed not so much the ideal of allegorical immersion as its limit. The bleak confusion of Golgotha, legible as schema of allegorical figures in a multitude of engravings and descriptions of the period, is not simply a symbol of the wilderness of human existence. In it, transience is not so much signified, allegorically presented, as — itself signifying — present as allegory. As the allegory of resurrection. At the last, in the death-marks of the Baroque — only now in backward-turning great arcs and as salvific — allegorical vision veers about. The seven years of its immersion are only a day. (*Origin*, p. 254)

The allegorical technique of divinizing the fallenness of existence is used by allegorists who, like Calderón, recreate a *worldly* celebration of the *beyond* that rules out doubt and ambiguity. These allegorists can be dubbed ‘bad’ because, as a consequence of their belief in their own omnipotence, they impose their own subjectivity on the world. Accordingly, they also end up asserting religious assurance in this world, even if they do so by extolling the decay of the profane: “Denn auch diese Zeit der Hölle wird Raume säkularisiert und jene Welt, die sich dem tiefen Geist Satan preisgab und verriet, ist Gottes. In Gottes Welt erwacht der Allegoriker” (*Ursprung*, p. 406; “For this time of hell, too, is secularized in space, and the world that abandoned and betrayed itself to the deep spirit of Satan is God’s. The allegorist awakens in God’s world”, *Origin*, p. 254).⁸⁵ The implicit argument, if we follow Newman’s illuminating study, is that such ‘bad’ allegorists prepare the grounds for the theological justification of the Great War.⁸⁶

Benjamin believes that the nationalistic justification of Germany’s war efforts builds on the legacy of Romanticism. Jena Romantics cleared the ground, through their re-sacralisation of aesthetics and nature, for the re-sacralisation of politics in general and of Germany’s involvement in the Great War in particular. Like the Romantic Calderón, so Weimar theologians supporting the war can be thought of as ‘bad’

⁸⁵ See Kluge, “Der Allegoriebegriff und die Kritik des Nominalismus in Walter Benjamins *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*”, *Internationale Walter Benjamin Gesellschaft* (2003). Available online: shorturl.at/ahuyV. Consulted 3/02/2022. In footnote 33 of her essay on Lukács, Kluge highlights that the differentiation between “bad” and “good” allegories is key to understand Benjamin’s *Ursprung* (“Georg Lukács”, p. 125)

⁸⁶ Newman further contextualises Benjamin’s position within contemporary German scholarship on the Baroque in “Inventing the Baroque: A Critical History of Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century Debates”, in *Benjamin’s Library*, pp. 23-77.

allegorists: they both paint false images of redemption. Yet Benjamin is not completely ruling out the possibility of redemption; instead, as I argue below, he is making the point that redemption will only remain available if we fully commit to the practices of destruction, fragmentation and incompleteness.⁸⁷ The gap between immanence and transcendence must be embraced in all its consequences, even in the seemingly unrelated fields of aesthetics and politics.

To further make his case against Counter-Reformation poetics, Benjamin refers, in addition to the drama of Calderón, to St Teresa's hallucination of the Virgin Mary and Karl Borinski's reading of Gracián's "ponderación misteriosa". Upon St Teresa's confession that the Virgin has left roses on her bed, her confessor admits he himself cannot see the roses. To which, according to *Ursprung*, the saint replies: "die Madonna hat sie ja mir gebracht" ("it is to me that the Virgin has brought them", *Ursprung*, p. 408).⁸⁸ The fleeting and ambiguous nature of the senses, representing the earthly and the subjective vision, is thereby used — this is Benjamin's argument — by the saint to claim a miracle, no matter the 'objective' truth of what has happened:

Und so wird auch die glühende Ekstase, ohne daß von ihr ein Funke verloren ginge, gerettet, säkularisiert im Nüchternen, wie sie's bedarf: Die heilige Therese sieht in einer Halluzination, wie die Madonna Rosen auf ihr Bett liegt; sie teilt es ihrem Beichtvater mit. >Ich sehe keine<, erwidert der. – > Die Madonna hat sie ja mir gebracht<, gibt die Heilige zur Antwort. In diesem Sinn wird zur getragene eingestandene Subjektivität zum förmlichen Garanten des Wunders, weil sie die göttliche Aktion selbst ankündigt (*Ursprung*, p. 408).

And thus, also, the incandescent ecstasy is saved, as it needs to be, secularized in the sober matter-of-fact, without a spark of its fire being lost: In a hallucination Saint Theresa sees the Virgin Mary laying roses upon her bed; she tells her confessor. "I see none," he replies. — "But Our Lady brought them to me," answers the saint. In this sense, avowed subjectivity displayed as such becomes the formal guarantee of the miracle, because it announces the divine action itself (*Origin*, p. 257).

⁸⁷ Uwe Steiner, "The True Politician: Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Political" (transl. by Colin Sample), *New German Critique*, 83 (Spring-Summer 2001), 43-88 (p. 49): "According to [Benjamin's] idea of the mystical understanding of history" (*GS* II/1, 203) expounded in the 'Theological-Political Fragment', all things earthly are bound to the divine realm only at the price of their destruction. [...] Wherever history sets goals, it must restrict them to the order of the profane."

⁸⁸ However, the episode cannot be found in Santa Teresa's *oeuvres*. See Santa Teresa de Jesús, *Obras completas*, ed. by Efrén de la Madre de Dios and Otilio del Niño Jesús, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 74, 120, 189, 3 vols (Madrid: Católica, 1951-59).

As in Calderón, St Teresa's sense of wonder becomes the key to understanding Counter-Reformation poetics. In the case of the saint, her attitude betrays the Catholic reaction to the Reformation, which holds fast to the sacredness of the profane — even if, to that end, the most radical subjectivism must be endorsed. In a rather obscure fashion, Benjamin recuperates Karl Borinski's studies on Gracián so as to baptise with the name 'Ponderación misteriosa' the Virgin's heavenly apotheosis, which of course parallels Calderón's artistic sins (see section 2.4):⁸⁹

»Es ist die aristotelische Idee des θαυμαστόν, der künstlerische Ausdruck des Wunders (der biblischen σημεῖα), der seit der Gegenreformation und vornehmlich seit dem Tridentinum« auch Architektur und Plastik »beherrscht ... Es ist der Eindruck übernatürlicher Kräfte, der im mächtig sich Ausladenden und wie von selbst Gestützten gerade in den Regionen der Höhe erweckt werden soll, gedolmetscht und akzentuiert durch die gefährlich schwebenden Engel der plastischen Dekoration ... Diesen Eindruck nur noch zu verstärken, wird auf der anderen Seite — in den unteren Regionen — die Wirklichkeit dieser Gesetze wieder übertrieben in Erinnerung gehalten. Was denn anderes wollen die durchgehenden Hinweise auf die Gewalt der tragenden und lastenden Kräfte, die ungeheuren Sockel, die doppelt und dreifach begleiteten vorgeschobenen Säulen und Pilaster, die Verstärkungen und Sicherungen ihres Zusammenhalts, um einen – Balkon zu tragen, was besagen sie, als durch die Stützwierigkeiten von unten das schwebende Wunder von oben eindringlich zu machen. Die »Ponderacion misteriosa«, das Eingreifen Gottes ins Kunstwerk wird als möglich vorausgesetzt.« Subjektivität, die wie ein Engel in die Tiefe niederstürzt, wird von Allegorien eingeholt und wird am Himmel, wird in Gott durch »Ponderación misteriosa« festgehalten" (*Ursprung*, p. 408).

It is the Aristotelian idea of the *thaumaston*, the artistic expression of wonder (the biblical *sēmeia*), that, since the Counter-Reformation and especially since the Council of Trent, has dominated [architecture and sculpture as well]... What is to be awoken is the impression of supernatural forces at work in powerfully projecting and ostensibly self-supporting structures precisely in the upper regions, structures interpreted and accentuated by the perilously soaring angels of the sculptural decoration... Solely in order to reinforce this impression, the reality of these laws is recalled in an exaggerated manner from the other side—in the lower regions. Why the constant references to the power of these sustaining and heavily laden forces, these immense pedestals, the doubly and triply augmented projecting columns and pilasters, the measures taken to reinforce and secure their cohesion, all in order to support — a balcony — why, if not to make vivid the wonder suspended above by illuminating the difficulties involved in supporting it below? The *ponderación misteriosa*, the intervention of God in the work of art, is presumed possible. Subjectivity — which, like an angel, falls into the deep — is retrieved by allegories and is held fast in heaven, in God, through *ponderación misteriosa* (*Origin*, pp. 257-8).

⁸⁹ Borinski, *Die Antike in Poetik und Kunsttheorie: von Ausgang des klassischen Altertums bis auf Goethe und Wilhelm von Humboldt*, Das Erbe der Alten, 9–10, 2 vols (Leipzig: Weicher and Dieterich, 1914–24) facs. <<https://archive.org/details/dieantikeinpoeti01boriuoft/>>, I: Mittelalter, Renaissance, Barock, pp. 188–207, "Grotesk und Barock" (p. 193).

Benjamin's reference to Borinski carries important implications: to begin with, the passage appeals to scholarly *auctoritas* in a field in which he is not a specialist. The quotation — even if it obscures the narrator's position at one of the most important parts of the argument — provides the key idea behind Benjamin's approach to Counter-Reformation aesthetics. Borinski echoes Ulrici's aforementioned reading of Calderón when he claims that Counter-Reformation poetics are ruled by the Aristotelian idea of wonder, the sacred connotations of which are used by Catholic artists to provide assurance that the link with the divine has not been severed for good: “das Eingreifen Gottes ins Kunstwerk wird als möglich vorausgesetzt”. Benjamin finds confirmation in the work of a respected scholar of the time in the field of Spanish Literature for his own reading of Calderón and of the Spanish Baroque. Just as Calderón's dramas re-sacralise the profane, so, in Borinski's reading, Gracián's “ponderación misteriosa” makes God's intervention in the artwork possible.

As Mariela Vargas has already shown, Borinski's reading of Gracián's “ponderación misteriosa” is highly idiosyncratic.⁹⁰ He translates the term, which in Gracián is indebted to the tradition of rhetoric, to the realm of architecture.⁹¹ Even if unwarranted from a philological standpoint, this catches Benjamin's attention because it draws productive parallels to the argument of *Ursprung* (Vargas, “Die ponderación misteriosa”, pp. 111-15). In Catholic Baroque buildings, so the argument goes, there is a massive mismatch between the levels of horizontality and verticality. At a vertical level, these buildings are rich and transmit a sense of strength and power; at a horizontal level,

⁹⁰ Mariela Vargas, “Die ponderación misteriosa als Verklärung der Subjektivität”, in her *Baltasar Gracián's Spuren in den Schriften Walter Benjamins*, LiteraturForschung, 34 (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2018), pp. 103–23 <<http://publikationen.ub.unifr Frankfurt.de/frontdoor/index/index/docId/62374>> (pp. 111–15).

⁹¹ Gracián's develops the concept of the “ponderación misteriosa” is his “Agudeza y arte de ingenio”, in *Obras Completas*, ed. by Santos Alonso (Madrid: Cátedra, 2011), pp. 437-808. For a study on architecture in Spanish Baroque Literature which considers Benjamin's theory of the Baroque, see Jeremy Lawrance, “Architecture in Spanish Baroque Literature”, *The Modern Language Review*, 116.2 (2021), 316-337.

they are poor and disappointing. In other words, the material of these horizontal structures — its balconies, for instance — does not fulfil the promise of vigour of the building's vertical components, i.e. “Säulen und Pilaster” (columns and pilasters). Borinski's architectonic metaphor has important consequences for the theological point Benjamin wants to make.⁹² On the one hand, the Reformation questions the vertical level of communication (from this world to the beyond) and emphasises the paucity of this world (the horizontal level); on the other, Counter-Reformation aesthetics covers up the paucity of the horizontal level by overemphasizing the vertical level, i.e. by celebrating the glory of nature and thus giving the impression that the link with the divine remains unsevered. To put it in Benjamin's architectonic terms, the impression is given, in Baroque Counter-Reformation art, that its ornamentation is not simply decorative, but rather that it supports, and therefore is connected to, the invisible world of Heaven. From the visitor's first person perspective of such Baroque buildings an ensuing feeling of wonder is elicited by the majesty of its vertical ornamentation; and yet the scholar, taking a more detached position, should see through the visual effect and discover the trick. Overall, Counter-Reformation Catholic art is deemed deceitful because it beautifully and enticingly overemphasises the vertical axis of connection between Heaven and earth.

The visitor's inability to see through such *trompe l'oeil* is, from Benjamin's perspective, understandable; after all, *Ursprung* emphasises repeatedly that the world is rife with entrapments of the Devil. This is true to the extent that even Benjamin's rhetoric also takes the Devil's form: as Vargas has already explained, just before the book's abrupt ending the narrator recreates an aesthetic apotheosis (“Die *ponderación misteriosa*: musikalische Apotheose des Trauerspiels”, pp. 115-19). Indeed, Benjamin's

⁹² The passage could also be read as the description of an aesthetic structure “weighed down” by an invisible force or power, just like mystics receive the stigmata and, in so doing, are physically impressed with the sign of an invisible divine. I am grateful to Sofie Kluge for this observation.

fragmented and mosaic use of quotation (of Borinski's study, in this case) obfuscates the position of his own narrator, and precisely at one of the most crowning points of the book's argument. In the reader's attempts to disentangle the arguments, she is expected to feel the same awe that she may also experience before Bernini's *Saint Teresa* or when entering Tridentine Baroque cathedrals. Just as in Catholic Baroque architecture, the representation of sacred mysteries is intended to elicit a sense of awe and wonder in the reader or visitor. The greater the sense of wonder before the mystery of existence, the greater the impact of the book's final recognition: ultimately, not even the illusions of "Ponderación" can cover the gap between God and His creatures. In opposition to the majesty of such Baroque architecture, the form of German Baroque dramas, which Benjamin's narrator vindicates, remains unfinished and fragmented — it breaks down into ruins:

Sie sind von Anbeginn auf jene kritische Zersetzung angelegt, die der Verlauf der Zeit an ihnen übte. Die Schönheit hat nichts Eigenstes für den Unwissenden. Dem ist das deutsche Trauerspiel spröde wie wenig. Sein Schein ist abgestorben, weil es der rohester war. Was dauert, ist das seltsame Detail der allegorischen Verweisung: ein Gegenstand des Wissens, der in den durchdachten Trümmerbauten nistet. Kritik ist Mortifikation der Werke (*Ursprung*, 357).

From the very beginning they were disposed to that critical decomposition which the passage of time worked on them. Beauty is nothing special to the uninitiated; for such people, there is hardly anything less inviting than the German Trauerspiel. Its luster has faded, died away because of its extreme coarseness. What endures is the curious detail of the allegorical references: an object of knowledge nesting in the carefully considered constructions of rubble. Criticism is the mortification of works (*Origin*, p. 193).

We have previously seen that *Ursprung* identifies in the ruined forms of the German Baroque a model for an alternative version of nationhood and canonicity; moreover, these artforms also become the model for his literary criticism. It is only once beautiful appearances fade away, indeed decayed by the passing of time, that truth can be unveiled. This is indeed why Benjamin finishes his own study abruptly, ushering readers from the heights of "Ponderación" to the depths of rubble and incompleteness. The narrator's delight in the description of such heights makes the final and sudden

change of perspective much more shocking; by the end of the book, the labyrinthine turns and obscure jumps of his prose are magnified to such an extent that the incompleteness of the ending becomes salient for both lay and experienced readers. Given the density of the following closing passage, it does feel like a disappointment to turn the page and discover that it is indeed the last page of the book — no further explanation is provided. For the reader who has made it as far as the end, this will of course not come as a surprise, but rather as congruent with the book's poetics and with its defence of fragmentation, obscurity, and incompleteness.

Weil aus den Trümmern großer Bauten die Idee von ihrem Bauplan eindrucksvoller spricht als aus geringen noch so wohl erhaltenen, hat das deutsche Trauerspiel des Barock den Anspruch aus Deutung. Im Geiste der Allegorie ist es als Trümmer, als Bruchstück konzipiert von Anfang an. Wenn andere herrlich wie am ersten Tag erstrahlen, hält diese Form das Bild des Schönen an dem letzten fest (*Ursprung*, p. 409).

Because the idea of the building plan speaks more impressively from the ruins of great buildings than from even the best-preserved of lesser structures, the German trauerspiel of the Baroque has a claim to interpretation. In the spirit of allegory it is conceived as a ruin, as fragment, from the beginning. If other forms shine resplendent as on the first day, this form captures the image of the beautiful as on the very last (*Origin*, p. 258).

Benjamin's commitment to the above values becomes evident for the scholar who makes the discovery that the enigmatic claim about the form of the German mourning play sends us back to the book's scattered remarks on truth and beauty; in addition to the quote above, the prologue also contains the key to the ending of *Ursprung*. In the "Erkenntniskritische Vorrede" (Epistemo-critical Prologue), Benjamin refers approvingly to the idea, attributed to Plato's *Symposium*, that beauty is guaranteed by truth (*Ursprung*, p. 211).⁹³ However, the truth of beauty does not simply shine through; it has to be disclosed with a destructive force which Benjamin poetically describes in the following way:

Ob Wahrheit dem Schönen gerecht zu werden vermag? diese Frage ist die innerste im »Symposium«. Platon beantwortet sie, indem er der Wahrheit es zuweist, dem Schönen das Sein zu verbürgen. In diesem Sinne also entwickelt er die Wahrheit als den Gehalt

⁹³ See also Michael Jennings, "The Critic as Alchemist: The Truth Content of the Work of Art", in *Dialectical Images*, pp. 82-121.

des Schönen. Nicht aber tritt er [der Gehalt des Schönen, i.e. die Wahrheit] zutage in der Enthüllung, vielmehr erweist er sich in einem Vorgang, den man gleichnisweise bezeichnen dürfte als das Aufflammen der in den Kreis der Ideen eintretenden Hülle, als eine Verbrennung des Werkes, in welcher seine Form zum Höhepunkt ihrer Leuchtkraft kommt (*Ursprung*, pp. 210-12 “Philosophische Schönheit”, at p. 211).

Can truth do justice to the beautiful? This is the core question in the *Symposion*. Plato answers it by assigning to truth the role of guaranteeing being to the beautiful. In this sense, then, he expounds truth as the content of the beautiful. But such content does not come to light in an unveiling so much as manifest itself in a process that can be described figuratively as the flaming up of the veil as it enters the circle of ideas—a conflagration of the work in which its form reaches the acme of radiance (*Origin*, p. 7).

In the context of the ending of *Ursprung*, this means that German Baroque drama, which resists temptations of closure and stands firm in its commitment to destruction, keeps the flame of truth alive. The failed allegorical constructions of German mourning plays become tantamount to the incineration of artworks; both, with their destructive energies, allow truth to shine, to be disclosed, by tearing down ideological illusions. There is, after all, an authentic Benjaminian ethos with which to inhabit modernity’s landscape of ruins, the highest virtue being a strong commitment to fragmentation, incompleteness, and to the destruction of ideological entrapments. That Benjamin never finished the concluding section of his study makes a lot of sense, for it mirrors the book’s own commitment to such values.

The Defence of German Baroque Drama

According to *Ursprung*, German Baroque drama presents and represents the ambiguity, anxiety, and uncertainty over religious matters characteristic of the early modern period. Daniel Weidner points out that their seemingly ‘profane’ matter does not warrant an interpretation which overlooks their theology. Even if, in these new plays, martyrs belong to the worldly stage of the court, redemption and conversion remain relevant; in fact, secular affairs disguise the theological anxieties of these dramas, which indeed poignantly portray the ambiguity and uncertainty of sacred signs, symbols, and omens. As Weidner says in his essay on Gryphius’s *Leo Armenius*, “gibt es hier also in der

Handlung keine direkte Äußerung der Transzendenz durch Visionen und Prophezeiungen, sondern nur ihre Repräsentation durch ambige Zeichen” (“Schau in dem Tempel an, p. 300; “there is therefore here no direct expression of transcendence by visions and prophecies in the action, but only its representation by ambiguous signs”).⁹⁴ Martyrs, in actor-like fashion, stage their pain before an audience whom they wish to convert, but, at the same time, they are also constantly haunted by the uncertainty of their own sanctity: “Gerade in der Unentschiedenheit der Bekehrung, dessen Eintreten wir nur mutmaßen können, wird die gesamte moralische Welt zweideutig” (Weidner, “Gespielte Zeugen”, p. 274; “Especially in the indecisiveness of the conversion, the occurrence of which we can only assume, the whole moral world becomes ambiguous”). In the post-Reformation period, martyrs from one side of the religious divide are considered heretics from the other, which is why the adequate interpretation of martyrdom becomes a central yet uncertain issue.⁹⁵ The only way out of this hermeneutic labyrinth is embodied, so *Ursprung* tells us, in German martyr-plays, for these fully embrace the uncertainty that characterises martyrdom and call for the audience’s faith and commitment towards God’s radical otherness. By way of example, in this subsection I briefly explore Gryphius’ *Catharina von Georgien*, a play that bears many structural parallels to Calderón’s *El príncipe constante*, but which Benjamin interprets in radically different terms.

Andreas Gryphius’ martyr play *Catharina von Georgien* stages the story of Catharina, princess of Georgia, who has been captured by Shah Abbas, King of Persia.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ “therefore, there is no direct expression of transcendence in the action through visions and prophecies, but only its representation through ambiguous signs” (my translation).

⁹⁵ See also Weidner, “Schau in dem Tempel an”: “Denn die unvermittelte Gleichsetzung von Märtyrern und Heiligen wird zumindest im Protestantismus fragwürdig, vor allem wird aber das Martyrium grundsätzlich zwischen den Konfessionen umstritten: Die Märtyrer der einen Seite sind jeweils die Häretiker der anderen” (pp. 294-95).

⁹⁶ Andreas Gryphius, *Catharina von Georgien oder Bewehrte Beständigkeit* [1647] (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1975), <http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Gryphius,+Andreas/Dramen/Catharina+von+Georgien>. See Hans Jürgen Schings, ‘Catharina von Georgien. Oder Bewehrte Beständigkeit’, in Gerhard Kaiser (ed.), *Die Dramen des Andreas Gryphius: Eine Sammlung von Einzelinterpretationen* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1968), pp. 35-72.

The Shah has fallen in love with Catharina and, despite Russia's intervention, refuses to let her go. The princess rejects his offer of marriage as well as apostasy and, in punishment, is condemned to endure a martyr's death — she is burned at the stake (pp. 116-20). Catharina is, of course, convinced of her sanctity, yet the play questions whether complete certainty about religious matters can ever be achieved in this world. Newman gives a very clear account of such a conundrum in her interpretation of Catharina's dream in Act 1.⁹⁷ When her maidservant Salome visits her in prison Catharina recalls a frightening dream she has had in which, clothed in the magnificent garb of an emperor, her crown suddenly began to grow horns, piercing and penetrating her skull. A political reading of the dream is first given by Salome, who, in the fashion of Baroque emblematics, tells Catharina that it represents the burdens that come with earthly power. Yet Catharina herself offers a very different reading by the end of the play. As Newman explains, "the crown of thorns [now] signifies the martyrdom that God has bestowed on her". Newman tells us that the tensions between both readings—the first political, the second theological — should be framed within Baroque debates on sovereignty ("Melancholy Germans", p. 176-77). On the one hand, it is Catharina's duty, in the name of *ratio status*, to secure the succession of her throne; following this logic, she should accept the Shah's conditions. On the other, it is also her duty to remain loyal to the sacred anointment of her *auctoritas*, as she does by suffering martyrdom. As Newman explains, Gryphius's play stages the difficulty of making the right choice in a world that is spiritually out-of-joint ("Melancholy Germans", p. 177).

For a modern reader, however, it might be tempting to argue that, in the religious world of early modernity, the theological reading is more appropriate. The play would thereby stage the common mistake of reading omens with profane lenses, that is,

⁹⁷ "Melancholy Germans: War Theology, Allegory, and the Lutheran Baroque", in *Benjamin's Library*, pp. 139-87 (p. 171).

without actually realizing the truth of their sacred meaningfulness. But Newman reminds us that, in the allegorical tradition of emblematics evoked in Catherina's horrendous dream, the political reading was in fact most common. To further make her point, Newman poignantly asks the following question: "what are we to do with the fact that the only character [...] able to complete a proper emblematic reading by seeing beyond the maimed body [of the martyr] to its greater significance in the transcendental realm—namely the Shah—does so only in a state of intense confusion, of insanity?" ("Melancholy Germans", p. 179). Redemption, in such a Baroque world, remains available only either as an act of faith or as one of madness.

Newman's interpretation of *Catharina von Georgien* is meant to illuminate the theological motifs with which Benjamin reads Baroque drama. It has already been mentioned that *Ursprung* should be read in dialogue with Germany's war ideology, grounded in modern Protestant discussions about Luther's "Two-Kingdom Doctrine" ("Zwei-Reiche Lehre"). If *Benjamin* argued for a radical uncertainty in matters of the divine — as in the example of *Catharina von Georgien* — this is because he disapproved energetically of the modern Protestant German nation, which had justified in theological terms its involvement in the Great War (Newman, *Benjamin's Library*, p. 145). Although it may seem that Luther's firm rejection of the saving grace of good works also represents a firm rejection of reading the secular world in theological terms, this is actually not the case. In his "Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should Be Obeyed" ("Von weltlicher Obrigkeit, wie weit man ihr Gehorsam schuldig sei"), for instance, Luther argues that the king and all other earthly authorities should be followed because God, through his inscrutable will, has made them the guarantors of order (cited in Newman, "Melancholy Germans", p. 159). For Luther, the argument that faith alone can save humans is *not* at odds with interpreting God's will and therefore makes room

for ideological justifications of the *status quo*. Even if infinitely separated, both worlds remain interlocked, making it still possible to justify politics in theological terms.

A similar train of thought was followed by many Weimar intellectuals, who framed the destiny of the German nation in terms of the development of God's plans (Newman, "Melancholy Germans", p. 147). Benjamin's theory of the Baroque — modelled on the ambiguity of German Baroque drama — stands in opposition to them; this is why it staunchly rejects any theology that claims to have reunited the sacred with the profane; the book is committed to the sheer uncertainty of God-related matters. This has also been compellingly explained by Newman, who considers Benjamin's theory of the Baroque through the lens of the Baroque studies of the so-called Warburg school ("Melancholy Germans", pp. 154-70).⁹⁸ As against Aby Warburg's nationalist agenda, Benjamin rejects the idea that redemption is available for the German nation

As much as the celebration of the German nation was the underlying subtext of Benjamin's book, then, what becomes visible in the actual texts of the "Lutheran" tragic drama [...] is that there is ultimately no guarantee of an unambiguous sense of progress beyond tragedy in this world. Redemption and rebirth come only rarely. And if they were to come for post-World War I Germany, they would come unannounced and undeserved ("Melancholy Germans", pp. 141-42).

This represents, for Newman, the lesson Benjamin learns from reading German Baroque dramatists; and yet she paints too bleak a picture of Benjamin's interpretations. Instead, for Benjamin, the failure of German Baroque drama ends up reflecting a beam of truth into the world (*Ursprung*, p. 357-58; p. 409).⁹⁹ Before the meaninglessness of earthly existence, German Baroque dramatists find a way out both by embracing ambiguity and uncertainty to their last consequences and by remaining committed to the task of destroying theologically-misleading appearances of totality.

⁹⁸ See Jochen Becker, "Ursprung so wie Zerstörung: Sinnbild und Sinngebung bei Warburg und Benjamin", in *Allegorie und Melancholie*, ed. by Willem van Reijen, Neue Folge 704 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), pp. 64-89.

⁹⁹ See also, amongst others, Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, pp. 59-60, and Weidner, "Kreatürlichkeit", p. 129-30.

Calderón's Seven Artistic Sins

Benjamin's contrasting of German and Spanish Baroque drama spells out two different paths to modernity. On the one hand, the plays of Calderón represent the model for a Romantic modernity. This is because, as I have explained in Chapter One, Calderón is the most skilled artist of transcendence according to Jena Romanticism. Romantic writers such as Schlegel identified in his dramas the theological potential of art, which they wished to enlist in their fight against modern "disenchantment". On the other hand, the plays of German Baroque writers such as Gryphius and Lohenstein represent the model of the alternative modernity that Benjamin is keen to vindicate. Whereas the Romantic Calderón is thought to provide what Curtius calls a *Blick in den Himmel* ("glimpse into heaven"), these German Baroque playwrights remain committed to fragmentation, incompleteness, and to the destruction of false appearances of unity.¹⁰⁰ Hence the difference between both modernities boils down to an aesthetic question that carries wide ranging theological and even political implications: Benjamin raises the worry that the version of modernity bequeathed by the Romantics cleared the ground for the justification of the Great War in theological terms. Rather than embracing the infinite distance between immanence and transcendence, the Romantics were the first to legitimise the modern sacralisation of the profane.

Benjamin identifies in Calderón's poetics seven artistic sins that perform this deceitful yet enticing sacralisation, which carry out the work of covering up the distance between immanence and transcendence. Each of these seven sins paints the illusion of totality and sacredness in art, and therefore covers up the world's fragmentation and destruction. What at first might appear as a merely aesthetic choice turns out to have

¹⁰⁰ Ernst Robert Curtius, "Exkurse: XXII. Theologische Kunsttheorie in der spanischen Literatur des 17. Jahrhunderts", in *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter*, 8th edn. (Bern: Francke, 1973), pp. 530-40 (p. 539).

major political implications: the awe and wonder elicited by Counter-Reformation art, however beautiful and enticing, has the ultimate aim of blinding the audience, which should instead take up a more detached and critical position in order to see through the ideological *trompe l'oeil*. Benjamin identifies in Calderón the foremost example of this manipulative and ideological aesthetics. Contrary to his German counterparts, Calderón is seen to weave closed, coherent, and complete narrative structures, which imbue art with a sense of sacredness and majesty.¹⁰¹ The wonder that these plays elicit makes their audiences gullible to the ideologies of those in power, who are happy to disguise with sacred garments the historical contingency of their own position. All in all, Calderón's dramas are accused of mesmerizing and manipulating the public into kowtowing to the status quo.

To make his point, the narrator of *Ursprung* identifies Calderón's misleading artistic techniques. I dub these "artistic sins" in accordance with the aforementioned concept of the "demonic", which is used by Benjamin to identify misleading mixtures of immanent and transcendent elements in the arts. These sins, as I show, perform the work of the Devil: they mislead the audience into believing that God's sacredness can be recreated in this world. Calderón's artistic sins take the following seven forms: 1) the "life is a dream" metaphor; 2) the plotter or *Intrigant* who weaves courtly narrative; 3) an idealised painting of nature which mirrors the hierarchies of the political realm; 4) the *deus ex machina* figure of the King as a secularised instance of the sacred; 5) ostentation and its courtly element of play and lightness; 6) reflection and thought; 7) honour.

¹⁰¹ I am not including Benjamin's discussion of Shakespeare, which has already been analyzed in depth by Newman, "The Task of the Translator: Shakespeare as German Tragic Drama", in *Benjamin's Library*, pp. 115-37; see also her aforementioned "»Hamlet ist auch Saturnkind«", pp. 175-94. Newman shows that Shakespeare was reappropriated as a German national writer, which is why Benjamin's critique of Calderón does not apply to *Hamlet*. And yet *Ursprung*'s main argument lies in the opposition between Spanish drama — the "virtuelle Gegenstand" (virtual subject) — and German Baroque drama — i.e. the actual subject of the book.

To begin with, *Ursprung* tells us that Calderón's life-is-a-dream metaphor provides an overarching structure to the eminently fragmented nature of the Baroque. Metatheatricality, which had initially opened up the closed dramatic world of Ancient Tragedy, here provides closure to the iterative structure of mourning plays. The dream structure of *La vida es sueño* — mirroring that of *El gran teatro del mundo* — provides meaning by inscribing the actions of the characters into a wider narrative of salvation, which in turn appeases the audience's fears of damnation.¹⁰²

Denn Spaniens Drama [...] löst die Konflikte eines gnadenlosen Schöpfungsstandes gewissermaßen spielerisch verkleinert im höfischen Umkreise eines als säkularisiertes Gewalt sich erweisenden Königtums. Die *stretta* des dritten Aktes mit ihrem indirekten gleichsam spiegel-, kristall- oder marionettenhaften Einschluß der Transzendenz verbürgt dem Calderonschen Drama einen Ausgang, der deutschen Trauerspielen überlegen ist. Es kann den Anspruch, an den Gehalt des Daseins zu rühren, nicht verleugnen. Wenn dennoch das weltliche Drama an der Grenze der Transzendenz innehalten muss, sucht es auf Umwegen, spielhaft, ihrer sich zu vergewissern. Nirgends ist das deutlicher als im »Leben ein Traum«, wo es im Grunde eine dem Mysterium adäquate Ganzheit ist, in der der Traum als Himmel waches Leben überwölbt. Sittlichkeit ist in ihm zuständig [...] Nirgends anders als bei Calderon wäre denn auch die vollendete Kunstform des barocken Trauerspiels zu studieren. (*Ursprung*, p. 260).

Spain's drama [...] resolves the conflicts of a graceless Creation playfully reduced, so to speak, within the compass of the court and of a kingship that proves to be a secular power of redemption. The *stretta* of the third act, with its inclusion of transcendence—as though in a mirror, or crystal ball, or marionette theater—guarantees to the Calderonian drama a denouement superior to that of the German Trauerspiel. The Spanish drama cannot disavow its claim to engage the content of existence. If the secular drama must nonetheless stop at the boundaries of transcendence, then it seeks to assure itself of this in indirect ways, via play. Nowhere is this clearer than in *Life is A Dream*, in which the dream arches over waking life like the vault of heaven. Morality has its place there [...] Nowhere else than in Calderón, then, could the consummate art of the Baroque Trauerspiel be studied (*Origin*, p. 68).

Benjamin's brief sketches about Calderón's artforms repeatedly highlight the same point: unlike German Baroque dramatists, he is capable of weaving totalizing artforms which manage to recreate transcendence on stage. Thus, he manages to find a "solution" for the graceless state of history that ensues after Luther's critique of good works, and this is why Calderón successfully secularises the crux of the medieval mystery play, i.e.

¹⁰² See Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *El gran teatro del mundo* [1655], ed. by Ignacio Arellano (Kassel: Reichenberger, 2021). For a brilliant interpretation of the philosophical motifs of the play, see Poppenberg, "Role and Freedom in Calderón's *The Great Theater of the World*", *Comparative Drama*, 47.3 (2013), 309-42.

the certainty of redemption. In *Das Leben ein Traum*, then, the life-is-a-dream metaphor re-unites heaven and earth, immanence and transcendence. I explain this more in depth in the analysis of *La vida es sueño* in Chapter Four, but for now it is enough to highlight that Benjamin continuously refers to architectonic metaphors to make his argument. Whereas the form of the German Trauerspiel is made tantamount to ruins and debris, the dream metaphor provides a vault that structures and constructs a solid poetic edifice. Consequently, the denouement of Calderón's dramas is deemed superior to that of the Germans; as mentioned above, this might provide the appearance of beauty, but truth, for Benjamin, can only be unmasked through destruction. All in all, *La vida es sueño* sacralises the sheer immanence of the world by making it a sign of a more authentic reality that awaits us once we die.

The second sin corresponds to the figure of the plotter in the Spanish Baroque stage. I have already mentioned that, inspired by Karl Borinski's reading of Baltasar Gracián, *Ursprung* understands the comic figure of the plotter who weaves courtly intrigue as a secularised embodiment of the Devil (*Ursprung*, p. 305). Even if this shocking comparison remains unexplained, it does make a lot of sense once contextualised within Benjamin's criticism of Calderón's world-as-stage metaphor. If, in Baroque theatre, the beyond of the stage represents heaven, Benjamin infers that the court, in which plotters weave plays-within-the-play as if it were all a dream, represents its opposite — Hell:

Sie sind vom Schlage des gebrandmarkten Höflings, wie Guevara, den Albertinus übersetzte, ihn geschildert hat, und gedenkt man in ihm des Intriganten, vergegenwärtigt man den Tyrannen, so ist das Bild des Hofes nicht weit verschieden von dem Bild der Hölle, welche ja die Stätte der ewigen Traurigkeit genannt wird (*Ursprung*, p. 322).

These courtiers are of the same breed as the stigmatized courtier described by Guevara, whom Albertinus translated; and if one thinks here of the intriguer, and brings to mind the tyrant, then the image of the court seems not very different from the image of hell, which is known, after all, as the place of eternal sorrows (*Origin*, p. 147).

The “Intrigant” (plotter) is here juxtaposed to the tyrant because both, immersed as they are in the world of things, attempt to control the strings of political life. Ultimately, tyranny and the plotter overlook the transience of worldly affairs; a task that is bound to fail, which makes them sorrowful and melancholy. Benjamin believes that both plotters and sovereigns attempt to weave convoluted plays-within-plays, and that these provide a totalizing form that recreate a false appearance of the divine on stage:

In ihr spielt nicht allein das organische Leben des Menschen sondern auch das Treiben des Höflings und das Handeln des Souverän sich ab, der nach okkasionalistischen Bild des waltenden Gottes jederzeit unmittelbar ins Staatsgetriebe eingreift, um die Daten des historischen Verlaufs in einer gleichsam räumlich auszumessenden, regelrechten und harmonischen Abfolge anzuordnen (*Ursprung*, p. 275).

In such time is enacted not only the organic life of the human being but also the doings of the courtier and the acts of the sovereign, he who, according to the occasionalist image of the divine potentate, immediately intervenes in the affairs of state at every moment in order to arrange the data of the historical process in a, so to speak, spatially measurable, regular and harmonious succession (*Origin*, p. 87).

Like the Devil in the medieval mystery play, plotters and tyrants find their dwelling place amongst falsehood and deceit, forever scheming the destiny of God’s creatures into their own playful web of conspiracies. *Ursprung* further argues that whereas German Baroque drama signals the ‘devilish’ nature of plotters, Spanish Baroque playwrights rather choose to sacralise this figure:

Wer das Leben des Höflings durchschaut, der erkennt erst durchaus, warum der Hof die unvergleichliche Szenerie des Trauerspieles ist. Der „Cortegiano“ des Antonio de Guevara hat die Bemerkung, „Kain sei der erste Hofmann gewesen, weil er durch Gottes Fluch keine eigene Heimstätte“ gehabt hätte.¹⁰³ [...] Während aber im spanischen Drama der Glanz der Herrschertums immerhin das erste Kennzeichen des Hofstaates war, so ist das deutsche Trauerspiel ganz auf den düsten Ton der Intrigen bestimmt. [...] Das Drama der deutschen Protestanten betont die infernalischen Züge dieses Rates; im katholischen Spanien dagegen tritt er mit der Würde der *sosiego* auf der „der katholisches Ethos mit antiker Ataraxie in einem Ideal des kirchlichen und weltlichen Höflings verquickt“ (*Ursprung*, p. 275-76).¹⁰⁴

Whoever looks deeply into the life of the courtier understands why the court is the setting par excellence of the trauerspiel. Antonio de Guevara’s *Cortegiano* contains the remark “Cain was the first courtier because, through God’s curse, he [had] no home of

¹⁰³ Benjamin quotes Guevara from Rochus Freiherr von Liliencron, *Einleitung zu Aegidius Albertinus: Lucifers Königsreich und Seelengejaidt*, ed. Liliencron, Deutsche National-Literatur, 26 (Berlin, Stuttgart [1884]), XI.

¹⁰⁴ This second quote is from Herbert Cysarz, *Deutsche Barockdichtung. Renaissance, Barock, Rokoko* (Leipzig: H. Haessel, 1924), p. 299.

his own.” [...] But whereas in the Spanish drama the splendour of sovereign power was, in spite of everything, the primary characteristic of courtly life, the German Trauerspiel is wholly determined by the gloomy tone of the intrigue [...] The drama of the German Protestants emphasizes the infernal features of the advisor; in Catholic Spain, by contrast, he appears with the dignity of *sosiego*, “which fuses Catholic ethos with ancient ataraxy in an ideal of the courtier at once ecclesiastic and worldly” (*Origin*, pp. 87-88).

Benjamin’s concern about Spanish drama is repeatedly emphasised throughout *Ursprung*, albeit under different guises each time. In the figure of the plotter, he identifies yet again the Catholic attempt to bridge immanence and transcendence; this time, accomplished through the sacred dignity of “*sosiego*” (serenity), which is interpreted, through the authority of Herbert Cysarz (1896-1985) in a highly imaginative way. In contrast, Protestant Baroque drama rejects any such references to secularised sacredness: not only are the intrigues of German plotters “*düster*” (gloomy), but the plays also insist on the “*infernalischen Zügen*” (infernal features) of these figures.

The third and fourth sins play an important role in Benjamin’s discussion of Calderón’s representation of sovereignty. Just as in the case of the first two sins, the reader finds out that Calderón continues to cover up the gap between immanence and transcendence which, in the argument of *Ursprung*, is characteristic modern feature of the Baroque:

Im Drama des Spaniers dagegen entfaltet das Schicksal sich als Elementargeist der Geschichte und es ist logisch, daß allein der König, der große Restaurator der aufgestörten Schöpfungsordnung, es zu schlichten vermag. Astrales Schicksal — souveräne Majestät, das sind die Pole Calderonscher Welt (*Ursprung*, p. 309).

In the drama of the Spaniard, on the other hand, fate unfolds as the elemental spirit of history, and it is logical that the king alone, the great restorer of the disturbed order of Creation, is able to put it right. Astral fate—sovereign majesty: these are the poles of the Calderón world. (*Origin*, p. 129).

Benjamin makes two related points in this brief passage: he begins by telling us that “*Schicksal*” (destiny) is portrayed by Calderón as the “*Elementargeist*” (elemental spirit) of history and that, therefore, Calderón’s kings have the power of restoring order in the chaotic state of the world. From this perspective, the problem with Calderón’s

world is twofold: first, he naturalises destiny as a given of history's unfolding (the third sin) and, second, he reinforces the belief that the sovereign is the highest and most sacred embodiment of nature (the fourth). Both points are related in that the king's sovereignty over nature is what allows him to regulate destiny. The king therefore expresses his sacredness because he is the only being capable of providing closure to the open structure of mourning plays: even the most uncertain and mysterious of all concepts, that of destiny, becomes malleable and comprehensible once it is subsumed under the order of nature, over which the king of Spanish Baroque stages rules.¹⁰⁵

The fifth sin amounts to what Benjamin calls "das Spielmoment in Drama" (the element of play in drama), with which he refers to Calderón's allegedly uncritical playfulness. The labyrinthine plots of his plays provide the audience with a totalizing form through which transcendence is recreated in a way that creates delight and doctrinal entertainment. Hence the impression is given that, just as Calderón is playfully weaving the strings of plot development, so God, from behind the scenes, is pulling the strings of earthly life like a puppeteer moving her puppets:

Ostentativ betonte sie das Spielmoment in Drama und ließ nur weltlich verkleidet das Spiel im Spiel als Transzendenz zu ihrem letzten Worte kommen. Nicht immer ist die Technik offenkundig, indem die Bühne selber auf der Bühne einbezogen wird. Doch stets liegt nur in einer paradoxen Reflexion von Spiel und Schein für das eben damit »romantische« Theater der profanen Gesellschaft die heilende und lösende Instanz. Jene Absichtlichkeit [...] zerstreut im idealen romantischen Trauerspiel des Calderon die Trauer. Denn in der Machination hat die neue Bühne den Gott. Für die barocken Trauerspiele der Deutschen ist es kennzeichnend, daß jenes Spiel in ihnen nicht mit dem Glanze der spanischen noch mit der Durchtriebenheit der späteren romantischen Produktionen sich abrollt (*Ursprung*, p. 261).

The element of play in drama was ostentatiously emphasized, and transcendence was allowed to have the last word only in the worldly disguise of a play within the play. The technique is not always obvious, in the sense of erecting the stage itself on the stage or incorporating the spectator's space within the space of the stage. Nevertheless, for the theatre of a secular society—which is, precisely for this reason, "romantic" — the healing and redemptive instance only ever lies in a paradoxical reflection of play and semblance. That deliberateness [...] dispels the sorrow in the ideal romantic trauerspiel of Calderón. For the new theatre has its god in machination. It is characteristic of the Baroque trauerspiel of the Germans that in it this play unfolds neither with the brilliance of the Spanish dramas nor with the artful cunning of the later Romantic productions.

¹⁰⁵ Lorenz Jäger, "Schicksal", in *Benjamins Begriffe*, ed. by Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla, 2 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), II, 725-40.

(*Origin*, p. 69).

Just as in the cases of the other sins, the sin of playfulness provides closure and meaning to the opened structure of the *trauerspiel* genre and turns melancholy into *admiratio*. In contrast to the German Baroque, Calderón's dramas weave together the world of fiction and the reality beyond the stage and therefore reassure the union of immanence with transcendence. The *comedia* entertains because it playfully gives the impression that, just as the playwright weaves the labyrinthine turns of narrative development, so God writes, from behind the stage of earthly life, the labyrinthine turns of human history. This technique provokes an intense emotional response from the audience, which becomes starkly immersed in the fiction as well as gullible and easy to manipulate. Rather than actively destroying the fiction's false recreations of the divine—i.e.: questioning the form's appearances of totality—, the audience takes a passive role and observes, with delight and entertainment, the totalizing unfolding of the plot.

In sixth place, Benjamin points out the role of reflection in Calderón's plays. Against the redeeming power of thought in Jena Romanticism, Benjamin raises the accusation that Calderón's delight in philosophical musings — embodied in long soliloquies — promotes a passive, irresponsible, and contemplative attitude. Characters such as the Tetrarch, from *El mayor monstruo, los celos*, take a step back from the events of history so as to philosophically consider their situation from a myriad of angles; ultimately, though, they remain incapable of acting and indeed changing the development of the plot, cast as it is in terms of an 'unchangeable' destiny that can be apprehended from a distance. This is enough, according to Benjamin, for Calderón's play to provide a sense of cohesiveness and meaning that ultimately redeems the Tetrarch. I further delineate Benjamin's interpretation of *El mayor monstruo, los celos* in the next section.

Finally, Benjamin does not forget to refer to the infamous role of honour in Spanish drama. As I have explained in Chapter One, this has been one of the landmarks of traditional Calderón scholarship, and has been read as the ultimate emblem of the *comedia*'s political conservatism and allegiance to the pre-modern world of the Counter-Reformation. Benjamin identifies in Calderón's notion of honour a worldly attempt to redeem humankind despite its fallen nature:

Im spanischen Drama ist durch eine beispiellos Dialektik des Ehrbegriffs die kreatürliche Blöße der Person wie nirgends sonst einer überlegenen, ja versöhnenden Darstellung fähig geworden. Das blutige Supplizium, unter dem das Ende des kreatürlichen Lebens im Märtyrerdrama sich vollzieht, hat sein Gegenstück in dem Kalvarienwege der Ehre, die, wie immer geschunden, am Ende eines Calderonschen Dramas durch königlichen Machtspruch oder ein Sophisma wieder sich aufzurichten vermag. Im Wesen der Ehre hat das spanische Drama dem kreatürlichen Leben seine adäquate kreatürliche Spiritualität und damit einen Kosmos des Profanen entdeckt, der deutschen Dichtern des Barock, ja selbst den späteren Theoretikern sich nicht erschloß (*Ursprung*, p. 266).

In the Spanish drama, through an unparalleled dialectic of the concept of honor, the creaturely vulnerability of the person was rendered capable of a superior and indeed conciliatory presentation, such as was seen nowhere else. The bloody torture under which creaturely life comes to an end in the martyr drama has its counterpart in the via dolorosa of honor that, however defiled, can be reestablished, either through a royal decree or a sophistry, at the conclusion of a Calderonian drama. In the essence of honor the Spanish drama revealed to the creaturely body the creaturely spirituality adequate to it, and thereby discovered a cosmos of the profane such as was never disclosed in the German writers of the Baroque era, nor even to later theorists (*Origin*, p. 75).

With the concept of creaturely life, Benjamin is here building on the German tradition, which uses the theologically-charged term *Kreatur* ("creature") to describe a life bereft of spirit, indeed hoping for otherworldly redemption as martyrs do.¹⁰⁶ In contrast to those German poets of the Baroque ('d[ie] deutsche[n] Dichter des Barock'), who are incapable of re-spiritualizing the cosmos, Calderón's representation of honour discloses "einen Kosmos des Profanen" (a new configuration of the profane) that grounds the creature's redemption. Ultimately, Calderón's representation of honour is taken to justify the political hierarchies of his time; it secures the sacredness of social roles and so benefits those in power.

¹⁰⁶ On *Kreatur* see *Briefe* § 143 An Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Grunewald, 11.6.1925, I, 384-90 (pp. 386-87). See footnote n°29 for bibliographical references to creaturely life in the German tradition.

Ursprung stands firm in its rejection of such ‘Calderonian illusions’. These are taken to represent yet another entrapment of the Devil, who is always happy to deceive and mislead God’s creatures. In its variegated review of each of these dramatic techniques, Benjamin’s treatise unmasks false paths to redemption. This is why, as I explain with more detail in Chapter Three, the narrator of *Ursprung* remains in a state of constant alertness: always vigilant of the ever-seducing ways of the Devil, which take multiple guises. Only German Baroque drama, in all its earnestness, incompleteness, and limitation, boldly reject sacred garments:

Allein ist ja die verklärte Apotheose, wie Calderon sie kennen lernt, mit dem banalen Fundus des Theaters, den Reyen, Zwischenspiel und stille Vorstellung entfaltet, nicht aufzustellen. Sie bildet zwingend sich aus einer sinnvollen Konstellation des Ganzen, das sie nur mehr, auch minder nachhaltig betont, heraus. Die mangelnde Entwicklung der Intrige, die kaum je die des Spaniers auch von ferne nur erreicht, macht die Insuffizienz des deutschen Trauerspiels. Nur die Intrige wäre vermögend gewesen, die Organisation der Szenen zu jener allegorischen Totalität zu führen, mit welcher in dem Bilde der Apotheose ein von den Bildern des Verlaufes Artverschiedenes sich erhebt und der Trauer Einsatz und Ausgang zugleich weist (*Ursprung*, p. 408-09).

Nevertheless, the transfigured apotheosis, as Calderón makes it known, is not to be realized with the banal resources of the theatre, as implemented in chorus, interlude, and pantomime. It necessarily builds from a meaningful constellation of the whole, which it accentuates only more or less lastingly. The weak development of the plot, which seldom even remotely approaches that of the Spanish dramatist, accounts for the insufficiency of the German trauerspiel. Only the plot would have been capable of bringing the organization of the scene to that allegorical totality with which, in the image of apotheosis, something different in kind from the images of succession stands out, affording both entry and exit to mourning. (*Origin*, p. 258).

German plotters lack the ability of their Spanish counterparts to weave organic and harmonious plays-within-plays: in failing to masterfully weave their narratives, they do not give the impression that God’s will, from beyond the stage, is moving the strings. Accordingly, they fail to recreate the apotheosis of Spanish Baroque drama. In their failure to establish the play’s structuring intrigue, the allegorists of the German Baroque betray their commitment to destruction, to incompleteness indeed, which radically affirms the otherness of the sacred and its impenetrability in this world. Benjamin vindicates the German Baroque as the source of an alternative modernity which could have been—a modernity that does not forget the theological separation between the divine and the

profane. All in all, German Baroque dramas are ethically superior to Calderón, in Benjamin's argument, because they reject the above sins of building totalizing forms: "Der Schluß der deutschen Trauerspiele ist daher wie minder formvoll so auch weniger dogmatisch, er ist – moralisch, sicherlich nicht künstlerisch – verantwortlicher als der spanische" (*Ursprung*, p. 263; "The conclusion of the German trauerspiel is therefore both less formally elaborated and less dogmatic; it is—morally, though certainly not artistically—more responsible than that of the Spanish drama", *Origin*, p. 72). The commitment to fragmentation and incompleteness of Gryphius and Lohenstein indeed points, within this narrative, to a more authentic stance in modernity: they stand firm in their determination of tearing down rather than covering up ideological illusions and instead embrace the hard truth of history's profanity, transience, and contingency.

Two Plays by Calderón: *El mayor monstruo, los celos* and *El príncipe constante*

EL MAYOR MONSTRUO, LOS CELOS

Benjamin explores the craftsmanship of Calderón at length in his early essay "«El mayor monstruo, los celos» von Calderon und »Herodes und Mariamne« von Hebbel.

Bemerkungen zum Problem des historischen Dramas", which begins with the following quote from Count von Schack's *Geschichte der dramatischen Literatur und Kunst in Spanien*:

»Es ist ein großer, aber, so viel wir wissen, noch nirgends grünlich berichteter Irrtum der neueren unpoetischen Jahrhunderte, von den Dichtern in der Art Originalität zu verlangen, daß sich der Benutzung fremder Erfindungen und Gedanken enthalten sollen. In unserer Zeit, wo die Kunst aus ihrem organischen Zusammenhange gerissen ist, wo die Dichter isolirt und ohne lebendige Wechselwirkung dastehen, betrachtet man Dasjenige unter dem Gesichtspunkt des Plagiat, was sich in allen wahrhaft großen Perioden der Poesie als allgemeiner Brauch nachweisen läßt. Durch die Isolierung von den Quellen, welche in den Werken Anderer fließen, wird dem Dichter der Zusammenhang mit den Wurzeln abgeschnitten, aus denen er reichen und gesunden Nahrungsstoff ziehen kann; er [wird] auf eine affectirte Eigenthümlichkeit, auf das Haschen nach Neuem und Originalem hingeführt, und gewiß haben wir hier, neben anderen mitwirkenden Ursachen, einen Grund für die betrübende Erscheinung, daß die Literaturen der Jetztzeit so ganz ohne innere Einheit und organische Fortbildung

dastehen.¹⁰⁷

It is a great error of the modern, unpoetic centuries, but one that has never been satisfactorily refuted, to demand of poets that they should be “original” in the sense that they should refrain from making use of the inventions and ideas of others. In our age, which is one in which art has been torn from its organic context, in which poets are isolated and denied any lively interaction with one another, such borrowings are deemed plagiarisms, whereas in all the truly great epochs of poetry they have been common practice. The poet’s isolation from the sources that flow into the works of others cuts him off from the roots from which he might derive a rich and healthy sustenance. It leads him to affect an independence, to snatch after novelty and originality; and here we have, alongside other causal factors, one reason for the depressing fact that the literatures of the present day are so completely lacking in inner unity and organic development.¹⁰⁸

Schack’s statement resonates throughout the whole of Benjamin’s essay. The count tells us that the organic coherence of art has been torn from its own context in his own times, and that, consequently, art has been stripped of its vitality and the poet has become isolated: “die Dichter isolirt und ohne lebendige Wechselwirkung dastehen”. In older times such as those of Calderón, artists could draw on the rich nutrients of tradition, but now this practice is condemned as “Plagiat” (plagiarism) and artists instead make efforts to snatch at novelties and affected (so trite and hackneyed) originality: “auf eine affectirte Eigenthümlichkeit, auf das Haschen nach Neuem und Originalem”. For Schack, this lack of respect for tradition amounts to a loss of vitality in the arts, which could be compared to a tree the soil of which is gradually becoming a wasteland. In Schack’s narrative, the vigour of literature will only be restored once tradition is, as in Calderón’s times, respected and properly taken care of.

Benjamin’s approach to literary history is opposed to that of Schack: the values the latter condemns in modern literature are those which Benjamin champions. Whereas

¹⁰⁷ “»El mayor monstruo, los celos« von Calderon und »Herodes und Mariamne« von Hebbel: Bemerkungen zum Problem des historischen Dramas”, GS, II/1 (henceforth “El mayor monstruo”), at p. 246-47, cited from Alfred Friedrich von Schack, *Geschichte der dramatischen Literatur und Kunst in Spanien*, 3 vols (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1845-46), III, 57-58.

¹⁰⁸ “Calderón’s *El Mayor Monstruo*, *Los Celos* and Hebbel’s *Herodes und Mariamne*: Comments on the Problem of Historical Drama”, in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, transl. by Rodney Livingstone and others, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, vol.1, 1913-1926, pp. 336-86 (p. 363) (henceforth referenced as SW).

Schack longs for the irrecoverable organic unity of past literature, Benjamin is set on the task of destroying literature's appearance of unity. And yet, despite their disagreement, Benjamin employs a highly respectful tone towards Schack's ideas. Mistaken as these may be, Schack employs a powerful imagery that provides food for thought and clears the ground for Benjamin's analysis of Calderón. Schack's words invite us to think of art's relationship to its historical context in biological terms: just as a plant nourishes itself from the soil in order to grow roots and ultimately to bloom, so the artist nourishes *himself* — in the gendered terms conventional in the nineteenth century — from tradition. Following this narrative, the point is that once poets become isolated from the rich soil of tradition, their artworks become trite, stifled, and lifeless.

Schack's argument is a powerful one, and we might assume that it made an impression on Benjamin for two main reasons. First, because the rhetoric of biological vitalism, reminiscent of Nietzsche, directly appealed to the early-twentieth century fascination, in Germany, with the concept of *das Leben* ("life").¹⁰⁹ Second, because it brings to the fore a pertinent point against Benjamin's own poetics: in Schack's argument, those artworks which have been deracinated from the rich soil of tradition, and therefore appear incomplete and fragmented, have also lost all their vitality. Benjamin takes the accusation seriously. He argues that, whilst Schack is right to stress the importance of tradition, he overlooks the full implications of his biological metaphor: with the passing of time, artworks that were once full of life turn into a fossilised structure. From Benjamin's perspective, and against Schack's position, the danger of tradition is that it may restrain the vitality of literature by reinforcing patterns and structures from which it is very difficult to break free.

¹⁰⁹ See Friedrich Nietzsche, "Jenseits von Gut und Böse", in *Werke in Drei Bänden*, ed. by Karl Schlechta, 3 vols (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1966), II, pp. 563-760. For an excellent contextualisation of the concept of life at the turn of the twentieth century in Germany, see Woldietrich Rasch, "Aspekte der deutschen Literatur um 1900", in *Zur deutschen Literatur seit der Jahrhundertwende: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1967), pp. 1-48.

Benjamin dubs this fossilizing tendency of tradition *Schicksal* (“fate”), a term that suits him well due to its central position in his aforementioned theory of drama. It is worth remembering that, according to his theory, the difference between ancient tragedies and mourning plays is that the former deal with fate in the form of myth whilst the latter deals with fate in the form of history: “Der Mythos, in jedem seiner geschlossenen Sagenkomplexe, ist sinnvoll an sich, nicht so die Geschichte.” (“El mayor monstruo”, p. 249; “In each of its self-contained saga complexes, myth is meaningful in itself. Not so history”, SW, p. 365). The subject-matter of ancient and modern playwrights has changed radically: historical events, rather than divine myth and legends, are now the content of the new drama; and, unlike myth, historical events remain open to interpretation and are utterly contingent. This is why the task of these new playwrights, as Benjamin further tells us, is to weave a necessary totality — “fate” — from the details of historical events (“El mayor monstruo”, p. 250). But this represents a dangerous task, since now history is represented as if it had been necessarily pre-ordained, that is, in terms of fate and of nature’s inevitable development. Hence the artistic treatment of fate becomes the essential difference between ancient and modern drama: “Das Gewicht liegt in der antiken Tragödie auf der Auseinandersetzung mit dem Schicksal, im historischen Drama auf dessen Darstellung” (“El mayor monstruo”, p. 249; “In classical tragedy, the emphasis lies on the conflict with fate; in historical drama, on its representation”, SW, p. 365).

It might be surprising for the reader to find out that, at such a key moment of the text, Benjamin suddenly turns to Schack’s initial quote: “Diese Erwägung [...] leitet zurück zu den Sätzen des Grafen Schacks” (p. 250; “This consideration [...] leads us back to Graf Schack’s statement”, SW, p. 365). Only to immediately go back, in the next sentence, to the topic of writing plays tainted by fate and tradition:

Gibt es Stoffe, welche Formen schicksalhafter Bildung in sich erahnen lassen, so wäre des Dramatikers allerdings die Hemmung unwürdig, die aus der bloßen Tatsache

früherer Bearbeitungen bei ihm hervorginge. Und sie wäre um so gefährlicher als es keineswegs auszumachen ist, ob die hohe dramatische Eignung gewisser Stoffe mehr ihrem Alter oder eben der Reihe ihrer früheren Gestaltungen verdankt wird (“El mayor monstruo”, p. 250).

If there are subjects that hint at the presence of fate within themselves, then it would be unworthy of the dramatist to let himself be inhibited purely by the mere fact of earlier treatments. Any such inhibition would be all the more dangerous as it is by no means clear whether the dramatic suitability of certain subjects springs from their age or from the series of previous adaptations (SW, p. 366).

Benjamin leaves it up to the reader to understand the relationship between his argument and Schack’s initial quote, but he has made sure to highlight its importance. Indeed, the issue at stake bears a lot of parallels with Schack’s argument, which also considers the link between art, its context and subject-matter, and tradition. For Schack, as has already been mentioned, tradition represents the rich soil for art to grow roots and bloom. In contrast, Benjamin takes a more complex position: whereas he agrees that art is always rooted within a specific context, he disagrees with what he perceives as Schack’s uncritical understanding of tradition. The problem with Schack’s position is that it remains blinded to the true historical soil of the art he analyses. Benjamin tacitly makes this point by raising the question whether die “hohe dramatische Eignung gewisser Stoffe” (the dramatic suitability of certain subjects) should be understood vis-à-vis “ihrem Alter” (their historical age”) or vis-à-vis “der Reihe ihrer früheren Gestaltungen” (the series of their previous designs), that is, the weight of tradition. This is a matter which Schack does not consider.

Benjamin suggests that layers of historical time — and so, of its different representations — shape the legacy of specific subject-matters, to the extent that when tradition carries enough weight, the story already possesses an underlying logic that is difficult to overcome. Since Schack does not raise the aforementioned question, he cannot distinguish, still less question, the assumptions of tradition, which he uncritically refers to as the poet’s healthy “Nahrungstoff” (nutrients). In contrast to Schack, then, Benjamin’s implicit argument here is that the task of the critic is to question a tradition

which appears fossilised and therefore unquestionable in the form of fate. It is only through this critical work of destruction that literary criticism might illuminate the authentic relationship between art and its historical time.

Benjamin continues his argument by claiming that the Herod theme seems predestined for the Baroque, and that a generation of German playwrights became fascinated by the distance between the king's two bodies, one sacred, the other profane ("El mayor monstruo", p. 253). He therefore makes the point that the relationship between the Herod theme and the Baroque is self-evident: "Die flüchtigste Übersicht bestätigt es: die Geschichte des Herodes ist ein Barockstoff" ("El mayor monstruo", p. 255; "Even the most superficial overview makes clear that the Herod story is a Baroque subject", *SW*, p. 369). It is as if history, following this narrative, had produced a theme that could only be handled in all its majesty in the Baroque. Benjamin further emphasises that this is why post-Baroque Herod dramas are scarce or unimportant: "Von dieser Erscheinung [daß fast alle nachbarocken Herodesdramen sei es Entwürfe geblieben [...] sei es unwesentlich erscheinen] macht Hebbel die bemerkenswerte Ausnahme. Unter allen Dramen dieses Stoffkreises kann nur er zu einer genauern Vergleichung mit dem des Calderon auffordern" ("El mayor monstruo", pp. 255-56; "Hebbel himself is the most striking exception to this rule [that almost all post-Baroque plays on this theme either remained uncompleted projects [...] or are simply unimportant]. Of all the plays of this theme, he is the only one worthy of detailed comparison with Calderón's", *SW* p. 369). The comparison between Calderón and Hebbel thus allows Benjamin to analyse the differences and similarities between two masterful treatments of the subject at contrasting historical times: at a time in which the Herod theme strongly spoke to the spirit of the epoch and at a time in which it had grown out of fashion.

In both Calderón and Hebbel Benjamin identifies a shared effort to fight against fate and tradition: whilst Hebbel overcomes the limitations of his age vis-à-vis the Herod theme, Calderón's treatment of the subject remained unparalleled in his epoch. Throughout the essay, Benjamin's narrative voice betrays its fascination for this aspect of Calderón's work: the playwright overcomes with vitality the dramatic limitations of the theme's shape as inherited by tradition. Benjamin identifies these limitations as the difficulty of many writers to square the circle of Herod's jealousy towards Mariamne, which ultimately leads to her assassination, with his love for her:

wo die Darstellung der Eifersucht, die in Haß sich verliert, ihren Ursprung aus Liebe nicht mehr zu bekunden vermag, da ist alles dramatische Interesse verloren. Diese Aufgabe ist vielleicht in Herodesdrama einzig von Calderon [sic] gemeistert worden ("El mayor monstruo", p. 253).

When the depiction [Darstellung] of jealousy ends in hatred and loses sight of jealousy's origins in love, all dramatic interest is forfeited. In the Herod plays, Calderón is perhaps the only dramatist to have overcome this dilemma. (SW, p. 368).

As opposed to most iterations of the Herod theme in his time — and Benjamin gives references ranging from Tirso de Molina to Lodovico Dolce — Calderón remains the only artist capable of portraying the character of Herod under a light of poignant ambiguity. Since, in Benjamin's reading of Calderón, Herod performs the highest evil whilst his love for Mariamne remains unblemished, he calls for the audience's mixed feelings of both sympathy and rejection:

Ist es doch ihm [Calderón], in dessen Werk unzweideutiger als in denen der andern Bearbeiter Herodes die erste Stelle behauptet, nicht nur gelungen, sondern wohl geradezu Problem gewesen, die entfesselte Eifersucht des Königs nie in Haß umschlagen, sie immer mit leidenschaftlicher Liebe gepaart erscheinen zu lassen (p. 252).

His [Calderón's] is the first play in which Herod unambiguously occupies the leading role, and the problem of the character as he saw it was precisely to prevent Herod's jealousy from turning into hatred. Instead, he wished to ensure that it was always accompanied by passionate love. (SW, p. 367).

Benjamin employs here a tone of respect for Calderón's artistic mastery; he is, after all, capable of overcoming the limitations of the traditional treatment of the Herod theme and instead of writing a drama much more suited to the issue, so important for the

Baroque, of the king's two bodies. This discovery aligns Calderón, as we learn further on in the essay, with none other than Gryphius, whose poetics Benjamin vindicates in *Ursprung*. In Gryphius's treatment of the subject, it becomes evident that what most suited the spirit of the Baroque—and therefore caused the fascination of the audiences—was the representation of the King's decay and profanity, even despite his sacredness. Hence the Herod Latin epic poems of Gryphius show the sovereign of the seventeenth century, the summit of creaturely life, erupting in a frenzy like a volcano and destroying himself with all the surrounding court: “der Souverän des siebzehnten Jahrhunderts, der Gipfel der Kreatur, ausbrechend in der Raserei wie ein Vulkan und mit allem umliegenden Hofstaate sich selber vernichtend” (“El mayor monstruo”, p. 253: “The seventeenth-century sovereign — the pinnacle of creation — erupting in rage like a volcano and destroying himself, together with his entire court”, *SW*, p. 368).” And yet, despite the fact that Calderón breaks free from the weight of tradition and reinterprets the theme in a way uniquely suited for the spirit of its age, Benjamin argues that he ultimately misuses the immense power of his artistic craftsmanship in order to overcome the division between the king's sacred and profane natures.

If Herod plays were very popular in the Baroque, they fell out of fashion in Germany from the nineteenth century onwards. Benjamin believes that the German tradition is incapable of understanding Calderón, since its artistic conventions are so alien to the Spaniard's art. Amongst other things, he underscores the inability of German critics to understand the stage props such as the “Dolch und Bild als Requisiten der Schicksalstragödie, gongoristischen Schwulst, hin und wieder in die Rede eingeschobene Sonette, Frauenchöre, Musik“ (“El mayor monstruo”, p. 256: the dagger and the picture, Gongoresque bombast, the sonnets inserted at intervals into the dramatic dialogue, women's choruses, and the music”, p. 370). In fact, Baroque aesthetics were rejected by neo-Classicists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and

accused of being stilted and artificial. Benjamin is particularly critical of A.W. Schlegel, whom he accuses of using Calderón with his own personal interests in mind.¹¹⁰ Goethe is the only German, we are told, who has been capable of understanding the art of the Spaniard.¹¹¹ He pointed out the two keystones of Calderón's artistic world, namely, Catholicism and the early modern court: "Wem sich Calderon eigentlich bequemt habe, will als Vorbedingung des Verständnisses seiner Dramen beleuchtet sein. Zweierlei wird man vor allem andern hier zu nennen haben: den Katholizismus und den Hof" ("El mayor monstruo", p. 257: "The question of what Calderón actually accommodated himself to has to be answered as the precondition for an understanding of his plays: it was the Church [*Katholizismus* ("Catholicism"), not the Church] and the court", SW, p. 372). Nevertheless, it turns out that another German was also capable of understanding Calderón: Hermann Ulrici, whom Benjamin invokes to explicate Goethe's point:

In welchem Sinne dies vom Katholizismus gilt, hat Ulrici in seinem Werke »Über Shakespeares dramatische Kunst und sein Verhältnis zu Calderon [sic] und Goethe« vortrefflich bezeichnet. Es heißt: Bei Calderon »muß wegen der an sich schon vorhandenen und vorausgesetzten Versöhnung der Gegensätze, bei der schon geschehenen Erlösung der Menschheit durch Gott, ... die Aktion in eine solche Verwicklung, das Wollen und Thun der Menschen durch besondere Umstände so in Widerspruch gegen die göttliche Ordnung gesetzt werden, daß Gottes unmittelbares äußeres Eingreifen wenigstens einen Schein der Nothwendigkeit gewinnt« ("El mayor monstruo", p. 259).

The sense in which this applied to the Church [*Katholizismus*] has been brilliantly explained by Ulrici in his book *Über Shakespeares dramatische Kunst und sein Verhältnis zu Calderón und Goethe*. He states there that in Calderón, "because of the assumed and actual reconciliation of the elements of conflict—because, in short, man has already been redeemed by God... — the plot has to be organized and man's desire's and actions have to be brought into conflict with the divine order by means of particular circumstances in such a way that God's direct, external intervention acquires at least the appearance of necessity" (SW, p. 372).

Benjamin elaborates here in more detail the point I have already underscored in the above discussion of *Ursprung*: that the Spanish art of the Baroque, following the

¹¹⁰ "Schlegel suchte jeder, der mit Calderon beschäftigt war, sich zu versichern [...]. [Er] betrachtete [...] als die Domäne seines Schrifttums allein, literarischen Ruhm zu vergeben" (Benjamin, "»El mayor monstruo, los celos«", p. 257).

¹¹¹ "In höchster Intensität hat Deutschland mit den in jeder Hinsicht so schwer zugänglichen Werken Calderons vielleicht nur in einem Manne sich auseinandergesetzt: in Goethe" (Benjamin, "»El mayor monstruo, los celos«", p. 256).

ideology of the Counter-Reformation, represents the intervention of the Godhead in the artwork. Benjamin, however, admits that this technique is not consistently used in the *comedia* in general and in *El mayor monstruo, los celos* in particular: “Nun ist freilich nicht überall, zumal nicht in dem Herodesdrama, das hier vorausgesetzte unmittelbare Eingreifen Gottes gegeben” (“*El mayor monstruo*”, p. 259: “Of course, the direct intervention that Ulrici presupposes is not always present, least of all in the Herod drama”, p. 372). But he insists on Ulrici’s point that, in a Calderonian world, a “Versöhnung der Gegensätze” (reconciliation of opposites) takes place, which in turn allows the “Erlösung der Menschheit durch Gott” (redemption of mankind through God). In the case of *El mayor monstruo*, this is achieved through the courtly element of play, which I have previously characterised as one of Calderón’s artistic sins:

Aber es bleibt Ulricis Frage in Kraft: Welche profanen Stoffe sind mit echt dramatischem Interesse in einer Welt noch verwertbar, deren tiefste sittliche Ordnungen [...] unverrückbar transzendent bestimmt sind? Wie auch immer die Antwort im einzelnen lauten mag, von vornherein ist klar, daß in solchen Dramen weit ostentativer als sonst der Charakter des Spieles hervortreten wird (“*El mayor monstruo*”, p. 259-60).

Nevertheless, Ulrici’s question remains valid: What profane materials can still possess authentic dramatic interest in a world whose deep ethical impulses [...] are irrevocably transcendental? However we may choose to answer this question at the level of detail, it is evident from the onset that in such dramas the element of play will be more prominent than usual (SW, p. 372).

Following Goethe and Ulrici, Benjamin goes on to identify in Calderón the pinnacle of the courtly Catholic culture of the seventeenth century. In his reading, the Spanish playwright succeeds in the difficult challenge of combining the court with Catholicism: whereas the former deals with secular affairs, the latter is of course concerned with transcendence (“*El mayor monstruo*”, p. 259). Benjamin argues that this impossible mixture imbues Calderón’s courtly plays with a stark sense of playfulness, as already analysed above. He adamantly insists on the importance of play for his interpretation, which is intimately bound to the key concept of fate: “Die Dramatik des Spiels sieht, wo sie historischen Stoffen gegenübersteht, sich genötigt, Schicksal als Spiel zu entfalten”

(“*El mayor monstruo*”, p. 260: “When the drama of play is confronted with historical subjects, it finds itself compelled to develop the logic of play as a game”, *SW*, p. 373.) The artistic development of fate in terms of playfulness accounts for the uncritical nature of Calderón’s dramas, and also grounds the accusation that the playwright turns the audience’s attention away from a critical engagement with fate and instead towards the uncritical pleasure of play. Ultimately, this is the pleasure that the audience experiences by passively and uncritically watching, from afar, the playfulness of fate’s unfolding. To further explain this point, I now turn to Benjamin’s direct engagement with Calderón’s Herod-play.

Calderón’s *El mayor monstruo, los celos* tells the story of Herod — referred to throughout the play simply as “el Tetrarca”, the Tetrarch —, who loses both his empire and the love of his dearest wife, Marienne.¹¹² The initial scene discloses Marienne’s unbound melancholy, caused by a twofold omen. A wise man has read in the stars that the greatest of all monsters will kill her and also that the Tetrarch’s dagger will kill what he most loves. When Herod hears this, his first reaction is to sceptically question the omen: in a rather philosophical soliloquy, he makes the point that, even if astrology may contain the secrets of our future, it is almost impossible for humans to apprehend it with certainty. In any case, and to appease Marienne’s fears, he throws the dagger far away in an attempt to show that he is the master of his own destiny. Their fear grows significantly, however, because the dagger, as if by magic, comes back to them. It fatally strikes the soldier Tolomeo, who was returning to the palace with sombre news: their enemy Octaviano is winning the war and they will most probably have to surrender the Empire. The Tetrarch is eventually captured by the enemy forces, and then tries to free himself by killing Octaviano; at the precise moment that he is about to stab

¹¹² *El mayor monstruo, los celos*, ed. by María José Caamaño Rojo (Madrid: Iberoamericana-Vervuet, 2017).

his enemy, and again as if by magic, a portrait of Marienne, which had come into Octaviano's possession by chance, abruptly falls between them. Instead of stabbing Octaviano, the Tetrarch stabs Marienne's image, as if prophetically fulfilling his fate — i.e., to kill the dearest love of his life. By the end of the play, and as much as Herod has tried to free himself, he fulfils his destiny: the passion of jealousy is revealed to be this “greatest monster”; the reason why, much to his own regret, the Tetrarch kills Mariene.

According to Benjamin, a secret magnetic field, mysteriously embodied by props such as the dagger and the portrait, attracts Herod to his inescapable destiny. The randomness and complete implausibility with which the dagger and the portrait lead to the unfolding of Herod's fate further grounds the underlying idea that there is a master director who, as a puppeteer, moves the strings from behind. In opposition to ancient Greek tragedy, the main character does not directly confront fate but rather passively watches it unfold before his eyes — the Tetrarch becomes the audience of his own play. This playful unfolding allows for philosophical disquisitions that, in Ancient Tragedy, are simply out of the question due to the intensity and earnestness of fate's dictums.

Benjamin goes to the extent of interpreting Herod's jealousy as another prop, like the dagger and Marienne's painting, all representing terrible “Unheilszeichen”, (signs of doom), for just as these props, despite their absurdity and randomness, lead forward the development of the plot, so jealousy drives the Tetrarch's actions in spite of his own will:

Nicht aus Eifersucht tötet Herodes die Gattin, sondern durch Eifersucht kommt sie um. Durch Eifersucht ist Herodes dem Schicksal verhaftet und ihrer, als der gefährlich entbrannten Natur des Menschen, bedient es sich in seiner Sphäre nicht anders als der toten Natur der Dolche und Bilder zu Unheil und Unheilszeichen. Nicht die sittliche Entfaltung eines mythischen Vorgangs in der Tragödie sondern die Darstellung des spannungslosen schicksalhaften Naturablaufs im Trauerspiel liegt in dem Calderonschen Herodesdrama vor (“El mayor monstruo, los celos”, p. 265).

Herodes does not kill his wife from jealousy, but it is through jealousy that she dies. It is through jealousy that Herodes is tied to fate, and fate makes use of it—the dangerously inflamed side of human nature—to bring about disaster and the portents of disaster [‘Unheil und Unheilszeichen’] in the same way that it makes use of inanimate nature in the form of daggers and pictures. What we have in Calderón's Herod play is

not the ethical unfolding of a mythical action, as takes place in tragedy. Instead, we witness the representation of a natural process that unfolds without tension but with the force of fate (SW, p. 376).

Calderón's Herod drama can be described, following the vocabulary of *Ursprung*, as a "Spiel vor Traurigen", that is, a play before mourning characters who cannot but take a step back and, like the audience, watch the spectacle of their fall (p. 298). Indeed, *Ursprung* develops the ideas from this early essay and claims that this balance between play and mourning makes Calderón's drama the "vollendete Kunstform des barocken Trauerspiels" (*Ursprung*, p. 260; "consummate art form of the Baroque Trauerspiel", *Origin*, p. 68; see also subsection "Spiel und Reflexion" at pp. 257-62). The Tetrarch's misdeeds, which strip him of his sovereignty, are driven, against his own will, by the 'natural' passion of jealousy. The play therefore justifies his actions by inscribing them into an alleged "Naturablauf" (natural process): "Nicht die sittliche Entfaltung eines mythischen Vorgangs sondern die Darstellung des spannungslosen schicksalhaften Naturablaufs im Trauerspiel liegt in dem Calderonschen Herodesdrama vor" ("El mayor monstruo", p. 265; "What we have in Calderón's Herod play is not the ethical unfolding of a mythical action. Instead, we witness the representation of a natural process that unfolds, in *Trauerspiel*, without tension but with the force of fate", transl. modified, SW, p. 376). In other words, Calderón is said to strip responsibility from Herod, the embodiment of evil in the Christian tradition, because he lacks jurisdiction over his own actions, instead driven by an uncontrollable passion. Furthermore, the Tetrarch's role as a spectator of his own demise reinforces the metatheatrical link between himself and the audience: like them, he passively watches the dramatic unfolding of fate happening before his eyes.

As a consequence of Herod's detachment from the wrongdoings of his passions, Benjamin makes the point that his love is not undermined by the greatest monster of jealousy. Whilst jealousy has become another stage prop — and indeed another sign of

fate — driving forward the plot, Herod's love remains unblemished and even redeems

his honour:

In jedem andern Anschauungskreis würde dies seine Königsehre mindern, hier steigert es sie, da durch die Einheit mit seiner Liebe sie ich als eines mit der Schöpfung erweist. Übrigens aber versäumt der Dichter kaum eine Gelegenheit, die Paradoxien des nationalen spanischen Ehrbegriffs absichtsvoll ins Ungeheure zu steigern, als Ausdruck einer unheilvollen und unwiderstehlichen Manifestation des Schicksals, dem das Geschöpf unterliegt, wie der Baum dem Gewitter. Einzig in nimmermüden dialektischen Reflexionen vermag es sich zu salvieren (*Ursprung*, p. 269).

From any other standpoint, this would diminish his [Herod's] majesty. But here this tie magnifies it, since, by fusing it with his love, his honor shows itself to be at one with creation. It is worth observing, incidentally, that Calderón rarely misses the opportunity to intensify the paradoxes of the national Spanish conception of honor, by showing them to be the expression of a baleful and irresistible manifestation of fate, to which created beings must bow like trees in a storm. The only means of salvation is through never-ending dialectical reflection. (SW, pp. 379-80).

For Benjamin, Calderón's unique treatment of Herod's love and jealousy portrays with stunning force the unity of creation and therefore reinforces the link between the king's two bodies, between immanence and transcendence. The distinction between love and jealousy redeems the Tetrarch's honour by intensifying the extraordinary union of opposites, namely, his evil misdeeds and his unblemished love. Benjamin further tells us that this paradox is stretched out so radically that it ends up representing humanity's relationship to fate in terms tantamount to a tree's relationship to a thunderstorm: "als Ausdruck einer [...] Manifestation des Schicksals, dem das Geschöpf unterliegt, wie der Baum dem Gewitter". The point is that the Tetrarch remains incapable of confronting his jealousy, which strikes him just like a thunderstorm striking a tree. Calderón's solution to the issue of fate, so Benjamin tells us, is that of philosophical reflection, which inscribes Herod's fall within nature's order and hence secures the Catholic sacralisation of the world that was so dear to Jena Romantics:

Was aber auch die theoretisch gerichteten Romantiker so magisch an Calderon fesselte [...] ist, daß in äußerstem Maße bei ihm *eines* erfüllt war, das sie in ihrem eignen Schaffen erstrebten: die Unendlichkeit war gesichert durch bloße Reflexion. Das ganze Herodesdrama ist von den skurrilsten Debatten über Schicksalsmacht und Menschenwillen durchzogen. Spielerisch wird das Geschehen durch die Reflexion verkleinert, welche Calderons Helden jederzeit bei der Hand haben, um in ihr die ganze Schicksalsordnung wie einen Ball in Händen zu wenden, den man bald von dieser, bald

von jener Seite betrachtet. Was anders hatten die Romantiker zuletzt ersehnt, als das in den goldnen Ketten der Autorität verantwortungslos reflektierende Genie? (“El mayor monstruo”, p. 268).

But what attracted so magnetically to Calderón [...] is that he fulfilled to perfection one condition they strove for above all else. This was that infinity should be guaranteed through mere reflection. The entire Herod play is criss-crossed with the most absurd debates about human will and the power of fate. The action is playfully diminished by the reflections that Calderón’s heroes always have at their fingertips. This enables them, so to speak, to twist and turn the entire order of fate in their hands like a ball so that you can examine it, now from this side, now from that. What, after all, had been the ultimate goal of the Romantics if not to see genius, even when bound by the golden chains of authority, still irresponsibly absorbed in its own reflections? (SW, p. 378-9).

The problem with Calderón’s representation of fate, in this narrative, is that it misleads the audience into believing that the infinitude of the sacred can be recreated in art through reflection. This remains problematic in Benjamin’s interpretation: Calderón is promoting a passive and uncritical stance towards fate and tradition, which becomes crystallised, through philosophical reflection, in terms of nature’s inevitable development. This turns out to be the main reason why, according to Benjamin, the Romantics were so moved by Calderón: his artworks contain the greatest artistic mastery and vitality, yet without actually questioning tradition: “Was anders hatten die Romantiker zuletzt ersehnt, als das in den goldnen Ketten der Autorität verantwortungslos reflektierende Genie”. Whereas both Gryphius and Calderón point towards the epoch’s key anxieties about the king’s two bodies, Benjamin’s argument is that only Gryphius is capable of embracing the epoch’s ensuing uncertainty. Calderón and the Romantics, in contrast, are said to have found a way to cover such anxieties up in the form of infinite reflection; and this creates a sense of totality and meaningfulness within Calderón’s dramatic world, which in turn confirms the status quo. All in all, the problem with Calderón’s representation of tyrants, according to this essay, is that it manages to redeem Herod’s Fall and to reinscribe the division between the king’s two bodies within the wider totality of Romantic infinite reflection.

In the next section, I turn to Benjamin's inclusion, amidst the discussion on sovereignty in *Ursprung*, of Don Fernando's monologue in Calderón's *El príncipe constante*. As we have seen, in his early essay on the tyrant play *El mayor monstruo* Benjamin argues that totality is secured through philosophical speculation and by inscribing fate within the order of nature. In *Ursprung*, the literary critic builds on his early work and argues that, in the martyr play *El príncipe constante*, such a totality is secured by inscribing the hierarchy of sovereignty within the order of nature.¹¹³ Moreover, Benjamin also develops more in full what he considers to be the political implications of Calderón's Counter-Reformation aesthetics. He discovers in *El príncipe constante* a link between Romanticism and Carl Schmitt's political theory, even despite the latter's theoretical rejection of the former.¹¹⁴ In both cases, the sacralisation of the profane clears the ground for a conservative and hierarchical politics and turns a blind eye to the task of questioning the fossilizing patterns of tradition.

EL PRÍNCIPE CONSTANTE

Benjamin clears the ground for the inclusion of Don Fernando's voice in *Ursprung* by first emphasizing the theological connotations of medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque aesthetics:

Nicht als irreligiöses heidnisches Zeitalter — als eine Spanne laienhafter Freiheit des Glaubenslebens erscheint die Renaissance gegen das Barock, während der hierarchische Zug des Mittelalters mit der Gegenreformation seine Herrschaft in einer Welt antritt, der der unmittelbare Weg ins Jenseits versagt war. [...] Nichts war ihr [die Gegenreformation] ferner als Erwartung einer Endzeit, ja auch nur eines Zeiteumschwungs, wie sie als Kraft der Renaissancebewegung durch Burdach sichtbar geworden sind. Ihr geschichtsphilosophisches Ideal war die Akme: ein goldenes Zeitalter des Friedens und der Künste, dem alle apokalyptischen Züge fremd sind, verfaßt und in aeternum garantiert durchs Schwert der Kirche (*Ursprung*, pp. 258-59).

Compared to the Baroque, the Renaissance appears not as an irreligious, pagan age but as a span of nonclerical freedom in the life of faith, while with the Counter-Reformation the hierarchical tendencies of the Middle Ages resumes its authority in a world that was

¹¹³ This is already hinted in the 1923 essay, which emphasises, with reference to *El príncipe*, Calderón's dramatic representation of apotheosis ("und sehr schön hat Schuchardt hierbei an die Calderonsche Schlußapotheose des »Egmont« erinnert") and the sovereignty of "Phantasie, Noblesse, und Artistentum" (fantasy, nobility, and artistry) in his poetics ("El mayor monstruo, los celos", p. 258).

¹¹⁴ See Schmitt, *Politische Romantik* [1919], 3rd ed. (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1968).

denied immediate access to the beyond [...]. Nothing was more alien to the latter [the Counter-Reformation] than [the] expectation of an end time, or even only of an upheaval of the times, such as Burdach has shown was instrumental to the movement of the Renaissance. The philosophic-historic ideal of the Counter-Reformation was the acme: a golden age of peace and artistic flowering, one to which all apocalyptic tendencies are foreign, but which was established and guaranteed *in aeternum* through the sword of the Church. (*Origin*, p. 66).

This view of the Counter-Reformation summarises Benjamin's approach to Calderón's dramas. The Spanish playwright, in this argument, insists on maintaining the religious patterns and structures of medieval times, even despite his quite different contemporary historical coordinates. Echoing the ideas of the 1923 unpublished essay on Calderón, Benjamin emphasises that the closed and totalizing structure of Calderón's dramas is intimately tied to the Counter-Reformation:

Denn die Welt der Schicksalsdramen [...] ist eine in sich geschlossene. Sie war es zumal bei Calderon, in dessen Herodesdrama »Eifersucht, das größte Scheusal« man das früheste Schicksalsdrama der Weltliteratur hat sehen wollen. Es war die sublunare Welt im strengen Sinne, eine Welt der elenden oder prangenden Kreatur, an der *ad maiorem dei gloriam* und zur Augenweide der Beschauer die Regel des Schicksals planvoll und überraschend zugleich sich bestätigen sollte. Nichts umsonst hat ein Mann wie Zacharias Werner, ehe er in die katholische Kirche flüchtete, sich am Schicksalsdrama versucht. Dessen nur scheinbare heidnische Weltlichkeit ist in Wahrheit das profane Komplement des kirchlichen Mysteriendramas (*Ursprung*, pp. 262-63).

For the world of the dramas of fate [...] is a world closed in itself. That was especially the case in Calderón, whose Herod drama, *Jealousy Is the Greatest Monster*, has been seen as the earliest drama of fate in world literature. It was the sublunary world in the strict sense, a world of the suffering or resplendent creature, in which, *ad maiorem dei gloriam* and for the edification of spectators, the rule of fate was supposed to be confirmed in a manner at once methodical and surprising. Not for nothing did a man such as Zacharias Werner, before he took refuge in the Catholic Church, try his hand at the drama of fate. Its only apparently pagan worldliness is in truth the profane complement to the religious mystery play. (*Origin*, p. 71).

These remarks prefigure Benjamin's discussion of Baroque sovereignty: once the theological implications of Counter-Reformation drama have been laid out, *Ursprung* turns to consider the political implications of Calderón's art. Benjamin raises his claim through the contrast between the German and the Spanish Baroque: whereas the Spanish Baroque is said to epitomise the political implications of Romantic aesthetics, German Baroque drama resists the temptations of artistic closure and instead provide a more authentic model for political action. Benjamin delineates his alternative model

through yet another comparison, this time between Calderón and Carl Schmitt's theory of sovereignty. The relevance of Schmitt's theory of sovereignty in *Ursprung* has already been excellently explained by Samuel Weber and Sigrid Weigel.¹¹⁵ Weber, for instance, pays special attention to the letter Benjamin sent to Schmitt in 1930, to which the literary critic attached his by then recently published *Ursprung* and expressed his debt to the jurist's work on dictatorship ("Taking Exception to Decision", p. 5).¹¹⁶ In the following pages, I argue that Benjamin engages with Calderón's martyr play with the tacit aim of accusing Schmitt, who criticises the political project of Romanticism, of committing the same mistake as the Romantics, that is, to confuse immanence and transcendence in Catholic fashion.

In *Politische Theologie*, Schmitt defines the sovereign as the person who is capable of making decisions within a state of emergency: "Souverän ist, wer über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet" ("Sovereign is he who decides on the exception").¹¹⁷ Schmitt's definition stands against Weimar liberals of his time, repeatedly ridiculed in his writings due to what the jurist perceives to be their endless and meaningless discussions. Building on Juan Donoso Cortés's defence of dictatorship, Schmitt further explains that, when emergencies take place, someone must rise up to the situation and simply make a decision.¹¹⁸ Liberal talk of dialogue thus becomes a cowardly refusal to

¹¹⁵ See Weber, "Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt", *Diacritics*, 22.3/4 (1992), 5-18, and Sigrid Weigel, "Souverän, Märtyrer und ‚gerechte Kriege‘ jenseits des Jus Publicum Europaeum. Zum Dilemma politischer Theologie, diskutiert mit Carl Schmitt und Walter Benjamin", in *Figuren des Europäischen. Kulturgeschichtliche Perspektiven*, ed. by Daniel Weidner (Munich: Fink, 2006), pp. 101-28.

¹¹⁶ Benjamin's letter to Schmitt was not included in Adorno and Scholem's edition of his correspondence; as Weber points out, his intellectual admiration for the Nazi Jurist did not fit the image that his friends and editors intended to make known to a broader audience ("Taking Exception to Decision", p. 5). The letter can be found in *GS*, I, p. 887.

¹¹⁷ Schmitt-Dorotić, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre der Souveränität* [1922], 2nd ed. (Munich and Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot, 1934) p. 17. In his translation, George Schwab adds a footnote to highlight that, in the context of Schmitt's work, exception refers to "any kind of severe economic or political disturbance". See *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, transl. by George Schwab (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 5.

¹¹⁸ See Juan Donoso Cortés, Marqués de Valdegamas, "Discurso sobre la dictadura" [1849], *Verbo: la ciudad Católica*, 1.8 (1962), 33-55. Available online: shorturl.at/alCHQ. For Schmitt's interpretation of the Spanish political thinker, see his *Donoso Cortés in gesamteuropäischer Interpretation: Vier Aufsätze*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 2009).

engage with historical events, and it is characterised — this is Schmitt's argument — by postponing decisions which, sooner or later, must be made. In *Politische Romantik*, Schmitt accuses Romanticism of taking the same naïve and liberal position: their emphasis on love and on overcoming conflict turns a blind eye to the harsh and Hobbesian reality of life.¹¹⁹ But Benjamin turns Schmitt's argument against himself: he includes a well-known monologue by Calderón's Don Fernando to spell out the parallelisms between the Romantic project, as embodied in Calderón's drama, and Schmitt's political theory. Calderón's Romantic celebration of the glory of creation now takes rather uncanny connotations because the union between aesthetics and theology of the Romantic Calderón parallels Schmitt's union between politics and theology. In both cases, theology has been unambiguously transformed, in Tridentine fashion, into a different realm (i.e. either aesthetics in the latter or politics in the former).¹²⁰

Benjamin inserts Don Fernando's voice between two revealing sentences: first, he warns us that the Prince's words reveal a specifically Spanish worldview; second, and after providing the quote, a hyphen introduces the point that Calderón's attempt to find the origin of kingship in the "Schöpfungsstand" (order of creation) can also be found in legal theory (i.e. in Carl Schmitt):

Spricht doch nichts weniger als eine spezifische Spanische Meinung aus den folgenden Worten des standhaften Prinzen Don Fernando. Sie führen das Motiv des Königsnamens in der Schöpfung durch. »Selbst bey dem Vieh und wilden Thieren / Steht auf solcher würd'gen Stufe / Dieser Name, daß das Recht / Der Natur ihm heißet huld'gen / Mit Gehorsam: wie wir lesen, / Daß der Löw', in ungebundenen / Staaten des Gewildes König, / Der, wann er die Stirne runzelt / Sie mit straub'gem Haarwuchs krönet, / Milde sey, und nie verschlungen / Hab' als Raub den Unterwürf'gen. / In dem salz'gem Schaum der Fluthen / Mahlen dem Dolphin, der König / Unter Fischen ist, die Schuppen, / Die er silbern trüg[t] und golden, / Auf die dunkelblauen Schultern / Kronen, und man sah wohl schon / Aus der wüsten Wuth des Sturmes / Ihn ans Land die Menschen retten, / Daß sie nicht im Meer versunken ... / Ist nun unter Thieren, Fischen, Vögeln, Pflanzen, Steinen, kundig / Solche Königs-Majestät / Des Erbarmens: billig muß es / Auch bey Menschen gelten, Herr.« — Der Versuch, dem Königtum im Schöpfungsstande seinen Ursprung anzuweisen, begegnet selbst in der juristischen Theorie (*Ursprung*, p. 264).

¹¹⁹ Schmitt-Dorotić, *Politische Romantik* (Munich and Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot, 1919). Available online: shorturl.at/lxF18.

¹²⁰ See Weidner, "Kreatürlichkeit".

Out of the following words of the steadfast prince Don Fernando, in fact, speaks nothing less than a specifically Spanish point of view. These words apply the motif of the king's name to the whole of creation: "For even in brutes and beasts of prey / This name's authority so ample / Will in its wondrous ways enforce, / That, by a certain law, obedience / Follows in Nature's usual course. / And so within his rude republics / We read of the kingly lion's reign, / Who, when his horrid front is wrinkled / And lifted high his royal mane, / Feels pity, and no time abuses / Whatever prey his wrath has slain. / So on the sea's salt foam, the dolphin, / Who is king of fish, we're told, / Works upon his azure shoulder / In scales of silver and of gold / The shape of crowns, and we behold him, / When the wild tempest shrieks with glee, / Bear on his back the sinking seaman, / Lest he should perish in the sea/... If then, among beasts and fishes, / Plants, and stones, and birds, the august / Majesty of king, is pity, / It, my lord, were not unjust / That men's bosoms should possess it." — The attempt to assign kingship an origin in the state of creation is encountered in legal theory (*Origin*, p. 73).

The reference to the "Spanishness" of Calderón's art sets up the expectations that Don Fernando's monologue, given in A.W. Schlegel's translation, is going to be used as a counterexample. In this interpretation, Calderón paints a world in which creation —both the organic and inorganic worlds — pays tribute to the majesty of kings, who in turn act out divine acts of mercy. By inscribing the king within the order of nature, Calderón's dramas reinforce the sovereign's jurisdiction over sacred matters. He therefore presents Calderón as a reactionary artist in the service of absolutist politics, which are theologically justified through an appeal to the 'natural order' of God's creation. Indeed, it appears from Benjamin's quotation that God has crafted a kingly role for all of nature's elements.

With the reference to legal theory that immediately follows Calderón's quote, Benjamin encourages the scholarly reader to find the parallelisms between this Romantic Calderón and Schmitt's theory. It might shock the reader, however, that what at first appears as a specifically Spanish attitude in fact becomes the political theory of the German Schmitt. Although this is not explicitly stated, the union between both is Catholicism: just like Calderón, so Schmitt imbues with sacred significance the profane figure of the sovereign. In both cases, then, the (Catholic) sacralisation of the world rules out uncertainty and ambiguity and, thereby, the "hierarchies" of the natural world are reinforced. By tacitly comparing Calderón with Schmitt, Benjamin is raising the

argument that the jurist fails in his attempt to overcome the limitations of Jena Romanticism. Although Schmitt scorns the Romantic aestheticisation of the world, the sacralisation of politics does not preoccupy him. As Daniel Weidner has shown, *Ursprung der deutschen Trauerspiels* stands against the theory of secularisation behind both positions, namely, that, in modern times, theology can become something else (“Kreatürlichkeit”, p. 129). According to *Ursprung*, the sacred cannot be successfully translated or transformed into other realms.

Benjamin finds an alternative path to modernity with reference to both Romanticism and Schmitt in mind: in German Baroque drama, he unearths a strand of the German tradition that embraces immanence, the gracelessness of earthly matters, and therefore rejects the sacralisation of politics and aesthetics. In line with his preceding subsection “Spiel und Reflexion” (Play and Reflection), the point is made that German Baroque drama embodies and engages with the anxieties of the divide between God and the world; unlike their Catholic counterparts, the German dramatists do not cover the bridge between immanence and transcendence:

Offenkundiger mußte das profane Drama von der Geschichtsphilosophie der Restauration betroffen werden. Es stand historischen Stoffen gegenüber – die Initiative von Dichtern, die wie Gryphius das aktuelle Geschehen, wie Lohenstein und Hallmann Haupt- und Staatsaktionen des Ostens zum Vorwurf nahmen, war gewaltig. Gebannt aber blieben diese Versuche von vornherein in eine strenge Immanenz und ohne Ausblick auf das Jenseits der Mysterien, in der Entfaltung ihres gewiß reichen Apparates auf die Darstellung von Geistererscheinungen und Herrscherapotheosen beschränkt. In dieser Beklemmung erwuchs das deutsche Barockdrama (*Ursprung*, p. 259).

The secular drama would necessarily been affected still more obviously by the Restoration philosophy of history. It was confronted with historical materials: the initiative of writers who, like Gryphius, took actual occurrences as their subject, or who, like Lohenstein and Hallmann, drew on the *Haupt und Staatsaktionen* of the East, was immense. But these efforts remained from the beginning bound up in a strict immanence and without prospect onto the beyond of the mystery plays, limited, in the unfolding of their no doubt ample apparatus, to the presentation of ghostly apparitions and of apotheosis of rulers. German Baroque drama evolved under such constraint. (*Origin*, p. 67).

Benjamin weaves his theory of modernity from the silk of German Baroque drama, which is why his theological remarks on Baroque drama and Romanticism are starkly

imbued with political connotations. The political alternative embodied within German Baroque drama embraces the radical immanence of the world and is built in opposition to both Jena Romanticism and Schmitt's theological politics. It gradually becomes clearer why Benjamin avowed to Scholem that Calderón represents the virtual subject ('virtuelle Gegenstände') of his Baroque studies. The engagement with Calderón's aesthetics allows him to criticise Romanticism and Schmitt in similar terms as well as to sketch out his alternative.

This chapter has reconstructed the place of Calderón in Benjamin's theory of the Baroque, whom he takes as an emblem for the dangers of aesthetic totality and immersion. Following the lead of Jena Romantics, Benjamin interprets Calderón as the artist who channels the energies of Counter-Reformation Catholicism into the realm of aesthetics. Yet Benjamin could not agree less with Romantics such as A.W. Schlegel, who championed Calderón's dramas as an aesthetic fortress against what was perceived to be the cold landscape of the Enlightenment. According to *Ursprung*, this is a dangerous path to take, for it leads into an illegitimate mixture of immanent and transcendental elements — referenced throughout the book with the vocabulary of "the daemonic". There is much at stake in Benjamin's reading, which stands firm against theological justifications of the war-efforts of the German Empire. The path for such a justification was cleared by the Romantics, in great measure as a consequence of their fascination with Catholicism. In contrast to Protestantism, Tridentine Catholicism does not acknowledge the divide between immanence and transcendence, and hence Tridentine Catholic artforms — from theatre to architecture — recreate what Benjamin calls "Ponderación misteriosa", that is, "das Eingreifen Gottes ins Kunstwerk" (the intervention of God in the artwork). I have argued that Benjamin finds such an intervention dangerous, akin to false consciousness: it obstructs the critical abilities of the audience by blurring the borders between themselves and the work; refuses to

recognise what *Ursprung* takes to be the ‘meaninglessness’ of ‘the modern condition’;
and it clears the path for the justification of politics in theological terms. In the next
chapter I revisit the rhetoric of *Ursprung* to show that, despite the book’s suspicion of
aesthetic attachment, immersion and aesthetic attachment find an alternative route.

MODERNITY III: IS THE WORLD A LIBRARY?

Lay and professional readers alike agree that *Ursprung* is a difficult book. This is true even though the “Erkenntniskritische Vorrede” (Epistemo-critical Prologue), its most obscure chapter, was not included in the initial *Habilitation* submission of 1925.¹²¹ It was only with the book’s publication, in 1928, that the public could read the prologue for the first time; and yet neither of the other two chapters are easy to follow, embedded as they are within an immense network of quotations and argumentative jumps.¹²² A brief example will suffice for now: as Jennings and Eiland have pointed out, Benjamin closes his study with reference to none other than to the aforementioned prologue, despite the fact that, in 1925, his academic examiners could not access it (*Walter Benjamin*, p. 230).

This chapter analyses Benjamin’s esoteric neo-Baroque rhetoric, which requires the reader to take the role of a passionate, albeit detached, interpreter. To do so, I first turn to yet another letter Benjamin sends to Hofmannsthal—this time in 1925. This is relevant not only because the manuscript of *Ursprung* is attached to the letter, but also because it lays out two distinct narrative voices. First, the narrative persona of Benjamin himself, engaged in written correspondence with the Austrian writer. Second, the narrative persona of Benjamin the literary critic, who deploys a much more obscure style and sets a scholarly tone to the conversation. All in all, the letter provides the contemporary reader with a glimpse from afar of the assumptions of Benjamin’s neo-Baroque literary criticism.

In the following sections I then turn to *Ursprung*’s discussion about Baroque libraries and scholars’ melancholy. The aim is to point out the book’s debt to the

¹²¹ Michael Jennings and Howard Eiland, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA; London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 230.

¹²² In a letter to Scholem, Benjamin tells his friend that the book “fast ganz aus Zitaten besteht” (consists almost entirely of quotations). See Benjamin, § 138 “An Gerhard Scholem. Berlin, 22 Dezember 1924”, in *Briefe I*, pp. 365-69.

everyday practices of scholarly work, even if, as I argue, the narrator hides and covers the attachments that make such practices possible in the first place. Ultimately, Benjamin's rhetoric takes a performative role: it schools the readers in the values associated with the everyday practices of research and teaches them to become intellectual decipherers. Benjamin, however, is aware of the limitations that come along with the role of the scholarly decipherer. The scholar is, in his argument, haunted by contemplation, which he describes in ambiguous terms. On the one hand, as we will see, contemplation becomes a prerequisite for Benjamin's redemptive criticism; on the other, it sets up yet another of the "Verheißungen des Satan" (promises of Satan).¹²³ This is because it provides the opportunity to observe from afar the spectacle of *Naturgeschichte* ("natural history") and find solace in the comfort of tradition.

A View from Afar: Benjamin's neo-Baroque Literary Criticism

On June 13, 1925, Benjamin sent the manuscript of *Ursprung* to Hofmannsthal alongside a letter underscoring the affinities between the playwright's drama *Der Turm* and his own academic work. Just two days earlier, on June 11, 1925, the philosophical faculty of the University of Frankfurt, encouraged by Hans Cornelius' negative report, unanimously voted to reject Benjamin's *Habilitation* application (Jennings and Eiland, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 232). Benjamin would not receive official news until late July, but he was already actively searching for ways to publish the book to which he had devoted years of research; and, of course, alternative ways of supporting himself given his meagre chances of success in the academic world.

From a rhetorical standpoint, Benjamin's letter has a clear aim: to convince Hofmannsthal — who at that time was one of the few established men of letters

¹²³ See Sofie Kluge, "Der Allegoriebegriff und die Kritik des Nominalismus in Walter Benjamins *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*", *Internationale Walter Benjamin Gesellschaft* (2003). Available online: shorturl.at/ahuyV. Consulted 3/02/2022.

supporting his work — to read the manuscript; and perhaps also to encourage Hofmannsthal to help him find a publishing house for the book.¹²⁴ Hence the interplay between the narrative voice of Benjamin the literary critic and Benjamin's own persona evokes two complementary practices of persuasion. First, it makes a polite request for Hofmannsthal to read the book, which is framed within the conventions of early-twentieth century intellectual practices of sociability in Germany. This voice is recognizable because it addresses Hofmannsthal with the rhetorical forms that a younger academic should use, following the standards of his time, towards an older and much more established intellectual.¹²⁵ Second, it opens up a window to the neo-Baroque world of *Ursprung*. The two voices thus parallel face-to-face practices of recommendation: whenever we recommend a film, for instance, we might show a trailer to those friends who we think might like it; but we can also appeal both to our friendship and to their trust in our artistic taste and, without further comment on the trailer, insist that they see the film. This is how Benjamin's letter begins:

Hochverehrter Herr von Hofmannsthal!

Ihr letztes Schreiben machte mir das Erscheinen des neuen Heftes der „Beiträge“ durch die Ankündigung des „Turms“ und die freundliche Ermunterung, vom Eindruck Ihres Werks auf mich zu schreiben, doppelt gewünscht. Nun liegt es seit Wochen vor und wenn ich erst heute schreibe, so ist das Tatsache, daß ich von Ihrer Rückkunft aus Afrika erst unlängst erfuhr, nur einer der Gründe dafür.¹²⁶

Dear Mr. von Hofmannsthal!

Your last letter made me doubly anxious for (‘doppelt gewünscht’) the publication of the new issue of *Beiträge*, firstly due to the announcement of the *Tower* and secondly the friendly encouragement to write about the impression of your work on me. It has been available for weeks now, and if I write only today, the fact that I only recently learned of your return from Africa is just one of the reasons for this.

The first sentences set the friendly and respectful tone of the letter. The prose is easy to follow because the narrator wants to make clear his admiration towards Hofmannsthal

¹²⁴ Hofmannsthal's support of Benjamin's early writing career is accurately described in Eiland and Jennings, “Weimar Intellectual: Berlin and Moscow, 1925-1928”, in *Walter Benjamin*, pp. 235-313.

¹²⁵ Eiland and Jennings describe Hofmannsthal as “one of the very few intellectuals in the German-speaking world whose human interactions tended to be even more formal and complex than his [Benjamin's] own” (*Walter Benjamin*, p. 187-88).

¹²⁶ *Briefe*, §143 An Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Grunewald, 11.6.1925, I, pp. 384-90.

and his intellectual enthusiasm about the topic at hand. It is only once the topic of literary criticism is discussed that the narrative voice changes and becomes incomprehensible for the contemporary lay reader:

Calderon entnimmt dem Stoff nichts als die Formel seines Titels, diese freilich philosophischer gehandhabt, als man es ohne ihn je denken könnte, aber dem Dramatischen des Stoffes konnte Sein Drama so wenig entsprechen, wie irgend ein „Schauspiel“ dies vermöchte. Es ist der Stoff eines „Trauerspiels“ und der Sigismund Ihres Dramas ist „Creatur“ in weit radikalerem Sinne als Calderons „Höfiling des Berges“, ja als nur unter den Helden der barocken Dramatik, die ich zu nennen wüßte. Irre ich, wenn ich in ihm das in die nüchterne Mitte der Trauerspielbühne gerückt sehe, was bei Shakespeare als Caliban, Ariel, Tiermensch und Elementargeist aller Art der farbigen Rand der komischen ausmachte? [...] Die Geister, die dem Trauerspiel obligat sind, verbinden hier sich innigst mit der Kreatur (*Briefe I*, pp. 386-7).

Calderon takes from the subject matter nothing but the formula of his titles, handling them of course more philosophically than one could ever imagine without him, but his drama could correspond as little to the dramatic quality of his content as any “Schauspiel” could. It is the material of a “Trauerspiel” and the Sigismund of your drama is creature (“Creatur”) in a far more radical sense than Calderon’s “courtier of the mountain”, indeed as only one among the heroes of Baroque drama that I could name (“nennen wüßte”). Am I mistaken when in him I see moved to the sober centre of the tragic stage that which in Shakespeare, as Caliban, Ariel, animal man and elemental spirit of all kinds, is the colourful edge of the comical? [...] The ghosts, which are obligatory in the Trauerspiel, are here intimately connected with the creature [‘der Kreatur’].

Just like a film trailer attracts its audience by disclosing the genre of the film it advertises, so Benjamin’s letter briefly recreates the most salient landmarks of his literary criticism with the aim of winning Hofmannsthal over. Through passages like this, it opens up windows which disclose the genre and rhetoric of *Ursprung*. It is evident that the genre is not for everyone: it requires training in the German literary and philosophical tradition as well as a predisposition for obscure, difficult, and intellectually-challenging topics. Hence the above passage is highly impenetrable: almost every sentence is thick in connotations that point toward manifold directions. By way of example, Benjamin’s reference to Calderón opens up a discussion about the methodology of literary criticism and the relationship between form and content in literary works; it makes an elusive remark on the Spaniard’s emphasis on Reason, which is reminiscent of the unpublished essay *El mayor monstruo, los celos*; and, finally, it hints at Benjamin’s disagreement with the aesthetics of the Spanish

playwright, which in turn clears the ground for his subsequent alignment with Hofmannsthal's. Moreover, the letter makes abrupt argumentative jumps: the discussion moves, through association of ideas, from Calderón to the creaturely nature of Hofmannsthal's Sigismund in *Der Turm*: "Es ist der Stoff eines ‚Trauerspiels‘ und der Sigismund Ihres Dramas ist „Creatur“ in weit radikalerem Sinne als Calderons „Höfing des Berges". Hofmannsthal is told that the concept of the *Trauerspiel* unites Calderón's dramatic world and his own *Der Turm*; despite the differences, the argument is made that both playwrights set their dramas within a shared territory.¹²⁷

In the next sentence, Benjamin changes both the content being discussed as well as his tone. A more personal voice suddenly appears and asks Hofmannsthal if he agrees with the comparison between Sigismund, from *Der Turm*, and Shakespeare's characters: "Irre ich, wenn ich in ihm [in Hofmannsthal's Sigismund] das in die nüchterne Mitte der Trauerspielbühne gerückt sehe, was bei Shakespeare als Caliban, Ariel, Tiermensch und Elementargeist aller Art der farbigen Rand der komischen ausmachte?" By suddenly addressing Hofmannsthal at a more personal level, Benjamin shows his modesty and respect towards the more established intellectual, on whose work he is after all giving an opinion; at the same time, he is also putting Hofmannsthal on the same level as the great canonical dramatists of the Baroque.¹²⁸

Nonetheless, Benjamin expresses his concern that this initial view from afar might not be enough to convince Hofmannsthal that the arduous task of reading *Ursprung* is worth the effort. To that end, his prose goes back to the clearer rhetoric of intellectual sociability:

¹²⁷ On Calderón's influence on Hofmannsthal, see Egon Schwarz, *Hofmannsthal and Calderon*, Harvard Germanic Studies, 3 [1962] (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, repr. 2014). DOI: 10.4159/harvard.9780674421967.

¹²⁸ Jennings and Eiland, however, point out that Benjamin had his reservations about *Der Turm*, which he avowed to Scholem in personal correspondence: "[Benjamin] had misgivings about Hofmannsthal's play and its attempts to wrest a modern *Trauerspiel* from an engagement with Calderón's *Life Is A Dream* [...]. he told Scholem that, although he had not yet read the play, "my private judgement is already clear from the outset; and my countervailing, public one as well (GB, 3:27)" (*Walter Benjamin*, p. 250).

Es wäre mir empfindlich, wenn mit diesen wenigen Worten ich etwas Fremdes Ihnen vorgetragen haben sollte, wenn die Gedanken meines neuen Buches darin dem Geiste Ihres Werkes unziemlich begegnet wären. Ich hoffe, dem ist nicht so und diese Gedanken werden Sie nicht hindern, bei gelegener Zeit einen Blick in das Manuscript zu werfen, das Ihnen mit gleicher Post zugeht (*Briefe I*, p. 387).

I would be upset if I had presented to you something alien with these few words, if the claims of my new book had inappropriately met the spirit of your work. I hope this is not the case and these thoughts will not prevent you from taking a look at a convenient time at the manuscript that will be sent to you in the same mail.

The passage expresses the hope that *Ursprung*'s world, as seen from afar, will not disappoint Hofmannsthal. Benjamin's clearer voice allows him to take a step back from the previous snapshots of literary criticism and instead to take the role of the friend or colleague who makes a recommendation. The manuscript is worth reading, he tells Hofmannsthal, even in the event that his remarks on *Der Turm*, Calderón, and Shakespeare have displeased him. After all, Benjamin cannot develop his neo-Baroque literary criticism, which demands from the reader an extended reading experience, within the genre of letter writing. And yet he is also aware of the limitations of the *Habilitation* genre, which — one can imagine — would have been salient from the standpoint of a creative writer such as Hofmannsthal. Benjamin therefore emphasises that he has been as ironic and maverick as possible, especially through his idiosyncratic use of quotation: "Die Technik der gehäuften Zitationen bedarf vielleicht einer Erklärung; aber ich möchte mich hier auf den Hinweis beschränken, daß die akademische Intention der Arbeit nichts als ein Anlaß, und zwar als ein ironisch aufgenommener dieser Schreibart mir gewesen ist" (*Briefe I*, p. 387; "the technique of cumulative quotation may perhaps need some explanation; here, however, I shall only remark that the academic intention of the work wasn't a cause, namely an ironically received one of this type of writing"). Finally, he tells the Austrian writer that he may keep the manuscript as long as he likes ("Das Manuscript steht zu Ihrer Verfügung so lange als Sie es wünschen sollen", *Briefe I*, pp. 387-88; "the manuscript is at your disposal as long as you wish") — even if he knows, to put it in Benjamin's own words,

that “ich mit meiner Übersendung nicht den mindesten Anspruch auf Ihre Zeit erheben kann” (*Briefe I*, p. 388; “I cannot lay claim to your time with my submission in the slightest”).

Scholarly Work: The Spell of Research

Benjamin’s letter to Hofmannsthal underscores his conscious use of rhetoric: whenever he wishes to express respect and gratitude towards an older academic who supports him, his prose becomes clear and distinct; whenever the subject changes to literary criticism, Benjamin’s prose becomes dense, full of references, argumentative jumps, and thought-provoking, albeit undeveloped, claims. Clarity is, of course, a pre-requisite to express respect and gratitude; but what role does obscurity play, both in the aforementioned letter and in the attached *Ursprung*?

The brief passage from Benjamin’s letter quoted above offers some hints, even if these are not enough to explain Benjamin’s fascination with esoteric writing. Indeed, the most obscure passages are rich in references to literary characters and the argument develops in non-linear ways, often through association of ideas, just as in the association between the form and content of Calderón’s *La vida es sueño* and Hofmannsthal’s ‘creaturely’ Sigismund. Benjamin utilises the same technique throughout *Ursprung*, thereby embedding the narrator’s voice within a mosaic and labyrinthine constellation of references and interrelated concepts.¹²⁹

This becomes clearer once we pay attention to the book’s structure, as provided by its table of contents: *Ursprung* is divided into two chapters—“Trauerspiel und

¹²⁹ See Malte Kleinwort, “Zur Desorientierung im Manuskript der Vorrede zu Benjamins Trauerspielbuch”, in *Benjamin Studien 2*, ed. by Daniel Weidner and Sigrid Weigel, 3 vols (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2008), pp. 87-111; Manfred Voigts, “Zitate”, in *Benjamins Begriffe*, ed. Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla, 2 vol (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), pp. 826-51. See also David S. Ferris, “Introduction: Reading Benjamin”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 1-17.

Tragödie” (“Mourning Play and Tragedy”) and “Allegorie und Trauerspiel” (“Allegory and Mourning Play”) —, preceded by the infamously difficult “Erkenntniskritische Vorrede”. Each of these chapters is, in turn, divided into three unnamed sections, which are preceded by obscure Baroque mottos and are also further divided into different headings with significant implications for the topic being discussed. By way of example, this is what the first untitled section of the first chapter looks like:

Barocke Theorie des Trauerspiels – Einfluß des Aristoteles bedeutungslos – Geschichte als Gehalt des Trauerspiels – Theorie der Souveränität – Byzantinische Quellen – Herodesdramen – Entschlußunfähigkeit – Tyrann als Märtyrer, Märtyrer als Tyrann – Unterschätzung des Märtyrerdramas – Christliche Chronik und Trauerspiel – Immanenz des Barockdramas – Spiel und Reflexion – Souverän als Kreatur – Die Ehre – Vernichtung des historischen Ethos – Schauplatz – Der Höfling als Heiliger und Intrigant – Didaktische Absicht des Trauerspiels (p. 205).

[17] Baroque theory of trauerspiel – [18] Influence of Aristotle insignificant – [19] History as content of trauerspiel – [20] Theory of sovereignty – [21] Byzantine sources – [22] Herodian dramas – [23] Irresolution – [24] Tyrant as martyr; martyr as tyrant – [25] Underestimation of the martyr drama – [26] Christian chronicle and trauerspiel – [27] Immanence of Baroque drama – [28] Play and reflection – [29] Sovereign as creature – [30] Honor – [31] Annihilation of historical ethos – [32] Setting – [33] The courtier as saint and intriguer – [34] Didactic intention of the trauerspiel (*Origin*, p. VII).¹³⁰

The fragmented presentation of the material is indebted to *Ursprung*’s theory of literary criticism, which has been widely researched by now.¹³¹ Following the phenomenological tradition, Benjamin makes an effort to let the material speak for itself as he immerses himself in the study of themes, motifs, objects, and literary fictions from the German Baroque.¹³² He finds an inspiring model in the methodology of the scholastic “tractatus”: “Darstellung ist der Inbegriff ihrer [Traktatus] Methode. Methode ist Umweg. Darstellung als Umweg – das ist denn der methodische Charakter des

¹³⁰ Eiland’s translation provide a sense of order to *Ursprung*’s fragmentation by numbering the table of contents and each of the chapters and subsections.

¹³¹ See, amongst others, the aforementioned Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*; Jennings and Eiland, *Walter Benjamin*; Jennings, *Dialectical Images*; Habermas, “Bewußtmachende oder rettende Kritik: die Aktualität Walter Benjamins”; Kluge, “Der Allegoriebegriff und die Kritik des Nominalismus in Walter Benjamins *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*”; and Eagleton, *Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*.

¹³² On Benjamin and phenomenology, see Uwe Steiner, “Phänomenologie der Moderne. Benjamin und Husserl”, in *Benjamin-Studien 1*, ed. by Daniel Weidner and Sigrid Weigel, 3 vols (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2008), 1, pp. 107-23; “‘Zu den Sachen selbst...’. Phänomenologie und Anthropologie bei Walter Benjamin”, in *Walter Benjamins Anthropologisches Denken*, ed. by Carolin Duttlinger, Ben Morgan, and Anthony Phelan, Rombach Wissenschaft. Reihe Litterae 115 (Freiburg: Rombach, 2012), pp. 59-95.

Traktats. Verzicht auf den unabgesetzten Lauf der Intention ist sein erstes Kennzeichen”

(“Presentation is the crux of their [“tractatus”] method. Method is indirection [circumvention]. Presentation as indirection, as the roundabout way—this, then, is the methodological character of the tractatus. Renunciation of the unbroken course of intention is its immediately distinguishable feature”, *Origin*, p. 2-3). Ultimately, the point is to undertake research without laying out in advance a unifying pattern or structure, but rather to allow a version of the whole to emerge by putting fragments together almost randomly, as the above untitled subsection of *Ursprung* makes clear.

Less attention has been paid, however, to the performative effect of *Ursprung*’s fragmented obscurity, that is, to the values that inform Benjamin’s fascination with the esotericism of the Baroque. In a letter to Scholem written in 1924, Benjamin makes the following remarks on the book’s structure: “Beide Teile in je drei gegliedert, über denen sechs Mottos stehen werden, wie sie kostbarer und rarer — unauffindbaren Barockschriften fast sämtlich entnommen — keiner versammeln könnte”.¹³³ (“Both parts are each divided into three, over which six mottos will stand — almost all taken from untraceable baroque writings — so that no one could collect any more valuable and rarer”). These words betray Benjamin’s excitement: a significant value of *Ursprung*, beyond any philosophical discussion to which the book may lead, lies in its presentation of rare objects. With a hint of haughtiness typical of young scholars, Benjamin claims that no one could have collected more precious and worthy Baroque mottos than those introducing each of *Ursprung*’s three subsections.

The discovery of unknown objects from the past represents a central motif of the book, committed as it is to the project of writing an alternative history that overcomes the politics and aesthetics of Jena Romanticism and Weimar Classicism (see Chapter Two). Indeed, Benjamin’s defence of unknown cultural artifacts aims to question the

¹³³ *Briefe I*, §138 An Gerhard Scholem, Berlin, 22 Dezember 1924, I, pp. 365-69 (p. 366).

established literary canon of his time, which was indebted to the Romantic's version of nationhood. Hence *Ursprung* bestows significant political value on scholarly work, even if this might appear contradictory for the lay reader who, without years of training in the German literary and philosophical tradition, will not be able to follow the argument. Such a lay reader will be right to ask about the political value of a book that can only be understood by a learned minority.

The answer lies in *Ursprung*'s intended readership, namely, the German mandarin elites, who played a significant political role in the development and construction of the German nation.¹³⁴ The book might be addressed to a minority, but this used to be a powerful minority which, by Benjamin's time, found itself in a time of crisis and decline. Fritz K. Ringer makes the point that "the rigid and nostalgic attachment to the values of the past [of the German academic community] prevented even the kind of conservative reforms that might have rescued some of those values for the present" (*The Decline of the German Mandarins*, p. 57). In its efforts to rethink the construction of the past, *Ursprung* succeeds in doing that which, according to Ringer, the German academic community failed to do, i.e.: to rescue the values associated with scholarly work that could still play a significant political role in the 1920s. If it had not been rejected by Frankfurt's Faculty of Philosophy, the book could have represented a realignment of the mandarin elite. Radicalising the academic writing conventions of its time, it makes a touching plea for rethinking the uncanny alliance between the academic literary tradition and the discourse of the modern German state. But this did not happen. Instead, Benjamin's rejection from the academy encouraged him to turn to other writing

¹³⁴ See Fritz K. Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890-1933* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969) and Wolf Lepenies, "Deutschland", in *Die drei Kulturen: Soziologie zwischen Literatur und Wissenschaft*, 3rd ed (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2006), pp. 239-424.

genres and vocabularies at the same time as his public changed from a learned clique of intellectuals into a wider public.¹³⁵

To understand the values that *Ursprung* sets to rescue, we must therefore take the scholar's perspective. The first that strikes the eye is the contrast between the humdrum routine of everyday scholarly life — archival work, writing, and spending days in libraries — and the exciting and fascinating world of *Ursprung*'s literary and philosophical tradition, which opens up an imaginary land inhabited by an uncountable number of characters, such as those from Plato's *Symposium*; the imprisoned and soon-to-be poisoned Socrates; Calderón's Tetrarch, Segismundo, Rosaura, Don Fernando, and others; Shakespeare's Hamlet; and, of course, the lesser-known *dramatis personae* of Gryphius' and Lohenstein's plays. The encounter with these inhabitants allows the scholar to break free from her prosaic everyday life at the library and from the bounds of time and space. Reading, after all, has been commonly understood in terms of engaging in a conversation with the dead as well as of visiting places which would otherwise be physically impossible to visit.

The scholar's immersion in the cultural tradition is rich in *admiratio*: she feels awe and wonder towards the immeasurable books that have survived the decay of time as well as towards the affordances they offer and the worlds they open. The scholar revels in the discovery that Benjamin's neo-Baroque draws significant parallels to her own bookish world, as I will argue in the following pages. In addition, *Ursprung*'s attention to rare, precious, and unknown objects and authors increases her bewitchment. Driven towards the infrequently consulted shelves of the German Baroque, she discovers that the great names of the West's cultural tradition have been enthroned not only because of their artistic quality, but also due to non-artistic reasons such as politics,

¹³⁵ In "Walter Benjamin and the European Avantgarde", Jennings makes the point that the scholarly image of Benjamin "as a distanced, ineffectual loner laboring in the ivory tower [...] has little to do with his life" (*Companion to Walter Benjamin*, pp. 18-34, p. 19).

power relationships, and sheer luck.¹³⁶ Indeed, Benjamin's defence of a 'minor' genre such as German Baroque drama vindicates the value of a vast area of research that had been previously downplayed. The fragmentation and incompleteness of writers such as Gryphius and Lohenstein are now incorporated into Benjamin's alternative tradition of decay, ruins, and destruction, and are therefore posited as the forerunners of 1920s avantgarde literary techniques.

Whereas the content of this alternative tradition might be gloomy and melancholy, the discovery that previously-underrated works are worthy of research is exciting. At a practical level, the German Baroque has become a more widely studied research area since *Ursprung*'s publication. At a more abstract level, Benjamin's excitement can be felt in his relentless collection of quotes from unknown sources and his effort to bring back to life those forgotten voices from the past. Nonetheless, secondary literature on *Ursprung* has repeatedly emphasised the role of melancholy in the book; the fact that it is impossible to bring back to life all of the past's silenced voices does feel saturnine and overwhelming.¹³⁷ Furthermore, the excitement of Benjamin's narrator is hidden through his argumentative jumps, paraphrases, quotes, and rhetorical obscurity; he refuses to fully acknowledge the position from which he is speaking. He remains in a state of vigilance and, in doing so, prevents the reader from having an immersive reading experience. Rather, such immersion is judged dangerous in a way similar to the artistic 'sins' of Calderón described in Chapter Two.¹³⁸ Despite the excitement of *Ursprung*'s ideal reader towards the reconstruction of the Baroque's

¹³⁶ From a contemporary perspective, racial and gender biases should be added too.

¹³⁷ See, amongst others, the aforementioned Ilit Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*, and Björn Quiring, "Pain and Memory in Benjamin's Mourning Play", in *Benjamin Studien 3*, ed. by Daniel Weidner and Sigrid Weigel, 3 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2014), pp. 153-65.

¹³⁸ For a historically reconstruction of such a state of alertness in the 1920s German republic of letters, see Helmut Lethen, *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte: Lebensversuche zwischen den Kriegen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994).

bookish fragments, they are ultimately encouraged to adopt the role of a scholarly and intellectual decipherer who must remain in a state of constant alert.

The Dangers of Scholarly Work: Melancholy Contemplation

In accordance with Benjamin's efforts to imbue research with political significance, *Ursprung* takes seriously the ethical dangers of scholarly work, explored in length in the long subsection "Rechtfertigungslehre, ἀπάθεια, Melancholie" ("Doctrine of justification, ἀπάθεια [apathy], Melancholy") from the chapter "Allegorie und Trauerspiel" ("Allegory and Mourning Play"). As Benjamin discloses in the above letter to Scholem, each of *Ursprung*'s sub-sections is introduced by a rare and precious Baroque motto: in this case, two verses from *Melencholey redet selber*, written by the unknown seventeenth-century poet Andreas Tscherning.

Tscherning's verses, which I interpret in detail below, offer a mysterious snapshot of the world that lies before the reader: they provide what appears like an unmediated dialogue with 'the Baroque', which is why his verses reverberate throughout the following paragraph. Benjamin's quotations from obscure Baroque mottos betray his effort to bring back to life the 'spirit of the age' in a way that does justice to the otherness of the past; and yet the task of recuperating obscure, unknown, and old-fashioned sources has its limits. The situation resembles that of the scholar whose love for knowledge makes it difficult for her to decide which book to pick up, but who eventually makes a decision each time she chooses a book from the library's shelves. From the scholar's perspective, to recuperate all the past's voices would represent the utopia of finding the book of books, that is, the sacred book containing all other books — and thus mapping the whole of human knowledge — that has long been

a secret fantasy of bibliophiles.¹³⁹ However, as it turns out, *Ursprung* warns its readers that this fantasy represents the scholar's ultimate danger. The treatise stands against the mesmerizing wonder of such a totalizing fantasy and, instead, encourages the scholar to break free from its spell.

Tscherning's poetic persona laments his loneliness and expresses his anxiety. Whatever he does, from sitting down to lying and standing, he cannot find rest because, to put it in his own words, *ist alles in Gedancken* (all is absorbed in thought). He is forced to take a contemplative and solipsistic attitude, which is why he quarrels even with himself:

Ich sitz / ich lieg / ich steh / ist alles in Gedancken.
Ich finde nirgends Ruh / muß selber mit mir zancken/
Andreas Tscherning: Melancholey redet selber
(*Ursprung*, p. 317)

Nowhere do I find peace, but must quarrel with myself.
Whether I sit, lie, or stand, all is in my thoughts.
—Andreas Tscherning, *Melancholy Speaks* (*Origin*, p. 140)

In the neo-Baroque world of *Ursprung*, feelings of awe, wonder, and excitement are repeatedly repressed, the danger being that they might mesmerise the reader and cloud her critical skills. But this does not mean that melancholy — the dialectical opposite of *admiratio*, in Benjamin's argument — is without sin; the Devil, as we will see, also thrives in sadness. And yet the advantage of Tscherning's verses is that they put to the fore, rather than repress, the melancholy that Benjamin considers to be at the core of the theological crisis of the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet the danger remains, as Tscherning's voice makes clear: melancholy's association with thinking means that the scholar is tempted by the possibility of rejoicing in a lonely world of inactive contemplation, just like Calderón's Tetrarch. Benjamin insists this thwarts the possibility of imbuing scholarly work with political significance. Hence, at this point,

¹³⁹ For a literary example that is contemporary to Benjamin — although written in a different context — of such a fascination with the discovery of the “book of books”, see Jorge Luis Borges, “El Aleph”, in *El Aleph* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1949).

the scholar might feel trapped between the Scylla of *admiratio* and the Charybdis of melancholy contemplation; from *Ursprung*'s perspective, the only available gateway is to remain committed, in a state of alertness, to the political task of destroying the library's appearance of totality.

To delineate the dangers of melancholy, I now turn to the book's discussion of Dürer's "Melencolia".¹⁴⁰ This apparently unrelated topic clears the path which eventually, if sinuously and surprisingly, leads the reader towards the discussion of the book in the Baroque and, ultimately, to the realisation that the melancholy world of thinking and libraries is also haunted by the Devil. *Ursprung* tells its readers that Dürer's 'Melencolia', anticipating the spirit of the Baroque, opens up a world in which even the most inconspicuous objects become cyphers and hidden enigmas of a higher wisdom:

Indem man dies Symptom der Depersonalisation als schweren Grad des Traurigseins erfaßte, trat der Begriff von dieser pathologischen Verfassung, in welcher jedes unscheinbarste Ding, weil die natürliche und schaffende Beziehung zu ihm fehlt, als Chiffer einer rätselhaften Weisheit auftritt, in einen unvergleichlich fruchtbaren Zusammenhang. Ihm ist gemäß, daß in dem Umkreis der „Melencolia“ Albrecht Dürers die Gerätschaften des tätigen Lebens am Boden ungenutzt, als Gegenstand des Grübelns liegen. Dies Blatt antizipiert in vielem das Barock (*Ursprung*, p. 319).

Insofar as this symptom of depersonalization was grasped as an advanced stage of mourning, an incomparably fruitful context was established for the concept of this pathological condition—this state in which the most inconspicuous of things, because the natural and creative relation to it is lacking, appears as cipher of a higher enigma. It is in keeping with this conception that, in Albrecht Dürer's "Melencolia", the utensils of active life lie unused on the ground around the figure, as objects of brooding. This engraving anticipates the Baroque in many respects (*Origins*, p. 143).

Dürer's angel parallels the situation of Tscherning's poetic persona: in both cases, melancholy and contemplation are grounded in the activity of thinking. According to

¹⁴⁰ Newman explains that, in Benjamin's time, Dürer "had long been understood as one of the great German 'national heroes'" ("Melancholy Germans: War Theology, Allegory, and the Lutheran Baroque", in *Benjamin's Library*, pp. 138-84, 138). Benjamin's reading of Dürer was highly influenced by Heinrich Wölfflin and by Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, in turn indebted to the art historian Aby Warburg (*Walter Benjamin*, Jennings and Eiland, p. 295). See Heinrich Wölfflin, *Albrecht Dürer* (Darmstadt: O. Reichl, 1922) and Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Dürer's „Melencolia I“: Eine Quellen- und Typengeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Berlin and Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1923).

Tscherning, even physical activities pertain to the realm of thought, to the extent that he must quarrel with himself. Likewise, Dürer's angel shows her disinterest with the tools of everyday life: she betrays, through her physical posture, her immersion in the world of thought. Nonetheless, the gloom and sorrow of the narrative voice is also tinted with excitement. The reader has not been explicitly told, for instance, how it is possible that an engraving from 1514 anticipates *in vielem* (in many respects) the Baroque, but it is implied that she will want to know more. In narrative terms, the excitement is of a very different nature to the excitement felt by a viewer of Netflix series, to put a contemporary and illustrative yet generalising example. In contrast to the quick pace of Netflix series, which call for feelings of identification and empathy as well as for strong emotional responses, the excitement of *Ursprung* calls for a reader/scholar who has been trained to enjoy interruptions as well as swift and unexpected changes of topics — all of which requires her to acquire the skills of decipherment. It also presupposes that she has the time, money, and the will to devote herself to the reconstruction of the fragments.

Melancholy emerges as the common term between Tscherning verses, Dürer's 'Melencolia', and the Baroque book. The link with the Baroque is further emphasised in the next sentence, which tells us that the wisdom of rumination — and the reader, of course, immediately thinks of Dürer's ruminative angel — parallels the research practices of scholars: "Das Wissen des Grüblers und das Forschen des Gelehrten haben sich auf ihm so innig wie in den Menschen des Barock verschmolzen. Die Renaissance durchforscht den Weltraum, das Barock die Bibliotheken. Sein Sinnen geht in die Buchform ein" (*Ursprung*, p. 319; "The brooder's knowing and the scholar's learning are as intimately blended in it as in the men of the Baroque. The Renaissance explores the wide world; the Baroque explores libraries. Its thinking takes the form of a book" *Origin*, p. 143). As in the reference to Calderón in Benjamin's letter to Hofmannsthal,

the argument here is built through apodictic claims, more or less interrelated, which carry far-reaching implications. In this case, the philosophical nature of rumination and the comparison, indebted to art history, between the Renaissance and the Baroque ground the claim that Dürer's 'Melencolia' parallels both the world of the Baroque and the world of scholars.¹⁴¹

From the scholar's point of view, this comparison is, to say the least, surprising. Benjamin delights in rhetorical complexities in order to argue that, as a dweller of libraries, the scholarly reader will probably feel the magnetism of *Ursprung's* Baroque; after all, it parallels her own world. The obscurity of the passage, as well as its argumentative jumps, play a significant role in the argument: they performatively school the reader to enjoy the arduous task of recollection required by everyday research activities. *Ursprung* therefore calls for the scholar's attention because she is the only figure capable of recognising, in her everyday practices, the hindrances and affordances of the Baroque library. In addition, she is the only reader capable of understanding, from a first-person perspective, the melancholy and contemplation, but also the *admiratio*, that may arise from immersing oneself in such bookish activities. Following such emotional hints, the scholar therefore learns to recognise the contours of her own bookish world in the landscape of the Baroque. In a metafictional turn, the scholar/reader is told that, just like *Ursprung's* neo-Baroque, she also understands the world as a library.

This is an exciting discovery. In the aesthetics of the Spanish *comedia*, which I discuss in Chapter Four, metafiction is intimately bound to feelings of attachment such

¹⁴¹ For a critical overview of the institutionalisation of the categories "Renaissance" and "Baroque", see Newman, "Inventing the Baroque: A Critical History of Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth Century Debates", in *Benjamin's Library*, pp. 23-76; and Ritchie Robertson, "Epilogue: Some Problems in Historical and Literary Periodization", in *Rethinking Period Boundaries: New Approaches to Continuity and Discontinuity in Modern European History and Culture*, ed. by Lucien George and Jade McGlynn (Berlin and Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2022), pp. 231-52. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110636000-009>

as empathy and identification.¹⁴² This is also the case, to a certain extent, of *Ursprung*'s narrative: like the scholar who passionately delights in discovering unknown sources; reading old-fashioned books from distant countries; and finding special editions of books; so *Ursprung*'s narrator delights in recreating the unexplored territory of the German Baroque. But his position remains highly ambiguous: despite his fascination with unknown bookish sources, the scholar eventually discovers that she has learnt to feel most at home in conversation with the dead. In a further subsection, entitled "Die Leiche als Emblem", the reader will indeed be warned: "Produktion der Leiche ist, vom Tode her betrachter, das Leben" ("From the standpoint of death, life is production of corpses", *Origin*, p. 236).¹⁴³

The stark presence of death in *Ursprung* constructs a gloomy atmosphere which clouds the aforementioned excitement — and especially in the case of Baroque scholars. The Baroque, according to Benjamin, not only understands the world as a library and has the decaying corpse as its emblem, but it is also significantly obsessed with the thought of death: "Ein ‚Memento Mori‘ wächst in der Physis, der Mneme selber; das Toddurchdrungensein der mittelalterlichen und barocken Menschen wäre ganz undenkbar, wenn nichts als Erwägung ihres Lebensendes sie beeindruckt hätte" (*Ursprung*, p. 392) ("A memento mori wakes in the physis, in the *mnēmē* itself; the obsession with death on the part of the medieval and baroque populations [Menschen] would be quite unthinkable if nothing but reflection on their life's end had motivated [beeindrückt] them", *Origin*, p. 236-37). Hence the *admiratio* that usually accompanies metafictional techniques is repressed and instead transformed into melancholy: the scholar comes to recognise the daemonic nature of her endless discussion and

¹⁴² See Barry Ife, *Reading and Fiction in Golden Age Spain: A Platonist Critique and some Picaresque Replies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹⁴³ See, for instance, Joel Morris, "Graves, Pits, and Murderous Plots", which argues that, in *Ursprung*, German Baroque drama represents the grave of humanity, at the centre of which lies the dead and decaying corpse (pp. 93-110).

interpretations, that is, of her full immersion in the world of ideas as well as of her bookish everyday activities. Just like Tscherning's poetic persona, the scholar's body has become restless, all her activity taking place in thought. Ultimately, she must break free from the spell of the library and from the *admiratio* which is also present, almost counterintuitively, in the bookish practices of scholarly rumination and contemplation.

To further make his point about Baroque libraries, scholarly activities, and melancholy, Benjamin recuperates yet another voice from an unknown Baroque source. He brings to life none other than the voice of the anonymous publisher of Ayrer, himself too an unknown poet, who, in a preface to his poetry, claims that melancholy is the *Stimmung* ("affective mood") of his times and emphasises the significance of the book as an *Arcanum* ("mystery") against the temptations of gloom (*Ursprung*, p. 320). The word *Arcanum*, belonging to the field of alchemy, refers to something mysterious that can only be deciphered with specialised knowledge; for Ayrer's publisher, this characterises the nature of the book in the Baroque:

„In bedenckung dessen, das die Pyramides, Seulen und Büldnussen allerhand materien mit der zeit schadhafft oder durch Gewalt zerbrochen werden oder wol gar verfallen... das wol ganze Städt versuncken, vntergangen vnd mit wasser bedeckt seien, da hergegen die Schrifftten und Bücher dergleichen vntergang befreyet, dann was jrgendt in einem Land oder Ort ab vnd vntergeht, das findet man in vielen andern vnd vnzehlichen orten vnschwer wider, also das, Menschlicher weiß davon zu reden, nichts Tauerhafftes vnd vnsterblich ist, als eben die Bücher“ (p.320).

“Considering that pyramids, pillars, and statues made of all kinds of material become damaged with time, or get broken through violence, or simply fall into ruins...and that whole cities have sunk, disappeared, and been covered with water, whereas writings and books are spared such destruction, since those that disappear or are destroyed in one country or locality are easily found again in many other and innumerable places, then — Humanity can witness the matter — there is precisely nothing more lasting and immortal than books” (*Origin*, p. 144).

Ayrer's unnamed publisher recreates the Renaissance tradition of the book as the only reservoir of eternity in human affairs: pyramids, columns, and all other materials break down with the advance of time; just as nations fall and their territory might even, with sufficient time, be covered by water — yet books remain.

At this point of the argument the position of Benjamin's narrator is difficult to discern — to what degree does he agree with Ayrer's publisher? It seems safe to say that he concurs with the characterisation of melancholy as the central mood of the Baroque, since this is a point repeatedly emphasised throughout *Ursprung* (see chapter Two). In the next sentence, Benjamin further embeds his point about books and contemplation with yet another quote, this time from literary scholar Arthur Hübscher (1897-1985), thereby making the issue of interpreting his position more complicated:

Der gleichen Mischung von Behagen und Kontemplation gehört es zu, daß „barocker Nationalismus“ „in Verbindung mit politischer Aktion...ebensowenig getreten, als sich barocke Konventionsfeindschaft bis zum revolutionären Willen des Sturm und Drang oder dem romantischen Kriege gegen das Philisterium von Staat und öffentlichem Leben verdichten sollte“ (p. 320).

The same mixture of complacency and contemplation is responsible for the fact that “Baroque nationalism” “never entered into alliance with political action, any more than Baroque hostility to convention ever would have consolidated [was to consolidate] itself to become the revolutionary will of Sturm und Drang or the Romantic struggle against the philistinism of state and public life” (*Origin*, p. 144).

Benjamin's debt to Hübscher's *Barock als Gestaltung antithetischen Lebensgefühls* has been explained by Newman in *Benjamin's Library*; she tells us that the literary scholar draws stark parallels “between the seventeenth century and other high points in the German tradition” (p. 71). Newman also emphasises that Hübscher associates the German “baroque spirit” with the challenges faced by the German nation throughout history; and that Benjamin is following Hübscher in his attempt to rewrite a literary history that celebrates the German Baroque, and its alternative literary canon, as a model for the German equivalent to the Renaissance (*Benjamin's Library*, p. 71).

In the above quote, Benjamin's quote from Hübscher emphasises what could be termed the “non-developed parallels” of the Baroque, that is, the dangers facing the contemporary German nation that have their origins in the seventeenth century: complacency and contemplation. As it turns out, the contemplative attitude of Ayrer's publisher turns out to carry yet another ‘Satanic promise’, since it mesmerises the

scholar in the comfort of contemplating eternal sorrow, which in turn hinders her political engagement. Although Ayres's publisher accurately describes the decaying state of worldly affairs, he offers the scholar the opportunity to take a step back from earthly matters and instead delight in reading sorrowful stories. In doing so, she takes pleasure in a melancholy contemplation and refrains from the political task of questioning the status quo. In her passionate discovery of the library, the scholar thus becomes immersed in the world of thought and alienates herself from the world, indeed only quarrelling with herself and with the products of her own thoughts. She comes to embody the contemplation of Tscherning's poetic persona.

Suddenly, in the next sentence Benjamin's narrator makes yet another abrupt jump, this time to the topic of the Baroque plotter, which is used as a counterimage to the scholar's contemplation:

Die eitle Geschäftigkeit des Intriganten galt als das würdelose Gegenbild der leidenschaftlichen Kontemplation, der einzig und allein die Gabe zugebilligt wurde, den Hochgestellten der satanischen Verstrickung der Geschichte, in welcher das Barock nur Politik sah, zu entbinden. Und doch: auch die Versenkung führte allzu leicht ins Bodenlose. Das lehrt die Theorie der melancholischen Veranlagung (p. 320).

The vain agitation of the intriguer was seen as the undignified antithesis of passionate contemplation, to which alone was granted the gift of releasing those from high rank from the satanic entanglements of history, in which the Baroque saw only politics. And yet: immersion itself led only too easily into the bottomless [into the abyss]. This is what the theory of the melancholy temper has to teach (*Origin*, p. 144).

Like the image of the double-faced Janus, so the courtly plotter and the scholar, who immerses himself in the world of books, represent two sides of the same coin. Both react to the theological crisis of the seventeenth century; in *Ursprung's* argument, this means that the Reformation severed for good the link between the profane and the divine. On the one hand, the scholar counteracts the ensuing anxiety by immersing herself in contemplation: she observes from afar the sorrowful landscape that books offer, which at least provide a glimpse of eternity. She takes the role of an intellectual decipherer, appeasing her fears about the uncertainty of eternal life by committing herself to the task of unveiling the hidden meaning of the objects surrounding her. On

the other, the (courtly) plotter compensates his anxiety with what Benjamin refers to as “die eitle [und würdelose] Geschäftigkeit des Intriganten” (the plotter’s incessant and undignified activity); in other words, his passionate weaving of the plots of courtly life betrays his efforts to re-sacralise the profane in a totalizing fashion. But the metaphor of Janus’ double face has its limitations. Unlike the plotter, who remains attached to worldly affairs in his futile and immersive implication in political life, the passionate scholar might still find a way out of deception. Contemplation, after all, represents a necessary step toward the final anagnorisis of *Ursprung*. This is because Benjamin’s modernist politicisation of scholarly work requires the passionate — yet also patient, slow, and arduous — work of contemplation that characterises scholarly work, the value of which lies in offering an alternative vision of the past.

Ursprung bestows high value on the everyday practices of scholarly work, which are deemed politically superior to the reckless and thoughtless immersive contemplation in political affairs. Even if rivetted in the dangers of contemplation and paralysing melancholy, the scholar’s practices provide a starting point towards the final realisation that the worldly attachment of the plotter represents but another “Satanic promise”. The plotter’s incessant activity, as well as his immersion in the daily affairs of politics, deceives him into believing the totalizing narratives which sacralise earthly matters. In other words, he becomes immersed in the strings of political life and ends up believing that redemption is still available in the secularised stage of the court.

Once the scholar realises the misleading path of the plotter, it will become easier for her to realise that her own melancholy contemplation is also dangerous. Hence the narrator’s defence of “leidenschaftliche Kontemplation” (passionate contemplation) is immediately nuanced: “Und doch: auch die Versenkung führte allzu leicht ins Bodenlose.” If the scholar wishes to redeem the political significance of her everyday practices, she must keep her guard high; the world of *Ursprung* is full of misleading

traps. She will eventually find out that her everyday practices — essential to travel through Benjamin's neo-Baroque territory — represent the yet another iteration of the Devil's entrapment. Research requires reflection, and this can too easily lead into the conformist position of Ayler's publisher, who is happy to find solace, with passionate and immersive contemplation, in the world of books. Instead, *Ursprung* encourages the scholar to interrupt her contemplation and commit herself to, first, the task of destroying what Benjamin considers misleading representations of totality — including, of course, that of the library; and, second, the suggestion of the true — albeit hypothetical and ephemeral — representation of totality.

A DEFENCE OF AESTHETIC ATTACHMENT

Throughout this thesis I have repeatedly argued that scholars have not taken in earnest Benjamin's claim, in his 1924 letter to Scholem, that Calderón represents the "virtuelle Gegenstand" (virtual subject) of *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. Indeed, the scholarship on Benjamin's relationship to Calderón is limited; the only monograph that engages with the subject, as far as I know, is Sofie Kluge's *Baroque, Allegory, Comedia* (2010). This represents a blind spot in Benjamin Studies: Calderón's Romantic interpretation plays a key role in *Ursprung's* theory of the Baroque origins of Modernity. Benjamin sees in the Spanish playwright the embodiment of what is wrong with Jena Romanticism, namely: their sacralisation of aesthetic experience, which in turn clears the ground — this is Benjamin's argument — for Schmitt's sacralisation of politics in general and of the role of the sovereign in particular. Within this framework, the contrast between the canonical Calderón and the lesser-known German Baroque dramatists carries important political and theological connotations. For Calderón's Tridentine Catholicism is opposed to the Lutheranism of his German counterparts, just as his 'Catholic' *admiratio* is contrasted to a radical version of 'Protestant' melancholy — a melancholy which, in *Ursprung's* argument, carries the splinter of hope to the desolate landscape of interwar Germany. Benjamin takes the opposition *admiratio* vs melancholy seriously because it allows him to imbue his own scholarly work with significant political meaning. The aesthetics of *admiratio*, in *Ursprung*, is linked to an immersive reception of artworks, described with the term "ponderación misteriosa"; whereas Benjamin's melancholy aesthetics are linked to an interrupted and fragmented reception, and open up a space for his redemptive criticism. Nevertheless, Benjamin's argument is not as clear-cut as it may seem from the above exposition. In Chapter Three, I have drawn attention to the excitement, and indeed *admiratio*, that comes along with Benjamin's neo-Baroque rhetoric. I have also explained that *Ursprung* warns its

readers about the dangers of melancholy, which might trap them into an immersive, contemplative, and passive attitude. Following the example of Calderón's Tetrarch in *El mayor monstruo, los celos*, *Ursprung* argues that melancholy might turn, by means of a dialectical jump which is left unexplained, into an uncritical version of *admiratio*.

Ultimately, I have claimed that the reader who manages to navigate *Ursprung*'s complex maze of references becomes schooled in everyday values and practices associated with scholarly work. These amount to specialised training in the German cultural tradition; delight in the intellectual challenge of reconstructing an argument; a passion for the discovery of rare, precious, and forgotten cultural artifacts; the conviction that the political task of scholars is to reimagine the canon; and the desire, tainted by melancholy, to tear down the ideology of the tradition in which such a learned scholar has been trained. And yet, however important these values may be for Benjamin's argument, his narrative voice betrays an effort to cover up the attachments that make such practices possible in the first place.

By way of example, in Chapter Three I have made the point that the elation that accompanies the discovery of a previously-unknown tradition becomes clouded within *Ursprung*'s labyrinthine rhetoric. Indeed, Benjamin's narrator positions himself in a state of constant alertness. He hides behind a mosaic use of quotation and paraphrases; and his brilliant brushstrokes of literary analysis are often interrupted by argumentative jumps that make his standpoint ambiguous and difficult to discern. Consequently, the reader of *Ursprung* is forced to take the role of an intellectual decipherer: before agreeing or disagreeing with the book's narrative voice, she will first have to pause and reconstruct the fragments, which will never add up in a cohesive or structured manner. Hence the book performatively displays, at a formal level, the fragmented aesthetic vindicated at the level of content and unearthed from the model of German Baroque drama.

The contrast between Calderón and German Baroque playwrights is rhetorically powerful because it allows Benjamin to reconstruct two opposing versions of aesthetic experiences: whereas the latter calls for an audience that is immersed in the narrative, the audience of the former does not let themselves be carried away, since this is considered morally dangerous. In formal terms, this corresponds to Benjamin's opposition between the fragmented structure of German Baroque artworks and the totalizing coherence of their Spanish counterparts: "Der Schluß der deutschen Trauerspiel ist daher wie minder formvoll so auch weniger dogmatisch, er ist— — moralisch, sicherlich nicht künstlerisch — verantwortlicher als der spanische (*Ursprung*, p. 263; "The conclusion of the German Trauerspiel is therefore both less formally elaborated and less dogmatic; it is—morally, though certainly not artistically— —more responsible than that of the Spanish drama", *Origin*, p. 72). Benjamin's claims about the totalizing structure of Spanish drama in general and Calderón in particular further the assumptions of Jena Romanticism, which championed his dramas precisely because of what they took to be his celebration of the harmony of creation.

By vindicating the German Baroque, Benjamin is therefore reimagining a version of the German tradition that might be capable of overcoming the limitations of Jena Romantic aesthetics and politics. He therefore associates 'Catholic' *admiratio*—as well as related feelings of elation, fascination, and excitement—with the uncritical celebration of the status quo; and instead weaves from the silk of the German Baroque an alternative tale of the German nation, the aim of which is to dismantle the Romantic ideological fantasies that, in his interpretation, lead towards the Great War. Within this framework, Benjamin could not see beyond the Romantic reading of Calderón. However, his failure critically to engage with such Romantic assumptions represents a missed opportunity. Had Benjamin paid closer attention to Calderón's works, he might have discovered an aesthetics that calls for feelings of attachment such as empathy and

identification — in turn dependent on building up narrative tension and immersing the audience in the fiction — and is also critical, thought-provoking, and defensible from a moral standpoint, as I argue in the following sections. Furthermore, he might have acknowledged the limitations of his own scholarly attachment to melancholy, which — furthering the genre elitism of the Western canon — blinds the narrator of *Ursprung* from taking comedy in earnest. All in all, this chapter makes a case against Benjamin's suspicion of attachment by going back to the poetics of Spanish *comedia* and, more particularly, to Calderón's dramas *La vida es sueño* (1635) and *La dama duende* (1629).

The chapter begins by examining seventeenth-century debates about the legitimacy of fiction in Spain and then turns to Lope de Vega's debate, with scholar and historian Diego de Colmenares, about the rhetorical obscurity of Luis de Góngora's poetry. The reason why it considers Lope's debate with Colmenares is that their discussion spells out the theoretical assumptions that sets the model for Calderón's aesthetics. In addition, I analyze a brief seventeenth-century example of literary criticism on Calderón, written by Fray Manuel Guerra y Ribera, which vindicates, even from a moral standpoint, the feeling of being moved by, and indeed immersed in, an artwork. Once the arguments of seventeenth-century Spanish defenders of the new theatre have been spelled out, I then turn to analyse selected passages from Calderón's aforementioned dramas.

Fiction and its Dangers in Early Modern Spain

Barry Ife has made the argument that early-modern Spanish debates on the dangers of fiction were highly productive for the arts, since these encouraged writers to develop a sense of self-awareness towards the legitimacy of their own artistic practice.¹⁴⁴ He

¹⁴⁴ Barry Ife, *Reading and Fiction in Golden Age Spain: A Platonist Critique and Some Picaresque Replies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

begins by reconstructing the position of early-modern Spanish critics of fiction, who built their case based on overlapping moral and metaphysical arguments of a neo-Platonic nature. In moral terms, literature is accused of setting “bad examples” and of encouraging “vicarious experience”; in metaphysical terms, it is looked down on as a “counterfeit form of reality” which undermines, through its techniques of verisimilitude, the authority of truth (Ife, *Reading and Fiction*, p. 24).¹⁴⁵

By way of example, in 1588 the Augustinian theologian and Platonist Fr. Pedro Malón de Chaide expressed his worries about the corrupting influence of fiction on the youth of his time. He warned readers that fiction’s rapture entices the inexperienced — and especially women — into utterly false and inauthentic worlds.¹⁴⁶ At the turn of the seventeenth century, ecclesiastical writers were particularly sensitive to the fact that imaginative literature “impinged on areas of emotion which the Church wanted reserved for religious feelings” (Ife, *Reading and Fiction*, p. 12). Ife further tells us that this early-modern distrust of literature was exacerbated as a consequence of Spain’s reaction against Protestantism; the country’s elites were unconvinced that the unaided lay public could successfully cope with the unmediated experience of private reading (*Reading and Fiction*, p.12).

On the other side of the debate, neo-Aristotelian defenders of fiction in early modern Spain appealed to the rhetorical figure of allegory to make their case. Imaginative fiction, from their perspective, may be morally and metaphysically dangerous, but this is only if the reader is incapable of seeing through the cortex of the fable so as to unveil its core or hidden truth (Ife, *Reading and Fiction*, p. 42). Ife

¹⁴⁵ This is indeed the way Plato was commonly interpreted in the seventeenth century, yet the philosopher’s position is more nuanced: for him, fiction (myth) represents a form of access to truth, although he does distinguish between acceptable and non-acceptable forms of fiction. On neo-Platonism in the literary republic of early modern Spain, see Kluge, “The Platonic-Christian Bias”, in *Baroque, Allegory, Comedia*, pp. 126-33.

¹⁴⁶ See also Juan Luis Vives, *De Institutione Christianae Feminae* (Antwerp, 1524); *Instrucción de la mujer cristiana*, transl. by Juan Justiniano (Valencia, 1528).

explains this argument *for* fiction as building on the tradition of post-classical pagan and Christian authorities such as Macrobius, Lactantius, and St. Augustine; all of whom recognised the value of fables “provided that they could not actually be mistaken for truth” (*Reading and Fiction*, p. 42). Fray Juan de Pineda, for instance, makes the point, in *Agricultura cristiana* (1589), that the work of poets is indeed useful for society. Despite the Platonist accusation of fiction as mere lies or falsehoods, he insists that the task of poets is to cover up truth with the goal of protecting it, in Ife’s words, “from the scorn of the unlearned” (*Reading and Fiction*, p. 42). Nevertheless, neo-Aristotelian arguments such as Pineda’s remained unconvincing for many: given the theatre’s appeal to a wide audience, Spanish critics thought that the lay public was incapable of distinguishing the fable’s truth from its cortex. Ife summarises the dangers of fiction, from their perspective, with the following words: “if we are to play fast and loose with words and use them to mean whatever we want, how are we to know what signifies what?” (*Reading and Fiction*, p. 43) Given the theatre’s growing popularity, the country’s elites became worried that fiction might encourage the masses to question their ideologically conditioned notions of truth and falsehood.

Despite the differences, the debates on literature in seventeenth-century Spain share a common denominator with those of the Weimar Republic: in both cases, the legitimacy of the ‘vulgar’ tastes of the new consumer public is perceived with suspicion by the elites, which experience with anxiety and uncertainty their loss of authority as legislators of aesthetic taste. In the Spanish case, ecclesiastical elites accused the *vulgo* of spending time reading idle matters such as chivalric novels and pastoral romances, that is, in lieu of scriptures and other weightier matters (Ife, *Reading and Fiction*, p. 15). In the German case, scholars have explained the rise of the figure of the *Kulturverleger* and the professionalizing of literary criticism as part of the state’s efforts to instruct the

new consumer public of the time.¹⁴⁷ In both the Spanish and the German cases, the argument *against* imaginative fiction relies on the assumption that the unmediated attachment and rapture of reading is morally dangerous for the uninstructed.

Ife argues that Spanish writers of the picaresque genre, as well as Cervantes, became increasingly aware of such attacks against fiction, and that they adumbrated a case *for* literature that overcomes the limitations of neo-Aristotelian arguments (“Breaking the Illusion”, pp. 84-171). Ife’s point about imaginative literature is relevant for this study because it makes the case for a morally-defensible, and indeed critical, aesthetic experience which does not call for an alert and interrupted reception of the artwork. Furthermore, Ife takes heed of the artistic development of *conceptismo*, which bears striking parallels to Benjamin’s aesthetics in *Ursprung*: *conceptista* poets, spearheaded by Luis de Góngora, recreate a highly obscure language that forcefully slows down the reader, who must now take the role of an intellectual decipherer. Just like *Ursprung*’s prose, *conceptismo* makes the reader “conscious of his own acts of comprehension” and “requir[es] him to participate actively and intellectually in solving the enigma of the text”. This is why, according to Ife, *conceptismo* breaks the spell of fiction:

...*conceptistas* are doing two things that might be thought to help the breaking of illusion: they are drawing attention to the text as language, helping the reader to focus on its opacity, its unreliability, its contingency, helping him to see the text not as a transparent window giving access to a world beyond, but as a stumbling-block that demands to be treated on its own terms. At the same time they are making their readers aware of the extent of their own contribution to the literary process and of their ability to grow and develop as rational and creative beings (*Reading and Fiction*, p. 89).

In a nutshell, *conceptismo* breaks down the rapture and spell of fiction because it calls for the reader’s attention to the medium of language. But the illusion is broken in such a radical way that fiction becomes, in Ife’s words, “something else” (*Reading and*

¹⁴⁷ See Alistair McCleery, “The book in the long twentieth century”, in *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. by Leslie Howsam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 162-80; Adrian van der Weel, “Modernity and Print II: Europe 1890-1970”, in *A Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. by Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 354-67.

Fiction, p. 89). In early-modern Spain, writers of popular literature could only break the spell to a limited extent if they wanted to remain in business, and hence *conceptista* poetics — according to Ife — took place “on the very edge of fiction” (*Reading and Fiction*, p. 89).¹⁴⁸ Ife is right to underscore the limitations of such rhetorical devices, especially since he focuses on prose writing, which is intended for a popular audience. In the learned poetry of Luis de Góngora, however, obscurity underscores the exclusiveness of the aesthetic attachments of its consumers.¹⁴⁹ The poet repeatedly voices this claim when he argues that the rhetorical difficulty of his poems *Soledades* and *Polífemo* blocks the immersion in the artwork of the *vulgo*. Indeed, his poems are crafted to catch the attention of people with time, energy, social position, and capacity to devote themselves to the practices of literary interpretation.

Notwithstanding the exclusiveness of such attachments, Ife underscores that a successful reply to any critique of fiction must respect and acknowledge what he calls “the spell of fiction”, that is, the feeling of being immersed in an artwork. He finds in the picaresque a convincing example of a genre that maintains rapture and, at the same time, remains intelligent and thought-provoking. The anonymous *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) becomes, in his argument, an excellent example of a morally defensible kind of fiction; the author, we are told, utilises the rapture of fiction with the aim of persuading the reader into considering with care and respect a variety of moral positions:

The first person of the [prologue] is in fact two people: Lázaro and Lazarillo. Because Lazarillo’s experiences are retold by the mature man with the benefit of hindsight, Lázaro is often critical of his former self, commenting with a certain detachment on his exploits [...] Under these circumstances the reader’s relationship of empathy with the younger man becomes overlaid with one of complicity with the older man [...]

The result of this technique is a literary equivalent of the Necker cube, in which the reader sees the events of the narrative from opposing points of view almost, but not quite, simultaneously. The true originality [...] of *Lazarillo de Tormes*, and its importance in the evolution of a morally defensible fiction, lies precisely in the way in which it exploits the division of self implicit in autobiography [...] to produce a double

¹⁴⁸ Ife points out that most writers — including Cervantes — kept *conceptista* devices “well below the threshold at which it would seriously disrupt the reader’s progress through the book” (*Reading and Fiction*, p. 90).

¹⁴⁹ See Tubau “La polémica”, in *Una Polémica Literaria: Lope de Vega y Diego de Colmenares* (Frankfurt am Main: Iberoamericana-Vervuet, 2007), pp. 83-154.

protagonist, two first persons, each of which the reader assimilates to himself and clothes in his own voice (p. 99).

Ife focuses on the forms of attachment elicited by the picaresque to make the wider point that the genre represents the best answer to Golden Age debates on the moral and metaphysical dangers of fiction. He shows that the picaresque moves the reader in ways which cultivate her autonomy and critical thinking. Following Ife's lead, I now turn to Lope's defence of the *comedia* and to his literary debate about Góngora's obscure poetry with the scholar and historian Diego de Colmenares. By going back to Lope, I describe the *comedia*'s contribution to the debates about fiction in the Spanish Golden Age. The point is to defend the spell of fiction against the accusation that it prompts an unreflective and ideological consumption of artworks. Ultimately, the next section clears the ground for this thesis' vindication of attachment as a valid and productive aesthetic quality.

Lope de Vega, Diego de Colmenares, and the Legitimacy of Fiction

In the *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias*, Lope makes an unabashed defence of popular art which was read aloud before the academics of the Academia de Madrid. This was a bold statement to make before a learned audience, prejudiced as they were (and still are, in many cases) against artworks consumed by the lay public. Indeed, many academics instead favoured the linguistic obscurity of Luis de Góngora's poetry and scorned Lope's rhetoric as well as his popular poetics. The accusation was raised amongst scholars that he had sold his craftsmanship in exchange for money and fame.

The ensuing debate on the nature of poetry, theatre, and linguistic obscurity has been recently reconstructed by Xavier Tubau in *Una polémica literaria: Lope de Vega y Diego de Colmenares* (2007). Tubau edits and analyses Lope's correspondence on the topic with scholar and historian Diego de Colmenares, a mouthpiece for seventeenth-

century academic and aristocratic taste.¹⁵⁰ Colmenares repeatedly derides Lope's 'insatiable' desire for public recognition, and argues that it has lowered the quality of his art. In his view, Lope bows down to the "apetito del aplauso popular" (Tubau, p. 111; tastes of the masses). The playwright, he tells us, vulgarises the extraordinary nature of *poesía* ("literature"), which is only rendered its due worth in the *culteranista* complexities of Góngora's *Soledades* and *Polifemo*.¹⁵¹

Colmenares therefore tells Lope that his popular and clear style, tailored as it is towards the *vulgo* (masses), is well-suited for his practice as a commercial playwright; but he does so in a tone that is full of irony and disdain. In fact, he attacks Lope by quoting out of context the following verses from the *Arte nuevo*:

Escribo por el arte que inventaron
los que el vulgar aplauso pretendieron,
porque como las paga el vulgo es justo
hablarle en necio para darle gusto (vv. 45-8; quoted in Tubau, "Respuesta a la carta
antecedente, por sus mismos puntos", 214).

[I write following] the rules that were invented,
by those who sought the plaudits of the mob,
for since it is the mob that pays, it's right
to act the fool to give [them] delight (translation modified; vv. 45-8).¹⁵²

Colmenares uses Lope's verses to suggest that the 'vulgar' audience of the *comedia* remains incapable of making intellectually challenging and critical distinctions. He insists on this point by repeatedly referring to the *Arte nuevo*, but he misses Lope's irony and sense of humour. The scholar disdainfully highlights Lope's point that the playwright's task is to offer moral orientation to lay theatregoers, and here he refers again to the *Arte nuevo* ("Respuesta a la carta antecedente", p. 214):

que, dorando el error del público, quiero
deciros de qué modo las querría [las comedias]

¹⁵⁰ Xavier Tubau, *Una polémica literaria: Lope de Vega y Diego de Colmenares*, Biblioteca Áurea Hispánica, 42 (Madrid: Iberoamericana-Vervuet, 2007). DOI: 10.31819/9783865279521.

¹⁵¹ Tubau rightly points out that Colmenares' defence of obscurity represents his rejection of the professionalisation of writing as well as his efforts to maintain intact poetry's upper-class veneer (*Una polémica literaria*, p. 137).

¹⁵² I henceforth quote Victor Dixon's translation, Lope de Vega, *New Rules for Writing Plays at this Time* (2009), digital edition by Nadia Revenga García. Available at: shorturl.at/dfxyE. Consulted 20/04/2022. I have modified the translation as necessary in order to provide a more literal meaning of the verses.

ya que seguir el arte no hay remedio,
en estos dos extremos dando un medio (vv. 153-56).¹⁵³

[so as to educate the misjudgment of the mob,
I would like to] say how I wish plays to be written,
[since it is impossible to keep with the rules of high art,
I will] seek a mean between those two extremes (Dixon, transl. modified, vv. 153-56).

Colmenares claims he agrees with Lope that the *comedia* should tailor its rhetoric to popular taste; the aim of the genre, after all, is to educate the uninstructed masses.¹⁵⁴ But he also makes sure to underscore that Góngora's poems are not for *el vulgo*, but for an educated elite. For the scholar, such a learned audience is capable of taking up difficult and intellectual challenges, which is why the best authors write poems of high linguistic complexity and demand a lot of effort from their readers (Tubau, p. 107). Lay audiences, in contrast, cannot be expected to make such efforts. To make his argument, the scholar appeals to the neo-Platonist commonplace that ordered and well-ruled republics follow a threefold hierarchy: "¿qué república, señor, medianamente gobernada, no diferencia sus estados con distinción de ornato plebeyo, medio y noble?" ("Respuesta a la censura antecedente", p. 195; "Which republic, sir, that is moderately governed, does not differentiate its social classes with the distinctive ornaments of plebeian, medium, and noble?", the translation is mine). The assumption here is that each social class should consume a certain kind of art: poetry belongs to aristocrats, who are educated and guided by reason, whilst the *comedia* is aimed at the lower

¹⁵³ The quotations are from Lope Fénix de Vega Carpio, *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo* [1609], ed. by Juan Manuel Rozas (Alicante: Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 2003). Available at shorturl.at/rIKP1. Consulted 5/12/2021. See also Lope de Vega, *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo*, ed. and preliminary study by Felipe B. Pedraza, Sociedad Don Quixote de Conmemoraciones Culturales (Madrid: Teatro Español de Madrid; [Toledo]: Universidad de Castilla la Mancha, 2009).

¹⁵⁴ Colmenares supports this point with multiple references to, amongst others, Horace and El Brocense, building on a long and elitist tradition which considers comedy a lower artform than tragedy (see "Respuesta a la censura antecedente" and "Respuesta a la carta antecedente, por sus mismos puntos", in Tubau, *Una polémica literaria*, pp. 187-98, 207-22). A vindication of comedy in general and of Lope's comedies in particular can be found in "Lope, the Comedian", in *A Companion to Lope de Vega*, ed. by Alexander Samson and Jonathan Thacker, (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2008), pp. 159-70. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv24t9kc.17>.

classes, who cannot but let themselves be carried away by their emotions.¹⁵⁵

Colmenares crafts this opposition in terms of the quick and immediate pace of the theater and the more slow and detached rhythm of reading:

La comedia, empleo del pueblo y de jurisdicción, pues él la paga, como Vuestra Merced cuerdamente dijo, siga su intento y acomódese con su llaneza, necesaria al oyente, no al letor, que puede, y es justo, detenerse a considerar lo que no entendié al vuelo. Más al lírico, al trágico y al heroico gran desdicha sería sujetarles al juicio del vulgo, “qui non delectu aliquo aut sapientia ducitur ad iudicandum, sed ímpetu non numquam et quadam etiam temeritate” [“quien no es guiado por algún discernimiento o saber, sino siempre por el impulso y también por una cierta temeridad”, transl. Tubau, p. 196], como dijo el prudente Cicerón (“Respuesta a la censura antecedente”, in Tubau, p. 196).

Comedy, employment of the people and of their jurisdiction, since he pays for it, as Your Mercy wisely said, should follow its intent and accommodate to its simplicity, necessary for the listener, not the reader, who can, and this is just, stop to consider what he does not understand immediately. But to the lyrical, the tragic and the heroic [reader] it would be a great misfortune to be subjected to the mob’s judgment, “qui non delectu aliquo aut sapientia ducitur ad iudicandum, sed ímpetu non numquam et quadam etiam temeritate” [“who is not guided by discernment or knowledge, but always by impulse and also by a certain recklessness”], as the wise Cicero said.

The *vulgo*, we are told, lacks patience and self-restriction. They will never appreciate Góngora’s poetry because they are incapable of practising the slower and more intellectual task of decipherment that it requires; they demand a facile artwork that can be easily consumed. Consequently, the ‘higher’ art of poetry should protect itself from the superficial demands of the *vulgo*, and Lope therefore disrespect the nobility of art when he kowtows to their tastes. As Tubau points out, Colmenares’ distinction between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ artforms — i.e., between ‘critical’ and ‘facile’ artforms — betrays his attachment to the practices of the elites: literature, in his view, should be obscure, learned, and complicated because, in this way, it filters the audience’s access to the artwork and allows the scholars and aristocrats to affirm their distinction. This is, after all, why he is suspicious of Lope’s professionalisation of literary practices, which necessarily appeals to wide audiences (*Una polémica literaria*, p. 137). From such a

¹⁵⁵ For a modern scientific account which tears down the classical view of emotions underpinning Colmenares’ argument, see Lisa Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain* (London: MacMillan, 2007).

standpoint, Colmenares fails to appreciate the nuances of the *Arte nuevo*: although it begins as a justification of the new theatre in learned and academic terms, it ultimately becomes a defence of popular art, a joke on academic rules, and a vindication of fiction's rapture.¹⁵⁶

Lope's dramatic statement is rhetorically tailored towards the learned academic audience for which it was composed and before which it was read aloud. This is why, in a persuasive effort, it begins by acknowledging the academic suspicion against popular art. But Lope also uses the opportunity to mock his audience's inability to adapt and understand the new tastes of theatergoers. Colmenares overlooks this provocative aspect alongside the dramatist's irony, ambiguity, and mockery of the elites. Instead, he takes Lope's verses at face value and finds in them confirmation for the widespread accusation at the time that Lope kowtowed to vulgar tastes: "como las paga el vulgo es justo / hablarle en necio para darle gusto" (vv. 47-8) ("for since it is the masses that pays, it's right / to act the fool to give them delight", transl. modified, Dixon, vv. 47-8). In the initial verses of the *Arte nuevo* Lope indeed justifies himself by explaining to his academic public that this was the only possible way for him to find success in the stage:

Verdad es que yo he escrito algunas veces
siguiendo el arte que conocen pocos
mas luego que salir por otra parte
veo los monstruos, de apariencias llenos,
adonde acude el vulgo y las mujeres
que este triste ejercicio canonizan
a aquel hábito bárbaro me vuelvo (vv. 33-39).

It's true that I have written on occasion
according to the precepts so few know,
but when by contrast I see sally forth
monstrosities replete with stage effects,
and how the common folk and women flock
to canonize such lamentable labours,
I too revert to that barbaric custom (Dixon, vv. 33-39).

¹⁵⁶ See Jonathan Thacker, "The *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias*: Lope's Dramatic Statement", in *A Companion to Lope de Vega*, pp. 109-18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv24tr9kc.13>.

Without further contextualisation, it may seem that Colmenares' attack against Lope hits the spot: the playwright abandons "el arte que conocen pocos" ("high culture") in an effort to establish himself as a renowned playwright, and thus is forced to bow down to the aesthetic preferences of "el vulgo" and "las mujeres" ("women").¹⁵⁷ Following upper class prejudices of his time, Lope tells his audience that, like them, he also recognises the deceitful nature of theatrical fiction: "veo los monstruos, de apariencia llenos". With the adjective clause "de apariencia llenos" (rich in appearances), Lope evokes the neo-Platonic accusation that the theatre is rich in morally corrupting *apariencias* ("appearances"). He is here enticing his audience by flirting with the academic rejection of "low" art. Yet this is due to the central role of persuasion in the rhetorical tradition in which he was schooled: just like Lope acknowledges the need to take heed of the artistic preference of theatregoers, he also modulates his own rhetoric towards the expectations of academics. The aim of the *Arte nuevo*, as we will see, is to persuade and convince the audience to agree with Lope's unabashed defence of popular taste.

Lope's poetic statement begins with a *captatio* that signals to his audience a shared sense of aristocratic disdain against the taste of the masses, and then turns to the authorities of Ancient Greece and Rome so as to delineate a genealogy of the classical theatrical tradition. Once again, the aim of Lope's appeal to such authorities is to win over the attention of his learned public, which of course highly values erudition and the scholarly knowledge of the Western tradition. It is at this point that Lope's argument starts to depart from traditional and aristocratic views against popular theatre: he claims

¹⁵⁷ Misogynistic critics were highly concerned about its effect on women, who were thought to be even more "emotional" and incapable of controlling themselves than ordinary people. See, amongst others, the aforementioned Vives, *Instrucción de la mujer cristiana* as well as Ife's summary of literature's perceived dangers for women at the time in "The Case Against Fiction", in *Reading and Fiction*, pp. 24-48. On the concept of the 'vulgo' in the Spanish Golden Age, see Porqueras Mayo and Sánchez Escribano, *Preceptiva dramática Española* pp. 374-79; "Función del 'vulgo' en la preceptiva dramática de la Edad de Oro", *Revista de Filología Española*, 1 (1967), 123-143; and Otis Green, "On the Attitude Towards the Vulgo in the Spanish Siglo de Oro", *Studies in the Renaissance*, 4 (1957), 190-200.

to have discovered, at the roots of the Western tradition, an alternative view to the dominant academic opposition between comedy and tragedy by which the latter represents “lower” artform and the former a “higher” artform. This opposition was created because the academy has traditionally considered “low” art adequate for the masses, whereas “high” art would be crafted for the educated elites.¹⁵⁸ In contrast, Lope appeals to the socially meaningful work of comedy in Athens, and to the authority of Cicero, in order to reclaim the often-overlooked dignity of comedy:

Con ática elegancia los de Atenas,
 reprehendían vicios y costumbres
 con las comedias [...]
 Por eso Tulio las llamaba espejo
 de las costumbres y viva imagen
 de la verdad, altísimo atributo,
 en que corren parejas con la historia.
 ¡Mirad si es digna de corona y gloria! (vv. 119-127)

With Attic elegance the men of Athens
 used comedies to castigate its vices
 and foolish customs [...]
 and Tully therefore said they were a mirror
 of human life, an image of the truth,
 which is so noble a description that
 it means they vie with history for renown.
 Think then; don't they deserve a glorious crown? (Dixon, vv. 119-27)

Lope makes his case for comedy in particular and fiction in general with an appeal to the authority of Cicero. The argument is directed against neo-Aristotelians, who instead insist that fiction takes us a step further away from truth. Fiction, from their perspective, becomes tantamount to lies, whereas history represents events that have actually taken place.¹⁵⁹ Lope stands against the fiction/history opposition and instead appeals to the Renaissance value of *imitatio* with the aim of restoring the dignity of comedy. The audience of the *Arte nuevo* is therefore told that literature’s capacity to mirror habits and

¹⁵⁸ For a contemporary account of the use of “high” culture in sociological terms, see Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction: critique social du jugement* (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

¹⁵⁹ An analysis on the borders between the writing of history and of poetry in the Spanish Golden Age can be found in Sofie Kluge, *Literature and Historiography in the Spanish Golden Age: The Poetics of History*, Routledge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022). DOI: 10.4324/9781003203575.

customs offers an unequal opportunity to capture truth, and that this capacity puts at the same level fiction and history (v. 126). Nevertheless, Lope acknowledges that many academics would remain unconvinced: critics of the *comedia*, who might have agreed with Cicero, were in fact much more worried about the monstrous form of the new genre than about the genre of comedy, which after all had a long and more or less respected tradition to back it up. The problem with the new genre, from their standpoint, is that its mixture of styles and high and low characters embodies the ‘vulgar’ tastes of its variegated audience and therefore disregards traditional dramatic precepts. The *Arte nuevo* recognises this fear by twice defining the new genre as a monster: “veo los monstruos, de apariencias llenos” (v. 36; “I see [...] monstrosities replete with stage effects”, Dixon, vv. 35-6) and “la vil quimera de este monstruo cómico” (v. 150; “the vile chimera of that comic monster”, Dixon, v. 150). From the perspective of the academy, the *comedia* thus became the unruly or misguided child of a recognisable upstanding parent, that is, the Spanish neo-classical drama performed in the 1580s.¹⁶⁰

Such critics could reply to Lope that Cicero might have been right about the virtues of *imitatio* in Latin and Greek comedy, but that the issue with the new drama was its mass consumer public. Catering to the taste of the masses, the *comedia* disregards traditional division of genres and instead mixes both tragic and comic elements. This makes the *comedia* a monstrous form, which Lope also puts in the terms of “máquina confusa” (v. 130; “confused construction”, my translation). Academics would have indeed felt suspicious of the messy mixture of genres of Lope’s artistic project. In their views, such lack of respect for the distinction between “high” and “low” art would further contribute to disorientate the “poor” and “irrational” judgement of the

¹⁶⁰ On pre-Lopean drama, see, amongst others, Antonio López Fonseca, “Teatro y tradición clásica a finales del s. XVI: Juan de la Cueva y la ‘tragedia de horror’”, *Cuadernos de Filología Clásica: Estudios Latinos*, vol. 34.2 (2014), 283-313. For a Benjaminian-inspired reading of Juan de la Cueva’s pre-Lopean drama, see Sofie Kluge, “Death Head’s and Death Masks: History as Absence in Juan de la Cueva’s *Los siete infantes de Lara*”, *Hispanic Review*, vol. 88.3 (2020), 265-88.

masses (Ife, *Reading and Fiction*, p. 56-7). Lope swiftly anticipates this counterargument with yet another reference to tradition:

Elíjase el sujeto, y no se mire
(perdonen los preceptos) si es de reyes,
[...]
Esto es volver a la comedia antigua
donde vemos que Plauto puso dioses,
como en su *Anfitrión* lo muestra Jupiter.
Sabe Dios que me pesa de aprobarlo,
porque Plutarco, hablando de Menandro,
no siente bien de la comedia antigua;
mas pues del arte vamos tan remotos,
y en España le hacemos mil agravios,
cierren los doctos esta vez los labios (vv. 165-173).

First choose your subject-matter; don't be bothered,
despite the precepts, if it features kings,
[...]
Yet ancient comedy affords a model,
for there we find that Plautus featured gods,
as Jupiter in his *Amphitryon* shows.
It pains me to approve of it, God knows,
for Plutarch, when discoursing on Menander,
is critical of ancient comedy.
But since we stray so far now from the rules,
and here in Spain commit crime after crime,
let men of learning hold their tongue this time (Dixon, vv. 165-73).

Lope cleverly points out that he is not the first to disrespect classical precepts: the canonical playwrights of Ancient Rome already mixed genres and styles in ways that disrespected Aristotle's rules in the *Poetics*. In reclaiming the *comedia*'s roots in classical tradition, the Spaniard is therefore clearing the ground for his final reevaluation of its 'monstrous' nature; and it is only once he has made an effort to win over his audience that Lope feels confident enough to make a case for the popular poetics of his *comedias*:

Lo trágico y cómico mezclado,
Y Terencio con Séneca, aunque sea
como otro Minotauro de Pasife,
harán grave una parte, otra ridícula,
que aquesta variedad deleita mucho:
buen ejemplo nos da la naturaleza,
que por tal variedad tiene belleza (vv. 174-180).

To mix the tragic and the comic modes,
 Terence with Seneca, perhaps producing,
 like Pasiphae of Crete, a Minotaur,
 makes one part serious, one ridiculous;
 and that variety gives great delight.
 Nature provides a pattern clear to see;
 its beauty lies in such variety (Dixon, vv. 174-80).

The classical reference to the Minotaur elegantly points towards the aforementioned monster, which now appears ironically and mockingly varnished with Antiquity's veneer of respect. The *comedia*, as it turns out, does not recreate a lacklustre monster, but rather one with parallels to classical mythology. This is to a great extent a joke on Lope's audience: a genre which scholars assumed to be vulgar in its disrespect to tradition turns out to model the myth of the Minotaur. Hence the new theatre becomes embedded within the canonical and highly respected world of Ancient Antiquity. From a rhetorical standpoint, Lope is therefore claiming the aura of "high" art for his theatrical practice, and he is tacitly making the point that academics are not the only wardens of the literary tradition. Cicero's defence of comedy; the role of *imitatio* in Greek comedies; Plautus' theatrical practice; and the myth of the Minotaur all ground Lope's effort to reimagine tradition as well as his departure from neo-Aristotelian doctrine.

The imagery of the Minotaur provides food for thought because the plots of the *comedia* — full of argumentative turns, twists, and changes of mood and genre — parallel the structure of a labyrinth; and, as already mentioned, because its variegated public parallels Minos' monstrous nature. But Lope does not follow through the consequences of his metaphor, for in the next verse we are told that the variety of the *comedia*'s turns (now tragic, now comic) produces a *deleite* ("pleasure") that, in the realm of nature, constitutes beauty (vv. 179-80). This change of argumentation is contrasted by argumentative proximity to the myth of Minos with the aim of voicing an altogether different defence of the new genre: unlike the figure of the monster in Greek

mythology, the *comedia*'s monstrosity is *not* an aberration that must be hidden. Lope is thereby encouraging his audience to embrace the new genre with a twofold argument: first, that its inherent variety produces pleasure; second, that this variety corresponds, in the realm of nature, to beauty: "buen ejemplo nos da la naturaleza / que por tal variedad tiene belleza" (vv. 179-80; "Nature provides a pattern [example] clear to see; its beauty lies in such variety", Dixon, vv. 179-80). Jonathan Thacker rightly emphasises that the rhyming couplet *naturaleza/belleza* ("nature/beauty") allows Lope to turn "a negative 'mixture' into a positive 'variety'": although the playwright accepts the "theoretical inferiority of his unruly drama", he also undermines that position "through hints at its weakness" and by being "assertive about the quality of the drama he writes" (*Companion to Lope*, p. 113).

Lope's *Arte nuevo* is quoted without its context by Colmenares. To give yet another illustrative example, the scholar takes at face value Lope's repeated use of the motif "el gusto del vulgo es justo" (the taste of the masses is just). Colmenares repeatedly misses Lope's provocations and sense of humour; in this case, phonetically reinforced by the repetition, throughout his speech, of the internal rhymes *gusto* ("taste and pleasure"), *vulgo* ("masses"), and *justo* ("fair and just"). Whereas, by the beginning of the speech, Lope apparently shares the academic distinction between "high" and "low" art, by the end he has managed to reframe the terms of the debate as well as to claim the academic respectability of his *comedias* (Thacker, *A Companion to Lope*, p. 118). Quoting Lope out of context, Colmenares therefore makes it look as if he is indeed bowing down to the vulgar tastes of the masses rather than vindicating the value of pleasure, banter, variety, simplicity, and, above all, rhetoric, in aesthetics.¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ Colmenares' readiness to read Lope as a superficial writer has indeed been the predominant view of the popular playwright until very recently. See Alexander Samson and Jonathan Thacker, *A Companion to Lope*.

Since Colmenares looks down on the taste of the masses and their ‘low class pleasures’, he refuses to listen carefully to the opinions and preferences of the new consumer public. Lope foresees that academics such as Colmenares will be unable to open up themselves to such novelties, which is why he claims, in the speech’s final stanza, “oye atento, y del arte no disputéis” (“Don’t hold debates about the ancient rules; / go to the plays, and play close heed” vv. 387-88; transl. Dixon). Hence Colmenares insists that he does not understand why Lope downplays the superiority of poetic obscurity in favour of rhetorical clarity and simplicity. But Lope replies that the value of *imitatio* is lost if rhetoric is abused, and indeed overcomplicated, in poetry. In his correspondence with Colmenares, printed in *Filomena* (“Sobre la poesía culta”, 1621), Lope makes his argument, reproducing gendered assumptions of his time, in the following terms:

Pues hacer toda la composición figuras es tan vicioso y indigno como si una mujer que se afeita, habiéndose de poner la color en las mejillas, lugar tan propio, se las pusiese en la nariz, en la frente, y en las orejas. Pues esto, señor excelentísimo, es una composición llena de estos tropos y figuras, un rostro colorado a manera de los ángeles de la trompeta del Juicio, o de los vientos de los mapas, sin dejar campos al blanco, al cándido, al cristalino, a las venas, a los realces, a lo que los pintores llaman encarnación (“Censura de Lope de Vega Carpio”, quoted in Tubau, p. 180).

To make the whole composition out of rhetorical figures is as vicious and undignified as if a woman who puts up her make up, having to put the colour on her cheeks, a place so proper, puts such colour on her nose, on her forehead, and on her ears. None other than this, esteemed sir, is a composition that is full of these tropes and figures, a red face in the manner of the angels of the trumpet of Judgment, or of the winds of the maps, without allowing for the white, the pale, the crystalline, the veins, the highlights, that which painters call incarnation.

The main point that Lope is raising against *culteranismo* poetics is that the sheer obscurity of its language, grammar, and syntax hinder the audience’s immersion in the world of fiction. To that end, he uses two closely related metaphors: first, a comparison between Góngora’s style and a woman who fail to apply make up in the socially appropriate way she “should”; second, and perhaps more elegantly, Lope refers to “lo que los pintores llaman encarnación” (“that which the painters call incarnation”).

In visual terms, Lope's clarity paints more effectively the nuances and vividness of imaginary physical bodies; this calls forth strong feelings of attachment in the audience which *culteranismo* poetics cannot achieve. Lope agrees that, in some very concrete cases, writers are warranted to use a very difficult rhetorical style; but this is only acceptable in cases in which, unlike in Góngora's poems, the subject matter is of a corresponding difficulty. In general, Lope stands firm against obscurity; in the rhetorical tradition in which he was schooled, clarity and its corresponding appeal to the public's emotional attachments is, after all, a prerequisite for the rhetor's task of persuasion. To put it in the words of Quintilian quoted by Lope: "Consuetudo vero certissima loquendi magistra, utendumque plane sermone ut numo cui publica forma est" ("Sin duda alguna, la costumbre es la manera más segura de hablar, y es claro que debe utilizarse el lenguaje como una moneda, que tiene valor público", "Censura", in Tubau, p. 177; "Without any doubt, custom is the safest way of speaking, and it is clear that language should be used as currency, which has public value", the translation is mine). From this perspective, the main problem with Góngora's poetry is that it obstructs the task of *imitatio* and therefore makes more difficult the audience's immersion in the artwork, which allows for their exploration of feelings and attachments. Instead, the enjoyment of obscure poetry is based upon the elitist demonstration that the reader has been schooled in the Western tradition and that he has the intellectual capability to decipher the puzzle.¹⁶²

Lope's argument on rhetorical clarity in his address to Colmenares is consistent with the views he had already expressed in the *Arte nuevo* (1609). In both cases, clarity is vindicated because it vividly engages the public's attention. In contrast, Lope points out that attachment is repressed in the rhetoric of, above all, the imitators of Góngora's

¹⁶² Lope also claims that Góngora's incomprehensibility fails to contribute to a shared literary tradition that future writers can model ("Censura de Lope de Vega Carpio", in Tubau, p. 180-81).

poetry. These *culteranista* poems call for a slow work of deciphering a subject matter which neither provides pleasure nor contains a higher wisdom. Lope repeatedly highlights his conviction that art's main goal should be to magnify the public's attachment and immersion in the world of fiction, which in turn produces pleasure. This is how he puts it in the *Arte nuevo*:

Porque considerando que la cólera
de un español sentado no se templa
si no le representan en dos horas
hasta el Final Juicio desde el Génesis,
yo hallo que, si allí se ha de dar gusto,
con lo que más se consigue es lo más justo (vv. 205-11).

I find the fiery temper of a Spaniard
who sits to see a play will not be calmed
unless he's told a story, in two hours,
from Genesis right up to Judgment Day;
and I say, if the aim is to delight,
whatever serves that purpose must be right (Dixon, vv. 205-10).

The passage highlights Lope's commitment and fruitful contribution to the rhetorical tradition: even the precept of verisimilitude — otherwise defended by Lope in the case of the language of prince and lackey figures —, can be sacrificed on the altar of persuasion. What matters most in Lope's poetics is to engage and enrapture the audience: given that some theatregoers would have to sit down for as long as two hours, Lope tells us that it is just and of common sense that the show enlivens their spirits. The point is that the theatre should evolve “to reflect the society for which it [is] written” and that it should respect the entertainment that comes along with being immersed in fiction (Thacker, *A Companion to Lope*, p. 116, 118). Hence verisimilitude can be disrespected if this increases the audience's attachment, to the extent that the *comedia* unabashedly represents events as distant as the Last Judgement and the Genesis in the brief time of two hours: “en dos horas / hasta el Final Juicio desde el Génesis” (vv. 207-08). Without pleasure and entertainment, fiction cannot hope to elicit identification and

rapture. This is the only way, according to Lope, for fiction to play an instructive and educative role in both its aristocratic and “vulgar” audiences:

Los casos de la honra son los mejores,
 porque mueven con fuerza a toda gente;
 con ellos las acciones virtuosas,
 que la virtud es dondequiera amada,
 pues [que] vemos, si acaso un recitante
 hace un traidor, es tan odioso a todos
 que lo que va a comprar no se lo venden,
 y huye el vulgo dél cuando le encuentra;
 y si es leal, le prestan y convidan,
 y hasta los principales le honran y aman,
 le buscan, le regalan y le aclaman (vv. 327-337).

Matters of honour are the best as subjects;
 they powerfully move all kinds of folk;
 and so do acts of high heroic virtue,
 for virtue is admired [everywhere];
 and so we see that if an actor happens
 to play a traitor, everyone so hates him
 that when he goes out shopping they won't serve him,
 and common people shun him when they meet him;
 but if he plays a hero, all acclaim him,
 and even men of rank bow down before him,
 seek out, reward, make much of and adore him (Dixon, vv. 327-337).

Lope is here exaggerating his point so as to underscore the blurring division between fact and fiction: he tells us that both the masses and the elites confuse actor with character, albeit in different ways. Whereas the *vulgo* vividly identify themselves with traitors to the extent that they treat badly the actors themselves, both the higher and lower classes identify themselves with “good” characters (vv. 335-36). The point is that both lay and cultured audiences share a natural rejection of vice and a love for virtue; this is emphasised by the fact that virtuous characters elicit love whilst traitors produce hate (vv. 331-32). Lope thus remains unworried that fiction might corrupt its audience and insists that rapture becomes part of the process by which the *comedia*’s audience learn to follow the path of virtue (vv. 327, 330). According to this argument, the greater the audience’s involvement in fiction, the greater its power will be.

Colmenares identifies well the nature of his disagreement with Lope: whereas the playwright vindicates the role of rhetoric in aesthetics, the scholar insists that poetry should rise above the constraints of rhetoric. Poetry, given its “higher” nature, should break free from the audience’s impositions and, consequently, from the tradition of rhetoric. For Colmenares, poetry is, above all, an intellectual activity: it provides its readers with a concrete object of analysis so that they can exercise their skills of decipherment. For Lope, in contrast, the point is not to recreate an intellectual exercise, but to address and therefore capture the emotional attachments of theatregoers, who are invited to get carried away by the fiction. Upon Colmenares’ insistence on difficulty in poetry, Lope mockingly refers to his passion for the unknown:

le suplico [...] no juzque de su passion, ni el haber tenido en tanto desprecio lo que a mí me paga versos que entiende [...] o no le agradan, si no los entiende por fáciles, como los que defiende por difíciles, pues dice que va a preguntar al autor de aquellos poemas que llaman cultos lo que no entiende, que debe de ser todo; de donde se infiere que defiende sin entender y que alaba, como muchos, aquello sólo en que halla dificultad (“Respuesta a la carta antecedente”, in Tubau, p. 202).

I beg you [...] do not judge with your passion, nor from the fact that you hold in so much contempt those who pay me for verses that they understand [...] you do not like these verses, if you do not understand them because they are easy, like the ones you defend only due to their difficulty, since you say that you are going to ask the author of those so-called cultivated poems that which you do not understand, which must be everything; whence it can be inferred that you defend without understanding and that you praise, like many, only that in which you find difficulty.

Lope insists that the *vulgo* at least understands the plot and subject of what they watch, whilst Colmenares wishes to ask the author himself about the meaning of his verses. This attitude is ridiculed by Lope, who mockingly tells him that, following his logic to its last consequences, Góngora’s sublime poetic creations will die with him, for no one else will understand them (“Respuesta”, in Tubau, pp. 202-03). From Lope’s point of view, Colmenares’s position makes little sense because it fails to respect the immediacy of fiction and instead encourages the audience/reader to take a detached position — a

position rich in haughtiness which would of course be expected from a *licenciado*.¹⁶³ If Colmenares took a different attitude, Lope mockingly suggests, he might then realise that the attachment which drives him towards Góngora in the first place is the passion for obscurity.

To sum up, the issue with obscurity is that it represses the audience's immersion in the world of fiction and instead encourages them to take the role of a scholarly interpreter. Góngora's poetry reinforces this attitude by constantly thwarting and cooling down the reader's direct access to the story. Hence *Soledades* and *Polifemo* require of the reader a slow pace filled up with interruptions, which make both poems the ideal objects for readers who thrive on difficulty and intellectual challenges. The overemphasis on difficulty, however, ultimately disorients even educated readers such as Colmenares himself, who fails to engage with the text in its own terms and instead is tempted to move beyond the text towards the author, as he himself avows in writing:

Confieso llanamente, señor, que en viendo estos dos poemas [*Soledades* and *Polifemo*] que tan alterada traen a la república poética, me llevaron la afición algunas cosas que de ellos entendí, y las que yo, como poco erudito, no alcancé, me declaró su autor a boca; donde conocí con cuánta cordura respondió Sexto Cecilio a Fabronio sobre la escuridad de las *Doce Tablas*: “Obscuritates earum non assignemus culpaе scribentium, sed inscitae non assequentium” [“Sus oscuridades no las asignemos a un defecto de los que escriben sino a la ignorancia de los que no comprenden”, transl. by Tubau] (“Respuesta a la censura antecedente”, in Tubau, p. 187).

I confess plainly, sir, that in seeing these two poems [*Soledades* and *Polifemo*] which so much disturbance have brought to the poetic republic, my interests enlightened me about some things which I understood, and those that I, as lesser erudite, did not reach, their author declared them to me; whence I learned how wisely Sextus Cecilio responded to Fabronio about the obscurity of the Twelve Tables: “Obscuritates earum non assignemus culpaе scribentium, sed inscitae non assequentium” (“We should not assign its obscurities to a flaw of those who wrote them, but to the ignorance of those who do not understand them”).

¹⁶³ In the Spanish Golden Age, the term “licenciado” (scholar) was often used with mocking connotations. See, amongst others, Miguel de Cervantes y Saavedra, “El licenciado vidriera”, in *Novelas ejemplares*, ed. by Jorge García López, Biblioteca Clásica de la Real Academia (Barcelona: Círculo de Lectores, 2013), pp. 265-303; and *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, edición del instituto Cervantes (1605, 1615, 2015), ed. by F. Rico, J. Forradellas and G. Pontón (Barcelona: RAE, Espasa-Calpe and Círculo de Lectores, 2015).

Rapture, in Lope's aesthetics, becomes a tool with which to challenge the audience's established beliefs. We have seen how, in the *Arte nuevo*, he plays with scholarly attachments so as to persuade the learned public of the Academia de Madrid into a position they would be expected to reject. In contrast, Colmenares defends poetry as an elitist endeavour attracting readers from a higher social class; unlike the *comedia*, this version of poetry requires training, cultivation, and education to be understood. Intelligent and mature readers, in his opinion, enjoy artforms that require them to play the role of an intellectual decipherer.

Fray Manuel Guerra y Ribera on Calderón's Aesthetics

One year after Calderón's death, Fray Manuel Guerra y Ribera wrote an *aprobación* (approval) to the publication of the fifth volume of the works of the playwright, entitled *Aprobación del reverendo padre Fray Manuel Guerra y Ribera a la verdadera quinta parte de Calderón* (1682). The approval is relevant for this study because it puts forward an unapologetic vindication of attachment in aesthetics in general and in Calderón in particular. Initially, the friar builds on the Horatian *utile et dulce*; however, he radicalises the emphasis on attachment in ways that transgress the Horatian motto. As we will see, the experience of feeling moved by fiction is valued more highly than the moral lessons that it might teach. Building on a tradition already present in early-seventeenth century defenders of poetry such as Francisco Cascales, Francisco de Barreda, and José Pellicer de Tovar, Fray Manuel extols fiction without much worry that, at least as given form in Calderón's plays, it may carry a corrupting influence for their audience.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ For an analysis of Golden Age poetic treatises, see Kluge, "Theory of Poetry", in *Literature and Historiography*, pp. 63-94.

Fray Manuel begins by adamantly emphasizing a humanity's need for play and entertainment, for which he provides the authority of Aquinas: "*Ludus est necessarius ad conservationem vita humana*: que es necesario algún juego para la conversación y conservación de la vida humana" (in Sánchez Escribano and Porqueras Mayo, p. 321; *Ludus est necessarius ad conservationem vita humana*: that some play is necessary for the conversation and conservation of human life", the translation is mine). His translation of the Latin *conservationem* into both "conversación" (conversation) and "conservación" (conservation) not only makes for a beautiful alliteration, but also anticipates his argument, i.e.: the *comedia* provides the best form of entertainment, as it is of course shaped by dialogue. He insists on Aquinas' authority because he feels the need to justify that delight and entertainment are *not* a lower class of need:

Debo el fundamento a quien se lo debo todo, que es a Santo Tomás; no dijo que era algún juego útil sino necesario, porque lo que es necesario es indispensable y conveniente. Conviene entretenir los ánimos, o cansados o ociosos (in Sánchez Escribano and Porqueras Mayor, p. 321).

I owe the foundation to him to whom I owe everything, that is Saint Thomas; he did not say that some games were useful but that they were necessary, because what is necessary is indispensable and convenient. It is convenient to entertain the spirits, either tired or idle.

If we briefly turn back to Colmenares' take on Góngora's obscurity, it does make sense that Fray Manuel feels obliged to justify his argument with a classical authority. As I have argued, aristocratic and upper class defenders of literature approached with suspicion the entertainment of the *comedia*, since it provided the lay public, in their argument, nothing else than a superficial distraction from weightier matters. Fray Manuel instead insists, contrarily, that entertainment is a prerequisite for human flourishing: not only does it delight both tired and idle, but it also lifts the spirits of those who are restless and prone to complaining. The friar admits, of course, that the supreme form of entertainment is none other than the Bible. Whereas in other books he finds conversation with other men, in the Bible he is addressed directly by God:

“[mientras que] en los otros libros me hablan hombres, en la biblia me habla Dios” (in Sánchez Escribano and Porqueras Mayo, p. 323; “whilst I am addressed by men in other books, in the Bible I am addressed by God”, the translation is mine). Yet he immediately nuances his statement and humbly acknowledges that he cannot impose his own aesthetic preferences on others:

Como no entienden de razones los gustos, tampoco entienden los genios. No hay duda, que en buen aire de razón deben mover más los sermones que las comedias; pero ¿qué aconsejaran los autores que impugnan las comedias a quien llegara a sus pies y le revelara, que le movían más las comedias que los sermones? Debo creer de su grande prudencia y sabiduría, que le procurarían persuadir a que los sermones tenían la verdadera moción por naturaleza, y la comedia por accidental y extrínseca; pero si rendido a la experiencia volvería a asegurar, que no se verificaba esta moción de los sermones en él, sino la de las comedias, debo creer que no le estorbaran la ocasión de sus progresos (in Sánchez Escribano and Porqueras Mayo, p. 323).

Just as taste does not understand reason, neither do geniuses. There is no doubt that, following the good spirit of reason, sermons should move more than *comedias*; but what would authors who challenge *comedias* advise whoever came to their feet and revealed to them that he is more moved by *comedias* than by sermons? I must believe that, due to their great prudence and wisdom, they would try to persuade him that sermons contain the true motion by nature, and the *comedia* by accident and extrinsic; but if, kneeling to evidence, he would once again ensure that this motion of the sermons was not verified in him, but instead that of the *comedias*, I must believe that they would not hinder his chance to progress.

Fray Manuel tells us that the aim of “los sermones” (sermons) is to enthrall the audience; at the same time, he admits that some might not be as moved as others by the religious ritual. Individual predisposition — which he calls “genio” (temperament) — inclines many, alternatively, to feel more moved by the *comedias*. Doubtless: sermons represent a “higher” version of enthrallment and for entertainment; and yet the friar insists, in the above quote, that the experience of feeling moved should also be respected in its dramatic form.¹⁶⁵

It is only once the friar has made a general case for the entertainment and enthrallment that he turns to Calderón, who comes to represent, in his argument, the *comedia*’s best craftsman. He begins by extolling the playwright with the love and

¹⁶⁵ To further justify his case for theatre, Fray Manuel compares the violent entertainment (“fiesta”) of bullfighting — which leaves its participants either physically exhausted or dead — to the harmlessness of the *comedia* (“Aprobación”, in Sánchez Escribano and Porqueras Mayo, p. 324).

affection of a dear friend writing an obituary for the deceased. Yet this emotional atmosphere does not cloud Fray Manuel's critical abilities, and he makes a very compelling case for Calderón's dramas:

Este monstruo de ingenio dio en sus comedias muchos imposibles vencidos. Noten cuántos. Casó con dulcísimo artificio la verosimilitud con el engaño, lo posible con lo fabuloso, lo fingido con lo verdadero, lo amatorio con lo decente, lo majestuoso con lo tratable, lo heroico con lo inteligible, lo grave con lo dulce, lo sentencioso con lo corriente, lo conceptuoso con lo claro, la doctrina con el gusto, la moralidad con la dulzura, la gracia con la discreción, el aviso con la templanza, la reprehensión sin herida, las advertencias sin molestia, los documentos sin pesadez; y en fin, los desengaños tan caídos, y los golpes tan suavizados, que sólo su entendimiento pudo dar tantos imposibles vencidos (in Sánchez Escribano and Porqueras Mayo, p. 325).

This monster of genius accomplished impossible feats in his *comedias*. Notice how many. With delightful craftsmanship he married verisimilitude with deception, that which is possible with that which is fabulous, that which is feigned with that which is true, that which is amatory with that which is decent, that which is majestic with that which is sociable, that which is heroic with that which is intelligible, that which is serious with that which is sweet, that which is sententious with that which is common, that which is artificial with that which is clear, doctrine with good taste, morality with sweetness, grace with discretion, warning with temperance, reprehension without wound, warnings without discomfort, information without heaviness; and in short, the awakenings [*desengaños*] so pleasurable, and the blows so softened, that only his understanding could vanquish so many impossible feats.

Fray Manuel emphasises — as A.W. Schlegel would do two centuries after him — the masterful craftsmanship of the Spanish playwright: his artistic feats, he tells the reader, are so great that they make concrete, in the form of art, what would otherwise be impossible. But, unlike in Schlegel's analysis, religion is not the reason behind Calderón's greatness (see Chapter One). Instead, Fray Manuel argues that the main quality of Calderón is what he calls being a "monstruo de ingenio" (monster of wit). He immediately elucidates what he means by giving a full account of the "imposibles" (impossible feats) accomplished in the playwright's dramas, which are described with reference to marriage. This metaphor allows Fray Manuel to make his case for Calderón's symbolic union of opposites. And yet, in his argument, there is no reference to the dialectical overcoming of opposites common to much post-Hegelian criticism — including, of course, that of Jena Romanticism.

The first two marriages in the above quote are those of “la verosimilitud con el engaño” (verisimilitude with deceit) and of “lo posible con lo fabuloso” (the possible with the fictitious); in both cases, the emphasis is on the union between reality and fiction, which is made possible thanks to Calderón’s “dulcísimo artificio” (delightful craftsmanship). But the Friar does not stop short there and goes on to describe a list — or, to put it in Benjaminian vocabulary, a constellation — of marriages that include all kind of impossibilities; even if, in purely grammatical terms, his clauses do not always agree with the sentence’s main verb. By way of example, he says that Calderón “casó [...] la reprehensión sin herida” (he married reprehension without wound) and “las advertencias sin molestia” (warnings without discomfort); and yet the point comes through powerfully, namely, that the playwright juxtaposes delight and entertainment alongside moral teachings. He summarises his position with a final reference to two further “Calderonian marriages” which do not add up well from a purely grammatical standpoint: “casó [...] en fin, los desengaños tan caídos, y los golpes tan suavizados” (“he married [...] in short, the awakenings so pleasurable, and the blows so softened”).

As is well-known by specialists, *desengaño* is a term of rich philosophical connotations in the Spanish tradition.¹⁶⁶ The fruitfulness of the term was made possible by the opposition between *ser* (“being”) and *parecer* (“appearing”) — that is, between more and less authentic versions of reality — which plays a central role in Spanish seventeenth-century culture.¹⁶⁷ Regardless of how different authors interpret the term, it always implies a change of state toward a more authentic reality, that is, from the false

¹⁶⁶ See, amongst others, Hansgerd Schulte, *El desengaño: Wort und Thema in der spanischen Literatur des Goldenen Zeitalters*, Freiburger Schriften zur romanischen Philologie, 17 (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1969); and Mercedes Allendesalazar, “Desengaño”, in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. by Barbara Cassin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 206-10;

¹⁶⁷ On the neo-Stoic and neo-Sceptic roots of the *ser* and *parecer* dichotomy in the Spanish Baroque, see Jeremy Robbins, “The Arts of Perception: The Epistemological Mentality of the Spanish Baroque, 1580-1720”, Special Issue of the *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, vol. 82, 8 (2005). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1475382052000345894>.

realm of Appearances to the truth of Being. Within this framework, Fray Manuel's last two "marriages" are meant to summarise the audience's experience faced with Calderón's dramas. Hence the strength and power associated to *desengaño* and *golpes* are coupled with delight and smoothness: although established patterns of thought are broken down and new life is infused into what used to be fossilised, distant, and unchangeable, this does not represent a painful experience for Calderón's audience. On the contrary: the playwright accomplishes the difficult task of producing pleasurable awakenings, the underlying assumption being that those *desengaños* which strike too hard and produce pain will trump the audience's engagement and block their learning process.

All in all, the aim of this detour into Fray Manuel's obituary has been to show that his literary criticism betrays opposing assumption to that of Benjamin's *Ursprung*. For the friar, delight, entertainment, and the feeling of being enthralled, elated, or moved by fiction — especially if crafted with Calderón's greatness — are not politically or ethically suspicious. Calderón's ability to move the audience is repeatedly championed because the friar considers that the rapture of fiction should be acknowledged, cherished, and cultivated. Taking the lead from Fray Manuel's literary criticism, I now turn to selected passages from *La vida es sueño* and *La dama duende* so as to spell out the marriage between rapture and critique in the aesthetics of Calderón.

LA VIDA ES SUEÑO

The following analysis focuses on Rosaura's first encounter with Segismundo; Segismundo awakening in court; his realisation of the dream-like nature of life; and the closing scene in which the Soldier is imprisoned. The aim is to outline the role of *admiratio* in what could be called Calderón's aesthetics of the monstrous as well as to argue against traditional readings that *La vida es sueño* uncritically embodies Counter-

Reformation doctrine. Such ‘traditional readings’ can be divided into two categories: first, those of Hispanists who interpret the play with neo-Stoic and Thomist lenses; second, that of Benjamin in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. Both fail to acknowledge the rich connotations of *admiratio* in Calderón’s aesthetics and, consequently, both misconstrue the structure of the play’s dramatic edifice as ideological, uncritical, and politically regressive. On the one hand, *admiratio* unsettles the reason/passion divide which, in a neo-Stoic/Thomist reading, secures the order of the realm through Segismundo’s moral education. On the other, I show — contra Benjamin — that the aesthetic attachment called forth by Calderón in his plays, which here takes the form of *admiratio*, does not encourage uncritical passivity; in contrast, it challenges the audience by grabbing their attention and then upsetting their expectations. In doing so, Calderón’s *admiratio* begs thought-provoking questions and clears the ground for change and transformations in the play’s characters.

The play tells the story of Segismundo, Prince of Poland, who has been imprisoned in a tower by his father, King Basilio, with the aim of protecting the Kingdom. An avid astrologer, when Segismundo is born he reads in the stars that the Prince is set to become a tyrant. But, as the years go by, Basilio feels remorseful and gives his son a chance. He sets up a test: his vassal Clotaldo will make Segismundo sleep with a drug, wake him up in court, and let him know about his princely nature. If Segismundo behaves duly, as a prince should, he will be granted all earthly honours; if he does not, he will be thrown back to the tower. Full of anger and fury as a consequence of his upbringing, Segismundo cannot but resoundingly fail the test: he defenestrates a lackey and almost commits rape against Rosaura, who is disguised as a lady servant. The Prince is immediately returned to the tower, where he begins to consider that reality is but a dream. This is understandable from his position: for a fleeting moment, his life experience has shifted from utmost powerlessness to waking

up as the heir to Poland's throne, only to wake up again back in prison. The news of Basilio's test, however, reaches the ears of the people of Poland, who claim their true Prince. They liberate Segismundo and wage war against Basilio. However, when Basilio's army falls, Segismundo challenges the prophecy and pardons his father whilst also reclaiming the throne of Poland. In a controversial last scene, the new King imprisons—in the same tower where he grew up—the leading soldier of the people's revolution which had liberated him.¹⁶⁸

Segismundo's storyline is intertwined with that of Rosaura, which has been often, and misleadingly, called a "subplot". Jeremy Lawrance describes the parallelisms between both characters with the following words: "[their] fates are intimately interlocked, but the nature of [their] connection is shifting, tantalisingly unsure right up to the last moment" ("La vida es sueño", p. 81). Like Segismundo, Rosaura begins the play in a state of gracelessness: she has been dishonoured by Astolfo, who promised her marriage and yet abandoned her, and has therefore lost her *honra* ("honour"), that is, her identity as a social being. Rosaura, however, is not ready to accept the situation and goes all the way to the Polish court looking for him. Against all odds the first person she encounters is Segismundo, imprisoned in his tower, who finds himself immersed in his own abstract ponderings. He is lamenting, from a philosophical standpoint, his lack of freedom. From then on, their lives remain bound together and mark key turning points in the plot; and yet Segismundo fails to recognise her identity, due to her multiple

¹⁶⁸ The ending of the play has been subject to heated discussion. See Harold B. Hall, "Segismundo and the Rebel Soldier", *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 45 (1968), 189-200; replied by Alexander A. Parker, "Calderón's Rebel Soldier and Poetic Justice", *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 46.2 (1969), 120-07; and again Hall, "Poetic Justice in *La vida es sueño*: A Further Comment", *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 46.2 (1969), 128-31. See also Daniel L. Heiple, "The Tradition Behind the Punishment of the Rebel Soldier in *La vida es sueño*", *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 50 (1973), 1-17; for a more recent account, A. Robert Lauer, "El leal traidor de *La vida es sueño* de Calderón", *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 77.1 (2000), 133-44; and Jeremy Lawrance's remarks, which I elaborate later on, about Segismundo's 'monstruous' final transformation in his "La vida es sueño", in *A Companion to Calderón de la Barca*, ed. by Roy Norton and Jonathan Thacker, Tamesis Companions (Martelsham: Tamesis Books, 2021), pp. 85-89. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv24t9nd.11>.

disguises, until the very end.¹⁶⁹ When Segismundo finally becomes King, however, he chooses not to marry Rosaura; in a surprising turn of events which defies the genre's expectations, she is engaged to Astolfo, the courtier who had initially abandoned her.

In neo-Stoic and Thomist readings, *La vida es sueño* develops from a state of chaos into one of order.¹⁷⁰ There is a grain of truth to this reading, for the play dramatises the anxieties and potential disarray caused by unruly kingly succession. Basilio overlooks his duty as sovereign and therefore as guarantor of the realm's order; he fails to ensure that, when he grows older, a legitimate successor will take his place; and that this process will unfold without violence. Instead, the King becomes pensive and superstitious; he feels entitled to read God's providence in the stars, which (mistakenly) tell him that his son will become a tyrant and violently overthrow him. By trusting his 'scientific' knowledge in astrology, the king ends up providing the worst kind of education for his son, who is the rightful heir to the throne. He therefore disturbs the 'natural' succession of power from one generation to the next. Critics have therefore

¹⁶⁹ On the relationship and multiples echoes between Rosaura and Segismundo, see Albert E. Sloman, "The Structure of Calderón's *La vida es sueño*", *Modern Language Review*, 48 (1953), 292-300; William Whitby, "Rosaura's Role in the Structure of *La vida es sueño*", *Hispanic Review*, 28 (1960), 16-27. I agree with Lawrance ("La vida es sueño", p. 82) that the most illuminating study on this topic remains Roberto González Echevarría, "El 'monstruo de una especie y otra': *La vida es sueño*, III, 2, 725", in *Calderon. Códigos, Monstruo, Icones*, ed. Javier Herrero, Co-Textes 3 ([Montpellier]: Centre d'Études et de Recherches Sociocritiques, Avril 1982), pp. 27-58.

¹⁷⁰ This interpretative tradition assumes that *La vida es sueño* embodies old-fashioned Tridentine values. In the turn of the twentieth century in Spain, Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo became an important mouthpiece for this view; see *Calderón y su teatro. Conferencias dadas en el Círculo de la Unión Católica* [1881, 8 parts separately paginated], 3rd edn, Colección de Escritores Castellanos 21, Obras Completas 7, Madrid: [n. publ.], 1884). This view also became prominent in the Anglophone world: see Alexander A. Parker, "The Approach to the Spanish Drama of the Golden Age", *The Tulane Drama Review*, vol. 4.1 (1959), 42-59; "Towards a Definition of Calderonian Tragedy", *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 39 (1962), 222-37; "Calderón's Rebel Soldier and Poetic Justice", *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 46 (1969), 120-7; *The Mind and Art of Calderón: Essays on the Comedia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and Paul Lewis-Smith, *Calderón de la Barca: La vida es sueño*, Critical Guides to Spanish Texts, 63 (London: Grant & Cutler, 1998). Calderón's dramas continue to be read in contrast to a 'progressive' version of 'modernity': see, for instance, Joachim Küpper, *Diskurs-Renovatio bei Lope de Vega and Calderón. Untersuchungen zum spanischen Barockdrama. Mit einer Skizze zur Evolution der Diskurse in Mittelalter, Renaissance und Manierismus*, Romanica Monacensia 32 (Tübingen: Günter Narr, 1990); "The Case of Rosaura's Honor, and the Problem of Modernity (*La vida es sueño*)", *Modern Language Notes*, 124. 2 (2009), 509-17. A similar view is sketched in Pedro Ruiz Pérez, *El siglo del arte nuevo*, in *Historia de la literatura española*, ed. by José-Carlos Mainer and Gonzalo Pontón, 9 vols (Barcelona: Crítica, 2010-13), III, which refers to the intrinsic harmony of the play (p. 332). Gonzalo Pontón recently defended a similar reading of Calderón in "Séneca y la tragedia de horror en Europa", *La tragedia I*, Institut d'Humanitats de Barcelona, 14.11.2018. Lecture.

pointed out his self-centered interests: when he decides to give Segismundo an ‘opportunity’ to challenge the prophecy he has read in the stars, Basilio knows beforehand that the test will fail.¹⁷¹

Francisco Ruiz Ramón shrewdly compares the play with the myth of the Greek Uranus and the Roman Saturn, representing the reverse model of the Oedipus myth. The conflict, he tells us, lies in the father’s inability to cope with the passing of time and therefore to acknowledge that his progeny will eventually outlive him and overcome his power.¹⁷² This illuminating comparison explains well Basilio’s fears: chaos, from this perspective, becomes a consequence of humanity’s lack of respect towards the “laws of nature” —i.e., that the son Segismundo will eventually outlive his father.¹⁷³ Later on, I argue that *La vida es sueño* condemns the human search for order, meaning, and constancy as futile and even arrogant. Just as Basilio’s efforts to interpret and control destiny fail, so the audience’s expectations about the play’s dénouement are repeatedly upset. I will show that the play’s “happy” ending — that is, Segismundo’s restoration of orderly and legitimate sovereignty — could be compared to a façade rich in fissures. It elicits in the audience, to say it with Lawrance, a “bitter sweet” feeling (“*La vida es sueño*”, p. 86). Accordingly, my reading will emphasise the limitations of Benjamin’s architectonic metaphor on Catholic art in general and on *La vida es sueño* in particular. As mentioned earlier, the critic compares Catholic artforms to a building whose ornamentation blinds the visitor to the structural keystone of the edifice; in so doing, it encourages the visitor to abandon her critical abilities and instead let go and delight in

¹⁷¹ José María Ruano de la Haza, “Introducción bibliográfica y crítica”, in Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *La vida es sueño*, Clásicos 208 (Madrid: Castalia, 1994), pp. 57-61.

¹⁷² Francisco Ruiz Ramón, “1.1 El mito de Urano”, in *Paradigmas del teatro clásico español*, Crítica y estudios literarios (Madrid: Cátedra, 1997), pp. 107-13. See also Kluge, “Oedipus Christianus: *La vida es sueño*”, in *Baroque, Allegory, Comedia*, pp. 257-86.

¹⁷³ For an analysis of Basilio’s role in the play, see Roberto González Echevarría, “Infinito e improvisación en *La vida es sueño*”, *Recial*, 9.14 (2018), 00-00. DOI: 10.53971/2718.658x.v9.n14.22691.

aesthetic pleasure. But I will show that the play's aesthetic pleasure promotes, rather than hinders, the critical abilities of the audience.

Segismundo's education has commonly been framed in Neo-Stoic and Thomist terms, the argument being that the Prince learns to overcome his uncritical and chaotic passions in favour of divine reason, which becomes the only guarantee of order and structure in the play's chaotic world.¹⁷⁴ By way of example, critics point to the fact that Segismundo restrains his lust for Rosaura, whom he marries to Astolfo, in order to secure the stability of the realm.¹⁷⁵ Calderón would therefore portray Catholic doctrine: whereas passion leads to chaos and to a "self-centered and limited vision", reason provides order and harmony, i.e. a perspective from above.¹⁷⁶ The mastering of reason is doubtless a difficult process, which is why Alexander Parker claims that the crux of Calderón's tragedies lies in the divorce of the imagination—ruled by passion—and reality, in which Reason rules sovereign ("A Calderonian Conception of Tragedy", p. 209).

El mayor monstruo, los celos provides a case in point: as a consequence of the Tetrarch's inability to control his reason, and dominated by jealousy, he fulfills the play's omen and loses both his Kingdom and the love of his life. The play carries significant parallels to *La vida es sueño*, but a major difference stands out: whilst the Herod play is set in pagan times, the story of Segismundo takes place in a Christian

¹⁷⁴ See Lewis-Smith, *Calderón de la Barca*, p. 29, 98-99, and Ruano de la Haza, "Introducción", pp. 48-49. A reading of Calderón's Thomism can be found in Everett W. Hesse, "Calderón's Concept of the Perfect Prince in *La vida es sueño*", in *Critical Essays on the Theatre of Calderón*, ed. by Bruce Wardropper (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1965), pp. 114-33. See also David Jonathan Hildner, *Reason and Passions in the 'Comedias' of Calderón*, Purdue University Monographs in Romance Languages 11 (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, PA: J. Benjamins, 1982), esp. "The Thomist Scheme of Reason and Passions", pp. 11-28.

¹⁷⁵ To name but one amongst the many critics who emphasise this argument, see Lewis-Smith, p. 98-99.

¹⁷⁶ Alexander Parker makes this point in his analysis of Calderón's *El pintor de su deshonra*, but highlights that "many other examples could be given to show that in the Calderonian world all moral evil lies in the divorce of the imagination from reality", see "A Calderonian Conception of Tragedy: *El pintor de su deshonra*", in *The Mind and Art of Calderón: Essays on the Comedias* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 196-212 (p. 209).

world.¹⁷⁷ Accordingly, Segismundo is said to raise to the task: the Prince, in this narrative, learns to dismiss temptations and instead behaves virtuously against the backdrop of eternity.¹⁷⁸ By the end of the play, not only does he forgive his father in a compassionate and Christian manner, but he also restrains his lust towards Rosaura and instead marries her to Astolfo, whilst also marrying himself to Estrella against the audience's expectations. In the name of *ratio status*, Segismundo would therefore learn to set aside his own egotistical interests and, by doing so, to overcome his father's mistakes.

Critics who defend this reading argue that the play's dream metaphor ensures the Prince's moral behaviour: it is only once Segismundo realises that this world is all but illusion and that beyond lies a more authentic reality that he learns to set his eyes on eternity and therefore to behave rightly. As the Prince says in the famous monologue from Act III: "acudamos a lo eterno" (v. 795; "we must focus on the eternal", p. 147).¹⁷⁹ What Segismundo learns, then, is that the epistemological uncertainty of earthly matters proves that we are living in a dream; and that, just as we wake up from our dreams to daily life, we will also wake up to a more authentic world once we die. As I discuss in more depth below, this powerful metaphor is often taken to have reactionary connotations, since it is argued that it reinforces the status quo.¹⁸⁰ Catholic virtue

¹⁷⁷ See Parker, "Fate and Human Responsibility (1): The Problem", and "Fate and Human Responsibility (2): A Dramatic Presentation – *El mayor monstruo, los celos*", in *The Mind and Art of Calderón*, pp. 107-113, 114-130. José María Ruano de la Haza has pointed out the doctrinal differences between the plays Calderón sets before and after the coming of Christianity. See his "Introducción" in *Jealousy, the Greatest Monster = El mayor monstruo, los celos*, ed. by Ruano de la Haza and Ann Mackenzie, Aries & Phillips Hispanic Classics (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017).

¹⁷⁸ See, amongst others, Parker, "Segismundo's Tower: A Calderonian Myth", in *The Art and Mind of Calderón*, pp. 86-95; Lewis-Smith, *Calderón de la Barca: La vida es sueño*, Critical Guides to Spanish Texts, 63 (London: Grant & Cutler, 1998), p. 98-99; and Ruano de la Haza, "Introducción", pp. 48-49.

¹⁷⁹ Quotations henceforth from Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *La vida es sueño*, ed. José María Ruano de la Haza, Clásicos, 2nd ed. (Madrid: Castalia, 2000). Translations from Calderón, *Life's a Dream: A Prose Translation*, by Michael Kidd (Boulder, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2004). On contemporary English translations of *La vida es sueño*, see Jonathan Thacker, "The translation of *La vida es sueño* for a twenty-first-century anglophone audience", in *Shakespeare and the Spanish Comedia: Translation, Interpretation, and Performance. Essays in Honor of Susan L. Fischer*, ed. by Barbara Mujica (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2013), pp. 43-65.

¹⁸⁰ See Maravall, *Teatro y literatura en la sociedad barroca*, revisited ed. by Francisco Abad, Filología 21 (Barcelona: Crítica, 1990) and *La cultura del Barroco: análisis de una estructura histórica*, Letras e

allegedly becomes the compass, pointing toward the divine, with which to navigate uncertainty. When Basilio behaves as an astrologer, he is committing the sin of pride; when he imprisons Segismundo, he is tacitly believing that fate is set in stone; all of which are against Catholic theology and thereby provoke disorder in his Kingdom. In this narrative, it is only once Segismundo acts as a *prudent* Christian — that is, when he follows Thomist and neo-Stoic virtues — that order and harmony are restored.

Benjamin makes the argument that the neo-Stoic emphasis on morality is inadequate to understand the seventeenth-century drama: as we have already seen in Chapter Two, for him the authentic “Schlüsselstein” (key pillar) of the epoch’s art forms is the question whether the divine can be recreated on stage. Moreover, he also argues against reading Baroque plays with a focus on character rather than form, and hence he does not consider Segismundo’s transformation from a moral standpoint. Instead, he worries that the artistic structure of *La vida es sueño* covers up what he takes to be the infinite distance between immanence and transcendence. According to *Ursprung*, this is, after all, the fundamental “Dramenwölbung” (dramatic arc) behind Baroque drama: “Denn niemand wird die stoische Moralität, in welche das Martyrium des Helden mündet, oder die Gerechtigkeit, die das Wüten der Tyrannen auf Wahnsinn hinausführt, für ausreichend erachten, die Spannung einer eigenen Dramenwölbung zu begründen” (*Ursprung*, p. 257-58; “For no one will consider the stoic morality in which the martyrdom of the hero culminates, or the justice that directs the tyrant’s fury toward madness, as adequate to sustain the tension of a proper dramatic arc of tension”, *Origin*,

Ideas, 4th ed. (Barcelona: Ariel, 1975). For a critique of Maravall’s reading of Spanish theatre, see Jonathan Thacker, “Maravall and the Self in the *Comedia Nueva*”, *Bulletin of the Comediantes*, 65.1 (2013), 155-73; and Duncan Wheeler, “Contextualizing and Contesting José Antonio Maravall’s Theories of Baroque Culture from the Perspective of Modern-Day Performance”, *Bulletin of the Comediantes*, 65.1 (2013), 15-43. Maravall’s critical views on the *comedia* are influenced by Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of mass culture; see their *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1947).

p. 65). Benjamin is here making an explicit reference to martyr and tyrant plays, and therefore the reader might query that the quote does not seem apposite to describe the situation of *La vida es sueño*. And yet *Ursprung* provides several hints that the moral conflict “passion versus reason” is insufficient to explain, in Benjamin’s argument, the structure of Baroque drama. The key issue, as mentioned above, is whether the sacred can still — in the desolate landscape of the Baroque — be represented both in the theatre and in the historical stage of worldly matters.

A clearer reference to *La vida*, as I have argued in “Calderón’s Seven Artistic Sins” (Chapter Two), can be found in Benjamin’s claim that *Spanish* Baroque theatre provides a totalizing solution to the epoch’s theological anxiety about redemption. It does so, he argues, by finding solace in the renunciation of grace, which is substituted by the redemption offered by the sovereign within his courtly kingdom.

Und deren eine [der Notwendigkeiten, die in der theologischen Situation der Epoche beschlossen liegen], wie der Ausfall aller Eschatologie sie mit sich bringt, ist der Versuch, Trost im Verzicht auf einen Gnadenstand im Rückfall auf den bloßen Schöpfungstand zu finden [...] Denn Spaniens Drama [...] löst die Konflikte eines gnadenlosen Schöpfungstandes gewissermaßen spielerisch verkleinert im höfischen Umkreise eines als säkularisierte Heilsgewalt sich erweisenden Königtums (*Ursprung*, pp. 259-60).

And one of these necessities [enclosed within the theological situation of the epoch], consequent upon the collapse of all eschatology, is the attempt to find consolation in the renunciation of a state of grace in reversion to the bare creaturely condition [auf den bloßen Schöpfungstand] [...] Spain’s drama [...] resolves the conflicts of a graceless Creation playfully reduced, so to speak, within the compass of the court and of a kingdom that proves to be a secularized power of redemption (*Origin*, p. 68).

Several sentences below, Benjamin supports the above argument with a quote from *La vida es sueño*, provided in Johann Diederich Gries’ Romantic translation; he also embeds the quote with more remarks about the tension between profanity and sacredness in Baroque theatre:

Wenn dennoch das weltliche Drama an der Grenze der Transzendenz innehalten muß, sucht es auf Umwegen, spielhaft, ihrer sich zu vergewissern. Nirgends ist es deutlicher als im »Leben ein Traum«, wo es im Grunde eine dem Mysterium adäquate Ganzheit ist, in der der Traum als Himmel waches Leben überwölbt. Sittlichkeit ist in ihm zuständig: »Doch sey’s Traum, sey’s Wahrheit eben: / Recht thun muß ich; war’ es

Wahrheit, / Deßhalb, weil sie's ist; und wär's / Traum, um Freunde zu gewinnen / Wenn die Zeit wird uns erwecken«. Nirgend anders als bei Calderon wäre denn auch die vollendete Kunstform des barocken Trauerspiels zu studieren (*Ursprung*, p. 260).

If the secular drama must nonetheless stop at the boundaries of transcendence, then it seeks to assure itself of this in indirect ways, via play [“spielhaft”]. Nowhere is this clearer than in *Life is a Dream*, where there is fundamentally a totality worthy of the mystery play, in which the dream arches over waking life like the vault of heaven. Morality has its place there: “But whether it is dream or truth, To act rightly is what become me. If it's true, because it is so; And if it's dream, so as to win friends, When the time will awaken us.” Nowhere else than in Calderón, then, could the consummate art form of the Baroque trauerspiel be studied (*Origin*, p. 68).

The issue at stake — according to *Ursprung* — is therefore not the education of the Prince nor the neo-Stoic and Thomist demand to tame our passion and to cultivate reason. Benjamin interprets *La vida es sueño* from the theological standpoint of the medieval mystery play tradition. As a consequence of Calderón's recreation of the divine on stage, the Spaniard allegedly crafts “die vollendete Kunstform des barocken Trauerspiels” (*Ursprung*, p. 260; “the consummate art form of the Baroque Trauerspiel”, *Origin*, p. 68). In contrast to the failure — in formal terms — of German Baroque drama, Benjamin implies that Calderón's art forms are totalizing and thereby recreate and secure earthly redemption. For the literary critic, this represents a rebuttal of the Spaniard's art, which is accused of not doing justice to the reality of contemporary history. As I argued in “Calderón's Seven Artistic Sins”, Benjamin's worries that the dream metaphor of *La vida es sueño* structures with coherence and harmony the Baroque's landscape of ruins; that is, that it provides a complete formal structure—in the same way that vaults give form to buildings—to what is in fact fragmented and incomplete, to ruins and debris. Hence the play's initial chaotic state of affairs, in this reading, is finally overcome through the sacralisation of courtly life, which becomes the stage for Segismundo's redemption in the form his access to sovereign power.

In *Trauer-Spiele: Benjamin und das europäische Barockdrama* (2016), Achim Geisenhanslücke studies Benjamin's remarks about Baroque *Trauerspiele*. He devotes a

chapter to *La vida es sueño* and makes an extended effort to prove that Benjamin was right, even despite his lack of engagement with, and knowledge of, the Spanish material. Geisenhanslücke explicates Benjamin's point through an extended comparison between Calderón and Gryphius' treatment of the "life is a dream" motif.¹⁸¹ Following Benjamin, he insists on the Lutheran/Catholic opposition so as to claim that Gryphius "Welt und Ehre verlach[t]" ("1.1 Das Leben ein Traum? Zur Vergänglichkeitstopik im Barock", p. 64; laughs at the world and honour), whereas Calderón remains too attached to the political and playful intrigue of the court. Geisenhanslücke goes as far as to insist that a sense of "spielerische Bewältigung" (playful coping) is characteristic of Spanish Baroque drama and that, conversely, German Baroque drama has an "ungleich schwerfälligeren Geist" ("1.4 Lebenstraum", pp. 73-4; incomparably heavier spirit). Despite the scholar's efforts to provide sustained close readings of plays which Benjamin analyses *en passant*, it is disappointing to find out that his readings boil down to long-standing stereotypes about Spanish and German culture, i.e. the "playfulness" of the former, which is coupled with an uncritical attitude, and the "seriousness" of the latter, which is of course lauded as being more ethical and responsible.

With the aim of delineating an alternative to both the neo-Stoic/Thomist and to Benjamin's readings, in the following pages I will give a close reading of the aforementioned selected passages of *La vida es sueño*. I first turn to the state of affairs that set the conditions of *admiratio* in Act 1, beautifully set out in Rosaura's initial speech:

[Exterior de la torre de Segismundo]
Sale en lo alto de un monte Rosaura, en habito de hombre, de camino, y en representando los primeros versos va bajando.

ROSAURA: Hipogrifo violento,
 que corriste parejas con el viento,
 ¿dónde, rayo sin llama,
 pájaro sin matiz, pez sin escama,

¹⁸¹ Achim Geisenhanslücke, "1. Ursprung des Trauerspiels? Calderóns *Das Leben ist Traum*", in *Trauerspiele: Walter Benjamin und das europäische Barockdrama* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2016), pp. 61-74.

y bruto sin instinto
 natural, al confuso laberinto
 de esas desnudas peñas,
 te desbocas, te arrastras y despeñas?
 ¡Quédate en este monte,
 donde tengan los brutos su Faetonte,
 que yo, sin más camino
 que el que me dan las leyes del destino,
 ciega y desesperada,
 bajaré la cabeza enmarañada
 deste monte eminente,
 que arruga el sol el ceño de la frente!
 Mal, Polonia, recibes
 a un extranjero, pues con sangre escribes
 su entrada en tus arenas,
 y apenas llega cuando llega a penas.
 Bien mi suerte lo dice,
 mas, ¿dónde halló piedad un infelice? (vv. 1–22).

[Deserted mountainside at twilight, near the entrance to Sigismund's tower].

Enter Rossaura at the top of the mountain, disguised as a man dressed for the road. As she makes her way down the mountain, she addresses the horse from which she has just been thrown.

ROSSAURA: Monstrous hippogriff, peer of the wind, you're as ill conceived as a bolt of lightning without flame, a bird without color, a fish without scale, or a beast without instinct! Where do you speed off to bucking, lurching, and bolting before the obscure labyrinth of those barren crags? Stay, there, on this mountainside and let the beasts have their Phaëton; while I, a women with no direction but that offered by the laws of destiny, shall descend in blindness and desperation the twisted face of this lofty cliff, whose scowling brow withers in the sun. Poorly, Poland, do you greet a foreigner, for you write his entrance to your sands in blood, and hardly is he come when he comes into hardship. My luck says it all, for whence can an unlucky wretch turn for mercy? (p. 91).

The disorderly state of nature is the predominant landscape of the incipit. Almost every verse points toward the questioning of strict borders, easily taken to represent the established order. These borders are of a sexual, geographical, and temporal nature, as well as those related to God's creation and to the four basic elements (earth, wind, fire, and water).¹⁸² Rosaura embodies an ambiguous gender, dressed as a man yet driven by her lost honour—according to the epoch's conventions—as a woman.¹⁸³ She complains

¹⁸² See the still relevant Edward Wilson, "The Four Elements in the Imagery of Calderón", *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 31, 1 (1936), 34–47. DOI: 10.2307/3715189.

¹⁸³ For a feminist approach to the topic, typical in Golden Age Spanish drama, of a woman in manly disguise, see Melveena McKendrick, *Women and Society in the Spanish Drama of the Golden Age: A Study of the Mujer Varonil* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974). See also Anita K. Stoll and Dawn L. Smith (eds.), *Perception of Women in Spanish Theatre of the Golden Age* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1991); and *Gender, Identity, and Representation in Spain's Golden Age* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 2000).

about the unpleasant welcome that she has experienced in the Polish border (vv. 17–8), to which she arrives, falling from her horse, at the threshold between night and day (v. 16). In this picture, the natural world is painted as a “confuso laberinto” (v.6; “obscure labyrinth”, p. 91) full of violence and destruction. The extraordinary fall of Rosaura’s horse, described with mythical vocabulary, emphasises her strong passions as well as her courage. Rather than turning around, the heroine is not afraid to defiantly ask, in a highly theatrical manner, about his whereabouts (vv.1-8).

La vida es sueño sets off with a bleak outlook, in fact quite close to the world of Greek tragedy. If Rosaura’s initial monologue could be taken to epitomise the whole play, then melancholy would indeed be its central mood, as some critics would have it.¹⁸⁴ But Calderón does not need much to upset the expectations he himself has set.

Immediately after Rosaura speaks, Clarín takes over, completely changing the mood:

CLARÍN: Di dos, y no me dejes
en la posada a mí cuando te quejes;
que si dos hemos sido
los que de nuestra patria hemos salido
a probar aventuras,
dos los que entre desdichas y locuras
aquí habemos llegado
y dos los que del monte hemos rodado,
¿no es razón que yo sienta
meterme en el pesar y no en la cuenta? (vv. 23-32)

BUGLE: Make that two unlucky wretches, and don’t pretend I’m asleep back at the camp when you start lamenting. For if it was two of us who left our fatherland to seek adventures, and two of us who, amid misfortune and madness, arrived at this spot, and two of us who were thrown down the mountain, can’t I rightly complain if you make me party to the sorrow and leave me out of the tally? (p. 91-2).

With Clarín’s appearance, Calderón is elegantly setting out his poetic agenda: no matter how tragic the situation may seem, the audience will not be spared a laugh. Following Lope’s lead, Calderón also disrespects the Aristotelian division between comedy and tragedy. The chaos of Rosaura’s initial situation is thus paralleled at a metapoetic level:

¹⁸⁴ See Antonio Regalado, *Calderón: los orígenes de la modernidad en la España del Siglo de Oro*, Ensayos 22-23, 2 vols (Barcelona: Destino, 2000).

If the world used to be ordered, harmonious, and self-contained, it seems that now borders of all kinds are constantly crossed over, even those at the level of genre.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, harmonious coexistence between genres is ruled out: the *gracioso* Clarín, as if unmasking Rosaura's posture before the audience, purposely makes fun of her tragic tone. After all, her lofty cries overlook the much-needed assistance Clarín is providing and which purposely makes her appear more courageous and heroic than she might be. Rosaura's answer to Clarín makes matters even stranger, since it implicitly acknowledges that they are indeed characters in a play speaking monologues before audiences. It is as if she momentarily steps out from her role as a tragic heroine and has a word with Clarín, worried that she might have hurt his feelings by letting him aside:

ROSAURA: No quise darte parte,
 en mis quejas, Clarín, por no quitarte,
 llorando tu desvelo,
 el derecho que tienes al consuelo;
 que tanto gusto había
 en quejarse, un filósofo decía,
 que, a trueco de quejarse,
 habían las desdichas de buscarse (vv. 33-40).

ROSSAURA: I didn't want to involve you in my laments, Bugle, and take away your right to consolation through the expression of your own distress, for there is such delight to be gained from lamenting, a philosopher once said, that one should go in search for misfortunes just to be able to lament them (p. 92).

Mixing of genres — indeed magnified by the variety of versification throughout the play—, and a stark sense of aesthetic self-awareness is of course to be expected from the Spanish *comedia*. In the *Arte nuevo*, Lope proclaimed with defiance that the *comedia* should indeed be considered a *monstruo* (“monster”) and a *quimera* (“chimera”). Covarrubias defines *monstro* in the following way: “Es qualquier parto contra la regla, y orden natural, como nacer el hombre con dos cabeças.”¹⁸⁶ Thus conceived, the *comedia* is a form that defies the established aesthetic order.

¹⁸⁵ Kluge further points out figures of ambiguity in *La vida es sueño* in “Oedipus Christianus: *La vida es sueño*”, pp. 260-62.

¹⁸⁶ See Covarrubias, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana* (Madrid: Melchor Sánchez, 1673), p. 227.

True to the spirit of Lope's text, Calderón adopts an ethos of defiance against tradition and marks the beginning of his play with the word "Hipogrifo" (hippogriff), one of the very few words prohibited by Lope himself (*Arte nuevo*, v. 268).¹⁸⁷ The genre is doubtless a monster: in order to delight and catch the attention of its mass audience, playwrights feel obliged not only to mix the traditions of "high" and "low" art, but also to take risks and break rules. The high demand for the consumption of *comedias* meant that genres and common *topoi* could easily become trite and hackneyed. *La vida es sueño* succeeds with honour at the task of setting up expectations with which the audience could identify, and look forward to, only to drastically upset them — without providing a reassuring alternative to make up for the disappointment. This is a key component of what could be called Calderón's "aesthetics of the monstrous", in which the "natural" order of things is constantly being challenged in ways that produce *admiratio*, i.e.: the excitement of novelty, fear before the unknown, and uneasiness and curiosity towards unresolved mysteries. Consequently, not only is the form of the play monstrous, but its content — from this very first word onwards —, is also rich in reference to monsters and monstrous events that suspend the order of things. The characters of the play embody the very strange world in which they find themselves.

Cognate to *admiratio* is the aforementioned seventeenth-century philosophy of *desengaño* and its distinction between Being and Appearing, *ser* and *parecer*. *Desengaño* underscores the distance between the infinitude of creation and the finitude of human existence, which makes our vision limited and awry, always prone to being misled by appearances, fantasy and imagination. Aware of the delusional nature of the

¹⁸⁷ Calderón's defiance to Lope is explored at length by Frederick A. de Armas in his "The Critical Tower", in *The Prince in the Tower: Perceptions of La vida es sueño*, ed. by de Armas (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1993), pp. 3-15.

world, Rosaura does not believe her eyes when she and Clarín first encounter

Segismundo's tower:

ROSAURA: ¡Quién ha visto sucesos tan extraños!
 mas si la vista no padece engaños
 que hace la fantasía,
 a la medrosa luz que aún tiene el día
 me parece que veo
 un edificio (vv. 49-54).

ROSSAURA: Who ever heard of such a strange turn of events? Yet unless my vision suffers from deceptions of fantasy, I think I see some kind of building in the flickering twilight (p. 92)

Admiratio is here implicit in Rosaura's reference to the extraordinary: "sucesos tan extraños" (such a strange turn of events). Finding Segismundo's tower is indeed so unexpected that Rosaura first assumes that it is a product of her imagination. It is a commonplace of seventeenth-century philosophy that the senses are unreliable, tantamount to veils and appearances, and yet, in this case, Rosaura's vision is accurate. The ensuing *admiratio* is therefore magnified: even the commonplace assumption that the senses mislead is, at times, mistaken. It just seems too extraordinary — almost like a miracle—that shelter is presented to her and Clarín at nightfall, when they need it the most. She therefore remains alert and wary of what she sees; her uneasiness is not appeased when they enter the tower. Quite on the contrary: she becomes extremely affected by the sound of Segismundo's lamentations, to the extent that — in yet another sign of monstrous *admiratio* turning upside down the established order — she fleetingly exchanges the roles of master and servant with Clarín.¹⁸⁸ It is now Rosaura who wants to leave the place in fear, whilst Clarín prevents her from doing so:

ROSAURA: Clarín...
 CLARÍN: señora...
 ROSAURA: huigamos los rigors
 desta encantada torre.
 CLARÍN: Yo aún no tengo
 ánimo de huir, pues a eso vengo (vv. 82-4).

¹⁸⁸ On the carnivalesque elements of *La vida es sueño*, see William R. Blue, "Carnival and Lent Alternations", in *The Prince in the Tower*, pp. 88-97.

ROSSAURA: Bugle!

BUGLE: My lady!

ROSSAURA: We must flee the rigours of this haunted tower!

BUGLE: I don't have the courage to flee again [since that is what I am doing] (p. 93; transl. modified).

Within this landscape of wonder, provoking fear and fascination alike, what kind of creature awaits them? Segismundo is initially unaware of their presence, and they find him in the midst of a highly theatrical and philosophical speech. The Prince, full of sadness and misery, complains that he has been born with reason but without freedom.¹⁸⁹ He epitomises the world's chaotic lack of borders, for he is tragically placed between the animal and the human. On the one hand, he is freer than animals, since he contemplates his own situation from above; on the other, he is less free, for he is physically imprisoned:

SEGISMUNDO: ¿Qué ley, justicia o razón,
negar a los hombres sabe,
privilegio tan süave,
excepción tan principal,
que Dios le ha dado a un cristal,
a un pez, a un bruto, y a un ave? (vv. 167-72).

SIGISMUND: What law, what powers of justice or reason are capable of denying men the sweet privilege, the fundamental license that God grants to crystalline waters, to fish, to beasts, and to birds? (p. 94)

In response to Segismundo's speech, Rosaura exclaims: "Temor y piedad en mi / sus razones han causado" (vv. 173-74; "His words have filled me with pity and fear", p. 94). It is easy to imagine that the actress playing Rosaura speaks to the audience when pronouncing such words, since she is indeed commenting on the play's events and telling them how to feel. Pity and fear are, of course, the two components of the Aristotelian notion of catharsis. By directing the public toward these emotions, Rosaura's words betray that the Aristotelian tradition still plays a role in the *comedia*.

¹⁸⁹ See Aurora Egido, "¡Ay, misero de mí!, ¡Ay, infelice! Apuntes sobre *La vida es sueño*", *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, 90.4-5 (2013), 535-49. DOI: 10.1080/14753820.2013.802565.

This might seem surprising because I have argued that the neo-Aristotelianism of Baroque drama has been overemphasised in detriment of the medieval mystery play tradition. And yet Rosaura's emphasis on fear and pity, with its associated sense of catharsis, leads us back to Aristotelian *thaumaston* ("wonder"), translated into Latin as *admiratio*:

ROSAURA: Con asombro de mirarte,
con admiración de oírte,
ni sé qué pueda decirte,
ni qué pueda preguntarte.
Sólo diré que a esta parte
hoy el cielo me ha guiado
para haberme consolado,
si consuelo puede ser,
del que es desdichado, ver
a otro que es más desdichado (vv. 243-52).

ROSSAURA: I'm so astonished at looking at you and so amazed by listening to you that I can't think of what to say to you or what to ask you. I shall say only that heaven must have led me here today to console me, if he who is unfortunate can attain consolation from seeing another even more so (p. 95).

Rosaura's speech has metatheatrical connotations: in the tradition of mystery plays, her character swiftly changes roles from participant of the play to audience of Segismundo's monologue. But her metatheatrical remarks also develop Aristotle's defence of poetry. Rosaura tells the audience that seeing the suffering of others, which fill her with awe and wonder, lifts her spirits: eavesdropping on Segismundo, whose situation is worse than hers, gives her comfort and solace. Like Rosaura, then, so the audience is taught to feel *admiratio* before the extraordinary events taking place on stage; and, just like Rosaura, they are also offered the opportunity to escape their melancholy by watching the embodied ills of Segismundo.

Calderón had previously provided Segismundo the opportunity to go through a cathartic experience similar to that of Rosaura; one which is also pierced through with *admiratio*. The encounter with Rosaura marks a lasting and astonishing effect on the Prince who, at first instance, desires to kill her and her accompanying lackey Clarín:

SEGISMUNDO: ¿Quié[n] mis voces ha escuchado?

¿Es Clotaldo?

ROSAURA: No es sino un triste, ¡ay de mí!

que en estas bóvedas frías

oyó tus melancolías.

SEGISMUNDO: Pues la muerte te daré

porque no sepas que sé

que sabes flaquezas mías (vv. 175-83).

SIGISMUND: Who's been listening to me? Is that you, Clothold? [...]

ROSSAURA: It's only a poor wretch — oh, miserable me! — who in these frigid caverns has overheard your melancholy words.

SIGISMUND: Then you shall die by my hand so you forget that I know that you know my frailties (transl. modified, p. 94).

Once Rosaura is clearly seen and heard by Segismundo, his fury and fear are appeased and he is instead filled with wonder. Rather than killing her, he claims to be “suspendido” (paralysed) and will eventually defend her from Clotaldo, the prison guard.¹⁹⁰ The Prince's actions defy the audience's expectations; his behaviour is out of the ordinary because it seems as if any other intruder — but Rosaura — would have been immediately killed by Segismundo. Yet, this time, the encounter makes a difference. This is how Segismundo expresses his awe and trepidation:

SEGISMUNDO: Tu voz pudo enternecerme

tu presencia suspenderme

y tu respeto turbarme

[...]

tú sólo, tú, has suspendido

la pasión a mis enojos,

la suspensión a mis ojos,

la admiración al oído.

Con cada vez que te veo,

nueva admiración me das;

y cuando te miro más,

aún más mirarte deseo.

Ojos hidrónicos creo

que mis ojos deben ser,

pues, cuando es muerte el beber,

beben más, y, desta suerte,

viendo que el ver me da muerte,

estoy muriendo por ver.

Pero véate yo y muera;

¹⁹⁰ On Segismundo's claim that he has been “suspendido” by Rosaura's presence, see Agustín de la Granja, “Los actores del siglo XVIII ante *La vida es sueño*: de la técnica de la turbación a la práctica de la suspensión”, *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 78.1 (2000), 145-72. For an analysis of Clotaldo, see J. Michael Fulton, “In Defense of Clotaldo: Reconsidering the Secondary Plot in Calderón's *La vida es sueño*”, *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, 56 (2002), 11-23.

que no sé, rendido ya,
 si el verte muerte me da,
 el no verte qué me diera.
 Fuera, más que muerte fiera,
 ira, rabia y dolor fuerte;
 fuera muerte –desta suerte
 su rigor he ponderado–,
 pues dar vida a un desdichado
 es dar a un dichoso muerte (vv. 190-242).

SIGISMUND: Your voice has filled me with sympathy; your appearance, with wonder; and your deference, with confusion [...] you alone—you—have stayed the agony of my anger, the bewilderment of my eyes, the amazement of my ears. Each glimpse of you increases my amazement, and the more I look at you the more I desire to look. My eyes must suffer from the dropsy, since although drinking means death, they wish to drink more, and thus, seeing that sight kills me, I'm dying to see. But let me see you and die, for now that I've succumbed I can't imagine, if seeing you brings me death, what not seeing you would bring. It would be beyond death; it would be savage ire, rage, and intense grief — thus do I qualify its severity — for to give life to an unfortunate wretch is tantamount to giving death to a happy soul (p. 95).

Taken from the world of Petrarch and Garcilaso, these verses transmit all the strength of the Spanish tradition of *loco amor* (“mad love”), framing emotions as a chaotic yet pleasant power that turn upside down the world of those who experience them.¹⁹¹ José María Ruano de la Haza has suggested that Segismundo’s infatuation betrays the reaction of a male animal who recognises a female and seeks to defend her before another male (i.e. Clotaldo) (“Introducción”, p. 38). But the gender of Rosaura, who appears in the scene dressed up as a man, is not recognised by anybody else, not even Clotaldo, her own father. Ruano de la Haza gives no clues as to why Segismundo should be an exception. His reading downplays the uncertainties of the scene such as Rosaura’s ambiguous gender presentation and the question of whether other characters do not recognize her sexual identity. Yet such uncertainties significantly shape the atmosphere in which the prince’s expected reaction against strangers is interrupted.

¹⁹¹ The concept of ‘loco amor’ informs a long and fruitful tradition in Spanish Literature, including Garcilaso de la Vega, San Juan de la Cruz, Lope de Vega, and others. It stems from Juan Ruiz, Arcipreste de Hita, *El libro del buen amor* [ca. 1283-1350], 8th ed. (Zaragoza: Ebro, 1963), in which it is framed as chaotic and irrational, in opposition to the love of God.

Segismundo's Petrarchan vocabulary should also be contextualised within the tradition of neo-Platonism, which understands Beauty as the soul's moving force.¹⁹² For Marsilio Ficino, for instance, a true enjoyment of Beauty is a stepping-stone towards the highest good.¹⁹³ From this perspective, physical beauty appears under a positive light: although it should never become the endpoint of the philosopher, it indeed has a role in awakening and promoting the desire for knowledge. Similarly, in Segismundo's first encounter with Rosaura, her physical beauty is not—as perhaps one would expect from a Baroque perspective—a mask of the world's true decay, but rather the spark behind Segismundo's transformation. Yet the scene goes beyond the neo-Platonic tradition in its emphasis on the extraordinary. Segismundo's verses represent yet another monstrous mixture which break up the rules of verisimilitude: educated amongst wild animals, Segismundo could not possibly know Petrarchan lore. His knowledge of tradition is justified by the overall sense of *admiratio*, which accounts for the audience's suspension of disbelief because this produces pleasure and delight.

The encounter is key to understanding the play because Segismundo suddenly manages both to placate his anger and to behave rightly. This nuance is lost if we construe the scene only as a male courting a female. In Act II, for instance, a very similar event takes place, yet Segismundo is there unable to change his impulses and attempts to rape her. The difference between Act I and Act II lies in the emotional atmosphere of both scenes: *admiratio*, predominant in the former, only plays a minor role in the latter. Segismundo's transformation in Act I should not be disentangled from the intense sense of wonder of the scene. He is paralysed at his encounter with Rosaura, the power of *admiratio* being that, as a consequence of its emotional strength, it challenges the enraged reaction expected from him in the context of his violent

¹⁹²Susan Byrne, *Ficino in Spain*, Toronto Iberic 18 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), p. 85.

¹⁹³ Christopher Celenza, "Marsilio Ficino", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward Zalta, plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/ficino/>, 2017. Accessed 4/04/2022.

upbringing. His transformation points to what in theology is termed a miracle, for it causes nature to suspend and transform itself without the need for reason to direct the encounter; and it is possible thanks to Segismundo and Rosaura's cathartic experiences. Against neo-Stoic/Thomist readings, which emphasise the role of reason in Segismundo's moral transformation, this episode underscores that a charged emotional environment does not necessarily lead characters astray. On the contrary: it is only through awe and wonder that their expected behaviour is interrupted; that they are able to address and acknowledge each other's presence; and that they find a fleeting, as well as much-needed, release from their theatrical melancholy.

In contrast to this initial scene, in Act II, Segismundo awakens at the palace full of melancholy, which leads him to violence driven by his fury, resentment, and anger:

SEGISMUNDO: ¿Yo despertar de dormir
en lecho tan excelente?
¿Yo en medio de tanta gente
que me sirva de vestir?
Decir que sueño es engaño;
bien sé que despierto estoy
¿Yo, Segismundo, no soy?
Dadme, cielos, desengaño.
[CRIADO] 2º: ¡Qué melancólico está! (vv. 1232-48)

SIGISMUND: I, waking from sleep in such an exquisite bed? I, amid so many people intent on dressing me? To say I'm dreaming is an error; I know quite well that I'm awake. Am I not Sigismund? Heavens, reveal the truth for me! ["dadme desengaño"] (pp. 112-13).

Segismundo cannot fathom his sudden and radical change of state; the shock he experiences is too strong, which disorients him. In this case, his lack of orientation elicits sorrowful feelings in him, for he now believes, with fear and anxiety, that reality cannot be truthfully discerned. But Segismundo's mournful words, like Rosaura's before him, are immediately mocked by Clarín:

[CRIADO] 1º: Pues, ¿a quién le sucediera
esto, que no lo estuviera [tan melancólico]?
CLARÍN: A mí (vv. 1249-51)

SERVANT 1: Who wouldn't be [so melancholy] after what he's been through?

BUGLE: Me (p. 113).

Like in Act 1, Clarín undermines the main character's tragic tone with a funny retort. Unlike Rosaura, however, Segismundo does not engage with the *gracioso*. Instead, he rejects lifting up his spirits or even acknowledging Clarín's different mood. Segismundo is overtaken by bellicose fury and refuses to appease his feelings through entertainment:

[CRIADO] 1º: Lleg a hablarle ya.

¿Volverán a cantar?

SEGISMUNDO: No,

no quiero que canten más.

[CRIADO] 2º: Como tan suspenso estás,
quise divertirte.

SEGISMUNDO: Yo

no tengo de divertir

con sus voces mis pesares

las músicas militares

sólo he gustado de oír (vv. 1252-59).

SERVANT 1: (*To SIGISMUND*): Shall I have them sing again?

SIGISMUND: No, I don't want any more singing.

SERVANT 2: You seem so bewildered. I thought you might enjoy some entertainment.

SIGISMUND: My sorrows can't be comforted by their voices; military marches are the only music I enjoy listening to (p. 113).

The servant's reply to the Prince makes a compelling defence of the social value of entertainment. His assumption is that Segismundo's perplexity before the situation — he has suddenly and unexpectedly awakened as Prince — will be appeased through the delight of music. The servant thus provides him with the first opportunity to be instructed in courtly manners, in which individuals, as princely as they may be, must learn to channel their rage in socially appropriate ways; or indeed to appease it through delight and entertainment. Hence Segismundo's rejection of entertainment already betrays that he is about to fail his father's test: rather than engaging with his new situation, he remains blinded by rage. Taking a step back from courtly delights, he insists that the only songs he enjoys are “músicas militares” (military songs). This anticipates his future misdeeds in courts: once Segismundo learns of his kingly power,

he unsurprisingly abuses it. He violently attacks Clotaldo, his former prison guard, who is also overcome by sorrow:

SEGISMUNDO: Pues vil, infame y traidor,
¿qué tengo más que saber,
después de saber quién soy,
para mostrar desde hoy
mi soberbia y mi poder?
¿Cómo a tu patria le has hecho
tal traición, que me ocultaste
a mí, pues que me negaste,
contra razón y derecho,
este estado?
CLOTALDO: ¡Ay de mí triste! (vv. 1295-1304)

SIGISMUND: You vile, contemptible traitor! What more need I learn, now that I know my true identity, in order to exercise my pride and power from this day forward? How could you commit such treason against your fatherland by hiding me away, for you have denied me my birthright against all reason and law!
CLOTHOLD: Oh, miserable me! (p. 114)

In the midst of Segismundo's infatuation, Rosaura appears again on stage, yet this time no longer in manly disguise. She is dressed up as Estrella's servant and does not want her identity to be revealed: "Soy de Estrella / una infelice dama" (vv. 1592-93; "Just a lowly lady-in-waiting to Princess Stella", p. 120). Rosaura immediately catches Segismundo's attention; she reminds him of their previous encounter, and yet she is not able to add up the pieces. The scene bears important parallels to their first encounter: in both cases, Segismundo reacts violently towards her. In Act I, however, Rosaura's genderless beauty paralyses his violence and encourages him to respect her presence; in Act II, her beauty obsesses him and, filled with rage, he attempts to rape her:

SEGISMUNDO: Sólo por ver si puedo,
harás que pierda a tu hermosura el miedo,
que soy muy inclinado
a vencer lo imposible. Hoy he arrojado
dese balcon a un hombre que decía
que hacerse no podía;
y, así, por ver si puedo, cosa es llana,
que arrojaré tu honor por la ventana (vv. 1638-1645).

SIGISMUND: You'll make me lose the fear your beauty inspires in me just to see if I can, for I'm strongly inclined to overcome the impossible. Today I threw a man off that balcony who said it couldn't be done, so have no doubt that I'll throw your honor out the window to see if I can (p. 121).

Having been released from his imprisonment, the Prince's only wish is to prove the unlimited extent of his willpower. He does not falter in the use of violence because he is now unwilling to recognise his own limitations: earlier on, he reminds Rosaura, he has defenestrated a man who stood between himself and his desires. Likewise, he is more than ready to overcome his initial respect and fear towards her beauty only to prove his power. This is, of course, a very different reaction to that of Act I, in which Rosaura's beauty paralyses Segismundo's anger, rage, and desire to kill. In this scene, the Prince remains detached from what is going on around him and is only driven by his infatuation with power. The main difference between both scenes lies on Segismundo's relationship to order and control; the sudden, unexpected, and extreme change from powerlessness to powerfulness makes him feel that he is entitled to dominate everything and everyone around him. The Prince's violent behaviour thus betrays his fear that his sovereignty will be taken away from him; he has become obsessed with the imposition of his willpower and chooses to take a closed and protective stance, which in turn betrays his fear of going back to his life in prison.¹⁹⁴ Yet Segismundo loses the curiosity and openness which he paradoxically had in his initial imprisonment; in the tower, he remains vulnerable enough to be touched by the encounter with Rosaura in a transformative way. In fact, this scene has often been overlooked by critics because it challenges the neo-Stoic narrative that Segismundo's transformation is secured when he learns to restrain his emotions and masters his reason.

As a consequence of his misdeeds, Segismundo is drugged, put to sleep, and imprisoned in the tower for a second time. He wakes up in a state of perplexity and ponders whether his life in court has been but a dream. For a fleeting instant, he has

¹⁹⁴ In "La vida es sueño", Lawrance highlights Segismundo's fear and anxiety about the possibility of reimprisonment (p. 88). See also Stephen H. Lipmann, "Segismundo's Fear at the End of *La vida es sueño*", *Modern Language Notes*, 97 (1982), 380-90.

experienced what it feels to be dressed in expensive garments and to possess sovereign power. The transformation has been too radical for him to process it without recourse to the dream metaphor, which makes him question the epistemological status of worldly reality:

[SEGISMUNDO]: Yo sueño que estoy aquí
destas prisiones cargado,
y soñé que en otro estado
más lisonjero me vi.
¿Qué es la vida? Un frenesí
¿Qué es la vida? Una ilusión,
una sombra, una ficción,
y el mayor bien es pequeño;
que toda la vida es sueño,
y los sueños, sueños son (vv. 2178-87).

[SIGISMUND]: I dream that I'm here, weighed down by these chains, and I've dreamt that I found myself in more flattering circumstances. What is life? A frenzy. What is life? A vain hope, a shadow, a fiction. The greatest good is fleeting, for all life is a dream and even dreams are but dreams (p. 132).

Often, as mentioned earlier, the reactionary nature of the Baroque “life is a dream” trope has been emphasised. Maravall summarises this position in his influential *Teatro y literatura en la sociedad barroca*, in which he claims that the metaphor represents the quintessential conservative feature of Baroque art. According to his interpretation, it was crafted by the upper classes as propaganda, the aim being to secure stability, immobility, and social passivity (*Teatro*, p. 68).¹⁹⁵ Although Maravall does not provide textual evidence for his argument, we might assume that he had in mind the *auto sacramental El gran teatro del mundo*; and, more specifically, the idea that God, the director, gives each social class a part to play on the world's stage, which they ought to play out well without questioning it. Segismundo agrees that, from the richest to the poorest person, all have been granted a role by a higher power and that His motives remain far beyond humanity's comprehension:

¹⁹⁵ Maravall's reading of the Spanish *comedia* is highly influenced by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “Kulturindustrie. Aufklärung als Massensbetrug”, in *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1947), pp. 144-98. See Duncan Wheeler, “Contextualizing and Contesting José Antonio Maravall's Theories of Baroque Culture from the Perspective of Modern-Day Performance”, *Bulletin of the Comediantes*, 65.1 (2013), 15-43.

[SEGISMUNDO]: sueña el rico en su riqueza,
 que más cuidados le ofrece;
 sueña el pobre que padece,
 su miseria y su pobreza;
 sueña el que a medrar empieza,
 sueña el que afana y pretende;
 sueña el que agravia y ofende;
 y, en el mundo, en conclusión,
 todos sueñan lo que son,
 aunque ninguno lo entiende (vv. 2168-2177).

[SIGISMUND]: The rich man dreams of more riches, which only bring him more worries; the poor man dreams that he suffers in misery and poverty; the man who improves his lot dreams; the man who toils and petitions dreams; the man who insults and offends dreams. And in this world, in short, everyone dreams what he is although no one realizes it (p. 132).

Nevertheless, Maravall's point that the Baroque "life-is-a-dream" metaphor reinforces existing power structures has nothing to do with *La vida es sueño*. On the contrary: Segismundo's appeal to the dreamlike nature of life is meant to emphasise his *admiratio* towards the mysteries of the world, which in turn accentuate the play's motif that it is impossible to control fate; or indeed, like Basilio, to read it in the stars. Segismundo therefore oscillates between two positions: at times, he seems capable of being opened and vulnerable to, as well as affected by, the unexpected events unfolding before him; other times, however, his infatuation with sovereign power closes him up to his own selfish desires, leaving him incapable of experiencing the transformative power of *admiratio*.

From Segismundo and Rosaura's three encounters, only in the second is the monstrosity of *admiratio* missing. Rosaura's appearance in Act III is, if not more, at least as monstrous as that of Act I. To begin with, she runs to Segismundo's side after rejecting the advice of her father Clotaldo, who seeks to find a watered-down solution to her lack of honour (i.e. social identity): he tells her to give it all up and instead enter a convent — a typical *comedia* solution for dishonoured women (vv. 2610-27). Defying genre conventions, Rosaura vehemently refuses and instead allies with Segismundo in the upcoming civil war; this is, without any doubt, the side of the play's monsters:

ROSAURA: Generoso Segismundo [...]

Tres veces son las que ya
 me admiras, tres las que ignoras
 quién soy, pues las tres me has visto
 en diverso traje y forma.
 La primera me creíste
 Varón, en la rigurosa
 prisión, donde fue tu vida
 de mis desdichas lisonja.
 La segunda me admiraste
 mujer, cuando fue la pompa
 de tu majestad un sueño,
 una fantasma, un sueño.
 La tercera es hoy, que siendo
 monstruo de una especie y otra,
 entre galas de mujer,
 armas de varón me adornan.

ROSSAURA: Kind Sigismund [...] Three times now you have beheld me, three times without knowing who I am, for on each occasion you've seen me in different attire and surroundings. The first time was in your cruel prison, where you took me for a man and your life made my misfortunes seem flattering. The second time—when you saw your majestic splendor reduced to a dream, a ghost, a shadow—you beheld me as a woman. The third time is today, where, like a monstrous hybrid, I mix the fine clothes of a woman with the weapons of a man (p. 144).

Rosaura's transgender identity makes her a "monstruo de una especie y otra" ("a monstrous hybrid"). She is aware that her monstrosity puts her at the same level of Segismundo and binds their destinies together.¹⁹⁶ However, for the sake of making a persuasive argument, she is being misleading when she describes their encounters in dialectical terms: first male, then female, finally transgender. In contrast to Act II, in which Rosaura only plays the role of a beautiful lady in disguise who arouses the animal attraction of the heterosexual Segismundo, in Act I Rosaura's appearance is already presented as transgender. There is no textual evidence so as to argue that the Prince sees through Rosaura's manly disguise; and Rosaura's speech here confirms this. And yet, her beauty paralyses and overwhelms Segismundo in a way that transforms his initial rage, just as it will transform his lust in Act III. As it seems, the *admiratio* caused by

¹⁹⁶ See the aforementioned González Echevarría, "Un monstruo de una especie u otra", pp. 27-58, and Lawrance, "La vida es sueño", 72-89.

monstrosity is of a different nature to the simpler attraction elicited by Rosaura's womanly beauty in Act II.

Segismundo claims victory over Basilio thanks both to Rosaura's transformative power, which infuses the Prince with courage, and to the masses who liberate him and support him after they learn that he is the legitimate heir to the Crown. Fearful of the *vulgo* who are now rising against him, Basilio refers to them in terms reminiscent of Rosaura's character:

BASILIO: ¿Quién, Astolfo, podrá parar prudente
la furia de un caballo desbocado?
¿Quién detener de un río la corriente
que corre al mar, soberbio y despeñado?
¿Quién un peñasco suspender, valiente,
de la cima de un monte, desgajado?
Pues todo fácil parar ha sido,
y un vulgo no, soberbio y atrevido (vv. 2428-2435).

VASILY: Who, Aistulf, is wise enough to curb the fury of a runaway horse? Who can detain the current of an imperious river in its downhill rush to the sea? Who is courageous enough to stay a boulder that has broken free of the mountaintop? Well, that's all easy in comparison to halting a willful and reckless mob (p. 138).

Rosaura's initial speech makes an explicit reference to the myth of Phaeton, in which the son of the god Helios drives his father's sun-chariot with the aim of convincing others that he is indeed his son. Despite his father's warnings about the danger of the journey — for Helios is the only one capable of doing so — Phaeton insists; only to dramatically fail in the task, which gets him killed. This has often been interpreted by critics as a sign of Rosaura's hubris, who enters the stage overwhelmed by passion (Küpper, "The Case of Rosaura's Honor", p. 513). In contrast, as mentioned above, Segismundo is often portrayed as the character who learns to tame such passions and to behave as a rightful King.

Basilio's words to Astolfo contradict such an interpretation. The King describes the *vulgo* with the horse imagery of Phaeton's myth evoked in the play's initial monologue by Rosaura. He wants, of course, to oppose his reign of reason to the monstrous passion embodied in the enemy's army. Basilio is, without any doubt, utterly

misinterpreting the situation: the sympathies of the audience lie in Segismundo's side, as they stand with the legitimate heir to the throne and the victim of the King's cruelty; and yet referring to the masses with the vocabulary of untamed passions was common in the *comedia* (see the above discussion on Lope's *Arte nuevo*). The juxtaposition between the King's misinterpretation and this common trope of the genre (i.e. that the masses are passionate and therefore irresponsible) is meant to underscore *desengaño*: things are not as they might appear. The dramatic universe of *La vida es sueño* is thereby upside down: uncontrolled passions end up restoring the stability of the realm, whereas Basilio's attempt to control destiny through reason unleashes the borderless and graceless chaos with which the play begins. Ultimately, *La vida es sueño* encourages the audience to set aside their expectations and instead to embrace the uneasiness and messiness of monstrous *admiratio*.

The ending of the play confirms the critical and thought-provoking nature of Calderon's dramatic form, which could be described as a reverse Benjaminian Trauerspiel. I have repeatedly shown that, according to *Ursprung*, German Baroque drama embraces the melancholy of contemporary history by espousing a fragmented, incomplete, and ruined structure. For Benjamin, this keeps the flame of hope alive in the desolate landscape of the Weimar Republic (see Chapter Two). Calderón, in contrast, is said to represent an uncritical writer of totalizing and coherent art: in *La vida es sueño*, the initial chaos is eventually overcome—within his framework—through the re-institution of Segismundo's kingship; the “life-is-a-dream” metaphor thereby bestows on him sacred powers and redeems, irresponsibly, the chaos and melancholy of political life and earthly matters (see Chapter Two). A closer look at the play's polemic ending, however, suggests a different interpretation, namely, that Segismundo's restoration of

order represents but a fleeting moment of stability.¹⁹⁷ The play could therefore be called a “reverse Trauerspiel” because its ‘totalizing’ ending points towards future despair — contrarily to Benjamin’s German Baroque, the ruined structure of which points towards hope. This is, above all, epitomised in Segismundo’s polemical decision to imprison back in his childhood tower the soldier who liberates him in the first place all the while rewarding his war enemies:

[SOLDADO] 1: Si así a quien no te ha servido
Honras, ¿a mí, que fui causa
del alboroto del reino,
y de la torre en que estabas
te saqué, qué me darás?
SEGISMUNDO: La torre; y porque no salgas
della nunca hasta morir,
has de estar allí con guardas;
que el traidor no es menester
siendo la traición pasada (vv. 3902-3301).

SOLDIER 1: If that’s how you reward someone who came to your aid, what do I get for inciting the uprising against the king and for freeing you from the tower in which you were imprisoned?
SIGISMUND: The tower. And so that you’ll spend the rest of your life there, you’ll be under constant watch of the guards, for traitors serve no purpose once their treason has been exposed (p. 152).

Critical efforts have been made to square Segismundo’s imprisonment of the soldier with his alleged transformation into the role of a perfect Christian King, but these have been incapable of accounting for what Lawrance calls the “bitter sweet” nature of the play’s conclusion (“La vida es sueño”, p. 86). To sum up their position, they tell us that Segismundo’s decision to imprison the soldier is judged wise by the standards of the seventeenth century.¹⁹⁸ Even if this might surprise many a modern reader, scholars insist on their philological accuracy. But, in the year 2000, Robert Lauer convincingly claimed that, even from a historical perspective, there is something odd taking place.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ In “Oedipus Christianus: *La vida es sueño*”, Kluge highlights that the play “oscillates between chaos and order” (p. 261).

¹⁹⁸ On the different interpretations of the play’s ending, see footnote 169.

¹⁹⁹ A. Robert Lauer, “El leal traidor de *La vida es sueño*”, *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 77.1 (2000), 133-44. DOI: 10.1080/00074900051082383.

Following seventeenth-century legal and political theory, there is no reason for punishing the soldier: he neither commits treason against his country nor does he disobey the King, his natural master: “el soldado calderoniano no traiciona a su patria ni traiciona a su señor natural” (p. 138; the Calderonian soldier does not commit treason against his homeland or against his natural lord).²⁰⁰ Lauer argues that the soldier supports Segismundo only once Basilio has forfeited his kingly authority by giving it away to a foreigner. From the perspective of absolute monarchy, this period could be described as an *interregnum* and would thereby justify the soldier’s defence of the country’s natural King (“El leal traidor”, p. 137). Since the soldier of course wins the war alongside Segismundo, the new King, he cannot but be considered loyal.

Lauer’s argument is difficult to refute. It paints a picture of Calderón’s art which makes more sense within his aesthetics of *admiratio*: Segismundo’s decision to imprison the soldier provokes wonder because it defies the audience’s expectations. It is an extraordinary event that does not fit into what Segismundo’s character is supposed to have become. There are several hints that confirm this, the most evident being Segismundo’s decision — allegedly in the name of *ratio status* — to marry himself to Estrella and Astolfo to Rosaura. As Jeremy Lawrance claims: “the whole dramatic logic of the play [...] is to cunningly mislead us [...] into thinking that the action’s culminating resolution will be the union of these intertwined victims with whom we have been made to sympathise” (“La vida es sueño”, p. 86). Most important, however, is the play’s emphasis on the monstrosity of Rosaura, Segismundo, and the *vulgo*, which not only drive forward the dénouement, but also call for the audience’s identification. The chaotic, passionate, and borderless nature of the former three, as we have seen, highlights the inscrutability of God’s providence and underscores the message that the

²⁰⁰ See also Kluge, “Claroscuro. Representación problematizante del poder político en *La vida es sueño*”, in *Figuraciones literarias del poder político en el Siglo de Oro*, ed. by Sabine Friedrich and Christian Wehr, *Hispanistisches Kolloquium* 6 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), pp. 257-65. DOI: https://doi.org/10.30965/9783846764862_104.

world is, in fact, turned upside down. No matter how hard characters try, the quest for order and structure is always, and unexpectedly, trumped. And yet, when Segismundo becomes King, he insists in securing his reign at all costs: driven by fear, he imprisons the soldier back in the tower and gives explicit orders to have the prison patrolled; the hope being, we might safely assume, to prevent potential uprisings. The audience is left to wonder whether he is not committing the same mistake as his father, and whether he is not harbouring the soldier's monstrosity. If this is the case, it remains difficult to believe that, in the poetic universe of *La vida es sueño*, monsters can be hidden and repressed for too long.

LA DAMA DUENDE

Jonathan Thacker begins his chapter on Calderón's comedies with the following warning: "as a writer of comic drama, [he] is a neglected figure".²⁰¹ Indeed, Calderón has more often than not been associated with dense and philosophical themes such as destiny and free will; and many have argued that his characters embody abstract ideas or symbols.²⁰² Scholars have therefore assumed, as Thacker underscores, that "he himself was a dour figure sadly lacking a humorous side" ("Calderón, the Comedian", p. 110). The obsession with Calderón's tragic tone has been so strong that even those who first studied his comedies came to the conclusion that these had *implicaciones tragedizantes* (p. 110; tragic implications).²⁰³

²⁰¹ "Calderón, the Comedian", in *A Companion to Calderón*, pp. 110-31.

²⁰² See the aforementioned Menéndez Pelayo, *Calderón y su teatro*. Another common assumption of Calderón Studies is that his dramas are more concerned with the development of the plot than with building flesh-and-blood characters; see Alexander Parker, "The Approach to the Spanish Drama of the Golden Age", *The Tulane Drama Review*, 4 (1958), 42-59 (p.42). Amongst others, Roy Norton challenges such assumption in his "Ironical Allusion and the Human Mind in Calderón's *La cisma de Inglaterra*", *Modern Language Review*, 111.4 (2016), 1004-28. As Jonathan Thacker argues, the paucity of Calderón's performance history might account for such misconceptions, since the public has had few chances to see how his characters are embodied and brought to life in stage ("Calderón, the Comedian", p. 119).

²⁰³ See Ignacio Arellano, "Los modelos de las comedias cómicas y de la comicidad en Calderón", *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, 94 (2017), 693-709, p. 694. The most influential account of Calderón's 'serious' approach to comedy can be found in Bruce W. Wardropper, "Calderón's Comedy and His Serious Sense of Life", in *Hispanic Studies in Honor of Nicholson B. Adams*, ed. by John Esten Keller and Karl-Ludwig

The efforts to vindicate Calderón as a tragedian can be traced back to the genre elitism of the Western literary canon. By way of example, Bloom's *The Western Canon* (1994) discusses books which, in their great majority, could be termed "serious" due to their tone or subject-matter. A cursory glance at the table of contents suggests that Cervantes might be an exception and stand out for his comic mind; the chapter on the Spaniard is entitled "Cervantes: The Play of the World". The reader soon discovers that *Don Quijote's* humour is downplayed at the expense of a tragedizing reading.²⁰⁴ Bloom's table of contents also betrays that his version of the canon only includes, in regards to the Spanish literary tradition, Cervantes and, in the twentieth century, Jorge Luis Borges. Indeed, genre elitism — which sometimes also includes the serious dramas of Calderón, thanks to the influence of Jena Romanticism — has exerted its pressure on Hispanists eager to include more Spanish authors in the canon.²⁰⁵ Likewise, in Spanish Golden Age Studies, there have been endless discussions on whether playwrights penned authentic tragedies.²⁰⁶ Within the backdrop of such debates is the idea that writers can only aspire to canonical status if they add something valuable to the tragic tradition.

The reasons for the higher esteem of tragedy in the Western tradition are manifold. Aristotle famously claims, in the *Poetics*, that the writer's character

Selig (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 179-93. In regards to *La dama duende*, see Barbara K. Mujica, "Tragic Elements in Calderón's *La dama duende*", *Kentucky Romance Quarterly*, 16.4 (1969), 303-328.

²⁰⁴ Bloom is, at least, honest about his own interpretative assumptions: "Romantics (myself included) see Quixote as hero, not fool; [and] decline to read the book primarily as satire" (pp. 129-30). A brilliant account of Cervantes's sense of humour can be found in Anthony Close, *Cervantes and the Comic Mind of His Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²⁰⁵ On canon formation and the Spanish tradition, see Wadda Ríos-Font, "Literary History and Canon Formation", in *The Cambridge History of Spanish Literature*, ed. by David T. Gies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 13-36, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521806183>.

²⁰⁶ See Alexander A. Parker, "Towards a Definition of Calderonian Tragedy", *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 39 (1962), 222-37; José María Ruano de la Haza, "Hacia una nueva definición de la tragedia calderoniana", *Bulletin of the Comediantes*, 35 (1983), 165-80; "Más sobre la 'tragedia mixta' calderoniana", *Bulletin of the Comediantes*, 37.2 (1985), 263-66. DOI: [10.1353/boc.1985.0003](https://doi.org/10.1353/boc.1985.0003). For a more recent defence of Spanish Golden Age drama in tragic terms, see Henry Sullivan, *Tragic Drama in the Golden Age of Spain: Seven Essays on the Definition of a Genre*, Teatro del Siglo de Oro. Estudios de Literatura 133 (Kassel: Reichenberger, 2018).

determines his predisposition towards tragedy or comedy: whereas “the more serious [...] represent[] noble people and noble actions”, “the more frivolous represent[] the actions of ignoble people” — with the latter, of course, he is referring to tragedy and, with the former, to comedy.²⁰⁷ Seventeenth-century Spanish neo-Aristotelians took such distinction seriously: they were concerned by Lope’s disrespect of Aristotelian doctrine because they believed that it offered frivolous and superficial entertainment to the masses. Even if, in the past two decades, there have been attempts to rethink such genre elitism, neo-Aristotelian prejudices remain highly influential to this day, and especially within academic circles.²⁰⁸

Benjamin’s *Ursprung* is a case in point: on the one hand, the book makes a plea for rethinking the canon and spells out a countertradition vindicating rare, precious, anonymous, unknown and old-fashioned cultural artifacts. Such an alternative rethinks the Western tradition in terms of fragments and discontinuities; the aim being to hinder ideological uses of culture by those in power. On the other hand, *Ursprung*’s mood and rhetoric is distinctly shaped by the very tradition that it tries to undermine and overcome. This is evident in its disregard for comedy, which furthers Aristotelian prejudices against “lower” artforms: Benjamin’s Baroque cannot but be sorrowful and melancholy since these are the feelings, from Aristotle onwards, that the learned require to discuss “serious” matters. And there is much at stake in *Ursprung*, which tries to reimagine none other than the destiny of the German nation.

²⁰⁷ *Poetics*, ed. and transl. by Anthony Kenny, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), vv. 25-29, p. 20.

²⁰⁸ An approach to tragedy that consciously breaks down such elitism can be found in Rita Felski (ed.), *Rethinking Tragedy* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008). For a more elitist approach to tragedy, see George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, Faber Library 4 (London: Faber and Faber, 1995). As of the recent scholarship on Golden Age drama, the work of Ignacio Arellano and Jonathan Thacker has recently reclaimed the value of Spanish comedy. See Arellano, *El escenario cósmico: estudios sobre la comedia de Calderón*, Biblioteca Áurea Hispánica 43.3 (Madrid: Iberoamericana; Frankfurt am Main: Vervuet, 2006); and Thacker, “Lope, the Comedian”, in *A Companion to Lope de Vega*, ed. by Alexander Samson and Jonathan Thacker, (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2008), pp. 159-70.

It therefore comes as no surprise that *Ursprung* dismisses the comic *capa y espada* subgenre of the Spanish *comedia* as yet another example of a totalizing artform: *La dama duende* would not rise to the standards of Benjamin's countertradition. Benjamin makes brief remarks on this Spanish genre in the subsection *Die Ehre* ("Honour"), but he is more concerned with emphasising the amorality of the Spanish Baroque than in understanding Spanish Baroque comedy in its own terms. The reference to the *comedia de capa y espada* begins by highlighting the opposition between Spanish and German Baroque drama that structures the book's argument:

Auf solchem Grunde hat das spanische Theater ein eigenes bedeutendes Motiv entwickelt, das wie kein anderes gestattet, den beschränkten Ernst des deutschen Trauerspiels als nationell bedingten zu erkennen. Die beherrschende Rolle der Ehre in der Verwicklung der *comedia de capa y espada* wie auch im Trauerspiel aus dem kreatürlichen Stande der dramatischen Person hervorzugehen zu sehen, kann überraschen. Und doch ist es nicht anders (p. 265).

On such a basis the Spanish theatre developed a characteristic and meaningful motif that, like no other, makes it possible to recognize the hidebound earnestness of the German trauerspiel as something nationally determined. To regard the dominant role of the intrigues in the *comedia de capa y espada*, as also in the trauerspiel, as proceeding from the creaturely estate of the dramatic character may seem surprising. But such is indeed the case (*Origin*, p. 74).

As I have shown in Chapter Two ("Calderón's Seven Artistic Sins"), Benjamin claims that this dramatic notion of honour is employed by Spanish Baroque playwrights to sacralise earthly matters. Through honour, then, Spanish plays cover up what Benjamin understands as the gracelessness of the Baroque; to put it in *Ursprung*'s terms, honour redeems and protects the individual from the creaturely state of worldly affairs through a dialectical and totalizing reconciliation: "Im spanischen Drama ist durch eine beispiellose Dialektik des Ehrbegriffs die kreatürliche Bloße der Person wie nirgends sonst einer überlegenden, ja versöhnenden Darstellung fähig geworden" (p. 266; "In the Spanish drama, through an unparalleled dialectic of the concept of honor, the creaturely vulnerability of the person was rendered capable of a superior and indeed conciliatory presentation, such as was nowhere else to be seen", *Origin*, p. 75). For Benjamin, this conception of honour marks one of the array of differences between the German and

Spanish material: since Spanish honour secures worldly redemption, Spanish plays can afford to be light and playful. German plays are characterised by their seriousness because, in the German Baroque, there is no equivalent with which to overcome history's decay and melancholy. Within the fragmented aesthetics of *Ursprung*, such an emphasis on playfulness, and its association with the comic genre, is dismissed as ideological. Benjamin makes sure to emphasise this by the end of the paragraph, in which he embeds a quote from Schopenhauer to make his final point against the aesthetics of the *comedia de capa y espada*.

The quote from Schopenhauer, as many others from *Ursprung*, is obscure and enigmatic. Above all, Schopenhauer focuses on Calderón's Romanticism and the "scholastische Spitzfindigkeit" (scholastic subtlety) of his *capa y espada* plays.²⁰⁹ Immediately afterwards, the philosopher's inability to understand the "Geist" (spirit) of Spanish drama is mentioned (*Ursprung*, p. 266). No further evidence is provided for this claim; instead, Schopenhauer's incomprehension is attributed to the "Amoralität" (amorality) of the Spanish Baroque, which is said to be alien to German interpreters: "Und nahe liegt die Versuchung, sein Befremden aus jener dem Germanen so entlegenen Amoralität der spanischen Betrachtung herzuleiten. Auf ihrem Grunde spielten spanische Tragödien und Komödien ineinander" (*Ursprung*, pp. 266-67; "and it is tempting to attribute his incomprehension to that amorality in the Spanish conception that is so foreign to the German. It was on the basis of such a conception that Spanish tragedies and comedies could play into one another", *Origin*, p. 76). From these remarks alone, with which the paragraph abruptly ends, it is difficult to reconstruct the position of *Ursprung*'s narrative voice.

²⁰⁹ Schopenhauer's quotation refers to *No siempre el [sic] peor es cierto* and *El postrero [sic] duelo de España*, both by Calderón (*Ursprung*, p. 266).

More hints are provided in the beginning of the next paragraph, in which the argument moves to the “Sophistische Probleme, ja Lösungen” (sophistic problems, and indeed solutions) of Spanish drama, which do not play a part in German Baroque theatre: “[sie] begegnen nicht im schwerfälligen Raisonement der deutschen protestantischen Dramatiker” (p. 267; “[these] are not encountered in the ponderous reasoning of the German Protestant dramatists; *Origin*, p. 76). The reference to sophistry thus leads back to Schopenhauer’s claim about the “scholastische Spitzfindigkeit” of the *capa y espada* subgenre. Herein lies the difference, and indeed amorality, of Spanish Baroque drama: it reconstructs, with scholastic sophistry, convoluted solutions that cover up decay and melancholy. In the following sentences, *Ursprung*’s attention to comic plays swiftly turns into a discussion about the melancholy rise and fall of kings (p. 267); the assumption here is that comedy cannot do justice to the moral and ethical demands of Benjamin’s alternative modernity. In his obsession with melancholy, Benjamin misses the opportunity to consider Baroque comedy in its own terms; instead, Spanish comic drama is measured against the standards of his fragmented aesthetics, which become the only blueprint for authentic artforms. With the aim of contesting Benjamin’s aesthetics of fragmentation, I now turn to Calderón’s *La dama duende*. Despite its totalizing structure and its allegedly sophistic solutions to honour-related issues, I argue that this *comedia de capa y espada* remains critical and thought-provoking.

The play dramatises the story of Doña Ángela, a young widow who is confined within her household, which is guarded by her two brothers: Don Luis and Don Juan. However, she refuses to be confined and instead goes out to present herself in the court in disguise. She is almost found out and discovered by Don Luis, but she manages to get away thanks to the help of Don Manuel, the *galán* figure, to whom she pleads for help. Don Manuel ends up in a quarrel with Don Luis. The succession of coincidences that

follow highlights the comic nature of this play: as it turns out, Don Manuel had been invited to Don Luis's house by Don Luis' brother, Don Juan, and so the fight ends up peacefully — when Don Juan appears — and the *galán* stays in the household. Once Doña Ángela learns of his stay, she and her servant deploy a plan to catch his attention. She uses tricks and disguises of a metatheatrical nature in order to presents herself as a mysterious lady and to seduce Don Manuel — the play's happy ending finishes soon after their marriage is arranged. Through marriage, the invisible Doña Ángela recuperates her social identity in the patriarchal society that she inhabits.²¹⁰

Within the framework of *Ursprung*, the playfulness of the drama, alongside its happy ending and closed structure, would be dismissed as ideological and uncritical. The drama's main theme is Doña Ángela's endeavour to reclaim her social identity without losing her honour. To that matter, she unabashedly takes the role of a plotter or intrigant who weaves metatheatrical plays-within-plays to secure her redemption in purely social terms. As a consequence of such metatheatrical recreations, the play's formal structure is all but fragmented. Calderón displays his craftsmanship by showing the audience his ability to craft plays-within-plays and to intertwine the borders between fiction and reality. In *La dama duende*, the dénouement is "solved" through Doña Ángela's marriage, which provides closure to the fictional world with resource to the narrative figure of the *deus ex machina*. For Benjamin, such a totalizing narrative structure would amount to the Spaniard's misleading sacralisation of earthly matters; in his vocabulary, to a daemonic mixture of immanence and transcendence.²¹¹

²¹⁰ On Doña Ángela's quest to recuperate her social identity, see Jonathan Thacker, "A Strategy for Self-Expression: The Puppet-Mistress", in *Role-Play and the World as Stage in the Comedia* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002), pp. 109-31; Jesús Pérez Magallón, "Una aproximación general a *La dama duende*", in Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *La dama duende*, ed. by Pérez Magallón, *Letras Hispánicas* 687 (Madrid: Cátedra, 2011), pp. 25-47; Frederick De Armas, "IV. The Phantom Lady" in *The Invisible Mistress: Aspects of Feminism and Fantasy in the Golden Age*, (Charlottesville: Biblioteca Siglo de Oro, 1976), pp. 123-61; and Juan Luis Suárez, "¿Quién es Doña Ángela? Drama, identidad e intimidad en *La dama duende*", in *Sexo(s) e identidad(es) en la cultura hispánica*, ed. by Ricardo de la Fuente y Jesús Pérez Magallón (Valladolid: Universitas Castellae, 2002), pp. 156-72.

²¹¹ Many other critics have also argued that the *comedia de capa y espada* in general and *La dama duende* in particular is an ideological and uncritical play. See, for instance, Ángel del Río, "Desde los orígenes

Doña Ángela's character parallels the Benjaminian figure of the daemonic, whose aim is to mix fiction and reality and, by doing so, to mislead the audience into believing that they are also characters from within the larger metaphor of the world as stage; and that, just like the characters of the play they are watching, they will also wake up to a more authentic reality once the performance ends. The parallelism is indeed uncanny: although *Ursprung* makes no explicit reference to the play, nor is there a reason to believe that Benjamin read it, the comparison between Doña Ángela's plotter-like figure and the Devil is one of the leading motifs of *La dama duende*. It makes its first appearance immediately after the initial scene in which Doña Ángela is almost caught outside from the household by her brother. Once she is safely back in the house, Don Luis tells her about his encounter with this mysterious lady in disguise, which was interrupted by Don Manuel's meddling—to which she replies:

DOÑA ÁNGELA: —¡Miren la mala mujer
en qué ocasión te había puesto!
Que hay mujeres tramoyeras;
Pondré que no conocía
quién eras y que lo hacía
sólo porque la siguieras (Act I, vv. 514-519).²¹²

ANGELA: What an evil woman to have put you in such a situation! Oh, these conniving women! I should assume that she did not know who you were, and that she only did what she did because [she wanted you to follow her] (Act I, transl. modified).²¹³

This is a funny episode because the audience knows, unlike Don Luis, that the “mala mujer” (evil woman) whom Ángela is accusing of deceitfully enticing him is none other than herself. The adjective *tramoyeras* (“conniving”) refers to the noun *tramoya*, i.e. the theatre's deceptive stagecraft. Hence Doña Ángela not only underscores the deceitful

hasta 1700”, in *Historia de la literatura española*, 2 vols (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963), I, p.438; and Evangelina Rodríguez Cuadros, *Calderón*, *Historia de la literatura universal* 22 (Madrid: Síntesis, 2002).

²¹² Quotation henceforth from Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *La dama duende*, ed. Evangelina Rodríguez Cuadros, *Base de Datos Teatro Español del Siglo de Oro* (Alicante: Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 2000). URL: shorturl.at/dtvA2.

²¹³ Translations henceforth from Calderón de la Barca, *The Phantom Lady*, transl. by Matthew D. Stroud. URL: http://www.comedias.org/play_texts/translate/phantom1.html.

nature of fiction, but she also deceives her brother with the truth, which makes matters more complicated as well as more humorous.²¹⁴ The audience, seeing through Doña Ángela's words, laugh at Don Luis' inability to distinguish make believe from reality.²¹⁵ From their standpoint, it is obvious that she is the one directing the plot of her play-within-the-play, and this is why she plays the devil figure. Unlike in Benjamin's devil figure, however, the art of scheming and crafting metatheatrical worlds makes possible her emancipation from ideology (in this case, that of the patriarchal world she inhabits). Furthermore, and as Thacker has argued, "audience sympathy and that of Calderón is clearly with her" ("A Strategy for Self-Expression", p. 132).

Don Luis' comic failure aligns him to other male characters of *La dama duende*, who are also temporarily tricked by female figures. The action takes place within the household, and it is within such limits that Doña Ángela is capable of turning patriarchal expectations upside down. Indeed, the fragility of male characters — always within the domestic territory — is comically exaggerated; despite their public appearances, in which they portray themselves as strong and confident, in private they show themselves to be impotent. By way of example, Don Luis secretly admits to his *criado* Rodrigo that his powerlessness is embodied in the "alacena de vidrio" (wall cupboard made of glass) separating Doña Ángela and Don Manuel's room:

RODRIGO: don Manuel, no ha de saber
que en casa, señor, se encierra
tal mujer [...]
...fabricó [don Juan] en ella
una alacena de vidrios
labrada de tal manera

²¹⁴ On metafiction in *La dama duende*, see Frederick A. de Armas, "La dama duende como metateatro: dioses, semidioses y la cuarta pared" in *Cartografía teatral: en homenaje al profesor José Romera Castillo*, ed. by Guillermo Laín Corona, Rocío Santiago Nogales, (Madrid: Visor Libros, 2019), 203-221; and Pérez Magallón, "Una aproximación general", p. 39. On metafiction in Spanish Golden Age drama, see the aforementioned Thacker, *Role-Play and the World as Stage*.

²¹⁵ For a good characterisation of doña Ángela's brothers, see Pérez Magallón, "Personajes, personas, personalidades", pp. 54-74. On the play's sense of humour, see Antonio Rey Hazas and Florencio Sevilla Arrollo, "Introducción", in Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *La dama duende; Casa con dos puertas, mala es de guardar*, ed. by Rey Hazas and Florencio Sevilla, Autores Hispánicos: Clásicos Universales, 172 (Barcelona: Planeta, 1989).

que parece que jamás
 en tal parte ha habido puerta [...]
 DON LUIS: ¿Ves con lo que me aseguras?
 Pues con eso mismo intentas
 darme muerte, pues ya dices
 que no ha puesto, por defensa
 de su honor, más que unos vidrios
 que al primer golpe se quiebran (Act I, vv. 344-51, 361-366).

RODRIGO: your guest [Don] Manuel [will not know] that such a woman is imprisoned in your house [...] The old door to the rest of the house has been closed up [by Don Juan], and in front of it has been placed a cupboard with mirrored doors designed in such a way that no one would suspect that there is a passageway behind it. DON LUIS: You think this gives me a sense of security? The very fact fills me with dread. What you are telling me is that nothing stands in defense of Angela's honor except a few mirrored panes of glass, which can easily broken with one blow (Act I, transl. modified)

Don Luis's fear is that Don Manuel will discover the secret of the cupboard. He sees Doña Ángela as a weak being that has to be protected from the exterior; but the audience knows that she manipulates the strings from behind. She is the one, after all, who will use the wall cabinet for her advantage in order to entice Don Manuel.²¹⁶ From the perspective of the audience, Don Luis is ridiculed: although he seeks to appear brave and declares himself ready to fight for his honour, he is in fact the one being misled and deceived. Throughout *La dama duende*, Calderón repeatedly contrasts what characters think with what the audience knows to create funny situations at the expense of male characters—as is also the case with the *galán* Don Manuel.

Don Manuel enters the household at Don Juan's invitation; he has not been told that his sister lives there, nor does he know that his sister is, in fact, the lady in disguise whom he had tried to help from being discovered by Don Luis. He is accompanied by the *gracioso* ("lackey") figure Cosme, who will mock his master's attempts to play Don Quixote. Once inside, they are lodged in a room that secretly communicates with Doña Ángela's chamber; as mentioned above, the audience knows this but the characters do

²¹⁶ Thacker has shown that Doña Ángela's plays with Don Manuel patriarchal expectations about virginity, and that this is embodied in her uses of the "alacena de vidrio", which can be taken to symbolise the hymen: "the only hymen to break is the fictional one, put in position by the women herself" ("A Strategy for Self-Expression", p. 130).

not. Their first encounter with Doña Ángela will, from their perspective, be full of mystery; she must remain invisible for them because, as a widow, she has lost her social identity. But Doña Ángela's identity will not be a mystery for the audience, who are instead encouraged to laugh at Cosme and Don Manuel's ignorance. Hence the audience is encouraged to take Doña Ángela's perspective and to empathise with her lack of freedom.²¹⁷

The *gracioso* Cosme is prominently made fun of as a consequence of Doña Ángela's deeds. Once she learns that Don Manuel is lodged in a room right beside hers, and that this room is separated by the *alacena*, Ángela waits until they leave and secretly leaves a letter addressed to his master. She is accompanied by her own *criada* Isabel, who unpacks Cosme's suitcase and exchanges his money for charcoal. Cosme soon learns about the theft, tells others, and starts mumbling that there must be a magical being, which he first calls *duende*, haunting the house (Act I, vv. 915-24). Since he plays the figure of the fool, his words are taken with skepticism; from the perspective of Don Juan and Don Luis, it appears that he wants to trick them out of their money. Don Manuel, for his part, only believes his lackey when he finds Doña Ángela's letter. In quixotic manner, he becomes immediately excited about the mysterious adventure that it promises. He is determined to reply without letting others know, and he does so in a highly chivalrous tone and vocabulary:

Fermosa dueña, cualquiera que vós séais la condolida deste afanado caballero, y a saz piadosa minoráis sus cuitas, ruego vós me queráis facer sabidor del follón mezquino, o agano malandrín, que en este encanto vos amancilla, para que segunda vegada en vuestro nombre, sano ya de las pasadas feridas, entre en descomunal batalla, maguer que finque en ella, que non es la vida de más proo que la muerte, tenido a su deber un caballero. El Dador de la Luz vos mampare, e a mí non olvide. El Caballero de la Dama Duende (Act II, vv. 20-21).

Most beauteous damsel, in whatever way you may have been aggrieved by this, your faithful servant, may you lessen his hardships by your ample piety. Pray make known to me the identity of the evil malefactor or pagan conjurer who imprisons you in this enchantment, such that, now that my earlier wounds have healed, I might present myself

²¹⁷ Thacker is right to highlight that Doña Ángela's motivation for trickery is her desire for freedom ("A Strategy for Self-Expression", p. 111).

as your defender in single and terrible combat, even though I may perish in the pursuit. Life is no better than death, if a knight have not honor. May the giver of light hold you safe and forget me not. The Knight of the Phantom Lady (Act II).

Don Manuel's style is rich in archaisms, exaggerated to such an extent that they become ludicrous. The audience is expected to laugh at his infatuation, since they know what is really going on behind appearances. This is Doña Ángela's charade, which she puts up with the aim of overcoming the strict gendered rules that keep her invisible and without honour. If it were not for her loneliness, her invisibility, and her ostracism—of which the audience is of course aware—, she would appear evil and sibylline.²¹⁸ This is how she appears for Cosme who, in his limited perspective, becomes more and more fearful of her. Therefore, he will warn his master—who is letting himself be carried away by the spell of chivalric fiction, just like Don Quixote before him—that they are not dealing with a Dulcinea, but rather with the devil:

COSME: Que es mujer diablo.
Pues que novedad no es,
pues la mujer es demonio
todo el año, que una vez
por desquitarse de tantas
sea el diablo mujer (Act II, vv. 1135-40).

COSME: That women is the devil; there's nothing unusual about that. If a woman can be a devil day in and day out, why should we be surprised that in this occasion the devil should appear as a woman? (Act II).

Cosme utters such words just after they almost discover Doña Ángela's identity: she had just entered their room under cover of darkness and they had bumped into her, but she manages to extinguish the candle just in time so as to maintain her invisibility and run away. This close encounter with the phantom lady leaves Don Manuel in a state of uncertainty: she seems real and he is therefore inclined to come up with a rational explanation to what is going on, but his infatuation with chivalric romances makes him want to believe that he is living an extraordinary adventure:

²¹⁸ Pérez Magallán also explains well that doña Ángela calls for the audience's sympathy: "la simpatía del público se orientará hacia la dama, hacia el personaje mentiroso, burlador, que prepara con ingenio un engaño. Es propio del género cómico suscitar la simpatía por la víctima que se opone al agresor." ("Una aproximación general", p. 73).

DON MANUEL: Como sombra se mostró,
 fantástica su luz se fue,
 pero como cosa humana
 se dejó tocar y ver;
 como mortal se temió,
 receló como mujer,
 como ilusión se deshizo,
 como fantasma se fue.
 Si doy rienda al discurso,
 no sé, vive Dios, no sé,
 ni qué tengo de dudar,
 ni qué tengo de creer (Act II, vv. 1123-1132).

MANUEL: She appeared as a shadow illuminated by a fantastic light, but, like all things human, she was able to be seen and touched. Like a mortal she feared me, like a woman she sought me out, like an illusion she deceived me, like a spirit she escaped me. If I think about this matter too much, by God, I shall not know what to doubt or what to believe (Act II).

In contrast to both Cosme and Don Manuel, the audience knows who this enigmatic phantom lady is: their position, following the Baroque metaphor of the world as a stage, is tantamount to that of God. Just like He observes from afar the events of history, so they observe the events of the theatre; and, just like Him, their all-encompassing standpoint allows them to know the truth behind appearances. This is, as mentioned earlier, the metaphysical danger that Benjamin identifies in Spanish Baroque drama. However, the clear-cut comparison is questioned in Act III, in which Doña Ángela's scheme is unmasked. As is usually the case in Calderón's dramas, her efforts to pull the strings of fate are eventually trumped by what is called *acasos* ("chance"), which can be described as unexpected events that turn destiny upside down.²¹⁹

Doña Ángela's final scheme is prepared in Act II, in which she tells Doña Beatriz her adventure with Don Manuel as well as her future plans to meet him. She is worried, however, about the policing presence of her brothers, who do not leave the house often. The reason is that they have feelings for Doña Beatriz, and so they wish to be around her as much as possible:

DOÑA ÁNGELA:

Todo advertido,

²¹⁹ On the concept of *acaso* in seventeenth-century Spanish theatre, see Henry Sullivan, *Tragic Drama*, p. 359; and Regalado, *Calderón: los orígenes de la modernidad*, p. 491.

está ya, y por estar tú aquí no ha sido
hoy la noche primera
que ha de venir a verme

DOÑA BEATRIZ: ¿No supiera
yo callar el suceso
de tu amor?

DOÑA ÁNGELA: que no prima, no es por eso,
sino que estando en casa tú, como a mis hermanos les abrasa
tu amor, no salen della,
adorando los rayos de tu estrella,
y fuera aventurarme,
no ausentándose ellos, empañarme (Act II, vv. 653-664).

ANGELA: Everything is just as you said. But since you are here with me, tonight will not be the night of our meeting.

BEATRIZ: I can keep the secret of your love!

ANGELA: No, cousin, that's not the reason. With you in our house, and with my brothers buzzing about you hopelessly in love, idolizing the very ground you walk on, it would be entirely too risky. I'll have to wait until they leave.

Up until this scene, Doña Ángela's power seemed uncontested, if only within the limits of the household. But the audience soon watches how Don Luis, Doña Beatriz's unrequited lover, eavesdrops on their dialogue. Don Luis learns that she will soon fake leaving only to hide herself somewhere within the house (Act II, vv. 679-724). The plot is further complicated since Don Luis does not really understand what they are up to: he infers, out of jealousy, that Doña Beatriz is scheming a way to secretly meet his brother Don Juan; he decides he will uncover her deceit. The dramatic tension is thereby set up for Act III, and the audience anticipates that the play's labyrinthine machinations are soon to be unraveled.

Act III begins with Don Manuel, who has received a letter from Doña Ángela with precise instructions on how to proceed if she wants to meet her. Everything appears to be perfectly arranged, and so Isabel guides the *galán* through the darkness of the night into what he believes to be a sumptuous palace:

[DON MANUEL]: Tu deseo
lograste, amor, pues ya ves
la dama; aventuras leo.
(Acecha)
¡Qué casa tan alhajada!
¡Qué mujeres tan lucidas!
¡Qué sala tan adornada!
¡Qué damas tan bien prendidas!

¡Qué beldad tan extremada! (Act III, vv. 33-40)

[MANUEL]: Love, you have fulfilled your desire.. (*Looking into the main part of Angela's room.*) I see the lady and await an adventure. What an enchanted house! What lovely ladies! What a sumptuous room! What riches! What beauty! (Act III).

The audience is aware that the house in which Don Manuel finds himself is none other than that of the two brothers, indeed where he has been all along. They know that Don Manuel is intoxicated by the narrative of chivalric romance and by his desire for adventures. In contrast to his naivety, bordering on madness, Doña Ángela appears to him at the height of her power. She now overtly takes the role of a playwright, weaving the fate of her male suitor as she wishes and giving stage directions to her female companions:

DOÑA BEATRIZ: ¿Y qué ha de ser mi papel?

DOÑA ÁNGELA: Agora el de criada
luego el de ver, retirada,
lo que me pasa con él (Act III, vv. 46-49)

BEATRIZ: (*To Angela*) (What is my role to be?)

ANGELA: (*To Beatriz.*) (For the moment, that of my servant. Later, [to watch, from a distance, that which happens to me with him] (Act III, transl. modified).

But, as the audience anticipates, Don Luis is about to interrupt the scene and break up the spell of her fiction. He soon knocks the door of her room, which provokes dismay and increases the dramatic tension: are they going to get caught? How is this labyrinthine plot, rich as it is in confusion, going to find a successful resolution? Doña Ángela continues in her efforts to maintain her fiction, and misleadingly tells don Manuel that this is her husband: “Señor, mi esposo es aqueste” (Act III, v. 185; “Sir, this is my husband”). The *criada* Isabel immediately carries Don Manuel to his old room, who is completely lost as to where he is, and the darkness of the night plays to the advantage of the female characters. Should Don Luis see Don Manuel, he would challenge him physically, and the scene could potentially end tragically.

This, of course, does not happen. Calderón, instead, masterfully exploits the comic possibilities of the play: just at the point in which the plot could take a more

serious turn, Cosme the *gracioso* makes his appearance and proclaims his happiness.

Despite the lack of light, he feels safe going back to his room now: the phantom lady already has his master's attention, and so he believes that she has lost interest in him. To his surprise, and to the audience's delight, he quickly finds out that there is another mysterious presence in the dark room:

COSME: Gracias a Dios que esta noche
entrar podré libremente
en mi aposento, sin miedo,
aunque sin luz salga y entre,
porque el duende mi señor,
puesto que a mi amo tiene,
¿para qué me quiere a mí?
Pero para algo me quiere
(Topa con don Manuel)
¿Quién va?, ¿quién es?

DON MANUEL: Calle, digo,
quien quiera que es, si no quiere,
que le mate a puñaladas (Act III, vv. 254-64).

COSME: Thank God that I was able to come back freely and fearlessly into my room, even though I have no light. Then again, if the ghost has my master, what would he want from me? (*He bumps into Manuel.*) Uh oh! More trouble. Who goes there? Who are you?

MANUEL: Hold your tongue, I tell you, whoever you are, if you do not wish to die pummeled by my fists (Act III).

The audience is not expected to take Don Manuel's menace seriously: they know, after all, who each of the characters is — and it was highly unconventional for *graciosos* to die on stage, let alone at the hand of their masters.²²⁰ Cosme himself does not seem too scared, for he replies with a funny retort: “No hablaré más que un pariente / pobre en la casa del rico” (Act III, vv. 265-66; “You have my word on it. I won't speak any more than a poor relative in the house of a rich man”, Act III, translation modified). Ignoring the tragic potential of the scene, Calderón exploits the comicality of their encounter: since the *gracioso* ignores the identity of his interlocutor, he feels even less bound than usual by social rules and can therefore freely express what he thinks about his master:

²²⁰ On the figure of the *gracioso* in Calderón, see Roy Norton, “Calderón's *graciosos*”, in *A Companion to Calderón*, pp. 199-222. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv24tr9nd.17>. The character of Cosme is analysed in “Cosme (*La dama duende*)”, pp. 202-09.

DON MANUEL: [Di] ¿Y tú, quién eres?

COSME: Soy un fámulo o criado,
soy un súbdito, un sirviente,
que sin qué, ni para qué,
estos encantos padece.

DON MANUEL: Y, ¿quién es tu amo?

COSME: Es

un loco, un impertinente,
un tonto, un simple, un menguado,
que por tal dama se pierde.

DON MANUEL: Y ¿es su nombre?

COSME: Don Manuel

Enríquez (Act III, vv. 278-88).

MANUEL: And who are you?

COSME: I am a servant or valet, an underling, a lackey who suffers these enchantments without knowing why.

MANUEL: And who is your master?

COSME: He's a madman, impertinent, foolish, idiotic, and wretched, who has lost his mind over a lady.

MANUEL: And his name?

COSME: Manuel Enríquez (Act III).

Having revealed their identity to each other, their confusion increases. Whereas the *galán* still believes that he is at Doña Ángela's palace, Cosme rightly thinks that they are back in their room. They soon discover that the *gracioso* is right: as he has just comically expressed, Don Manuel is the one who is acting the fool as a consequence of his infatuation. Hence the audience is expected to laugh at the *galán*, who, despite his higher social rank, has exchanged roles with his lackey and has now become the fool. And yet Cosme, fearful like many a *gracioso*, declares that he is no longer capable of distinguishing between fiction and reality:

DON MANUEL: Pues dime, ¿qué cuarto es este?

COSME: El tuyo o el del demonio (Act III, vv. 303-04).

MANUEL: What room is this?

COSME: Either yours or the devil's.

By the end of the play, Don Manuel is granted the gift of *desengaño*: he has been duped by Doña Ángela, and he learns that she is Don Luis' and Don Juan's sister. Cosme had been right to believe that they had not left the household; just as he had been right in calling his master a fool and a madman. Don Manuel's *desengaño*, from the standpoint

of his society's social standards, is bitter: whilst he has been led to believe that Doña Ángela is a high born lady, he eventually discovers that she is a widow; and that, deprived of social identity, she has been locked up and imprisoned by her brothers.²²¹ As much as he might love the phantom lady, Don Manuel finds himself on the horns of a dilemma: he *must* marry Doña Ángela, or else he will have offended the honour of his friend and host and will also appear as a traitor in the eyes of his society:

[DON MANUEL]: Pues, ¿qué es lo que pretendo?
Si es hacerme traidor, si la defiendo;
si la dejo, villano;
si la guardo, mal huésped; inhumano,
si a su hermano la entrego;
soy mal amigo, si a aguardarla llego;
ingrato, si la libro, a un noble trato;
y si la dejo, a un noble amor, ingrato.
Pues de cualquier manera
mal puesto he de quedar, matando muera (Act III, vv. 781-90).

[MANUEL]: So, what am I supposed to do? If I defend her, I am a traitor; if I abandon her, I am a cad; if I hide her, I am an unworthy guest; if I turn her over to her brother, I am less than human; if I take her under my protection, I am an unworthy friend. Since no matter which choice I make I must end up worse off, at least let me die fighting.) Fear not, madam. I am a nobleman and you are now with me (Act III).

La dama duende, as many critics have emphasised, remains within the domains of comedy, and the bloody outcome that Don Manuel anticipates does not take place (Pérez Magallón, "Una aproximación general"). Instead, the plot's complications are resolved through their marriage, which redeems her social invisibility and lack of freedom as well as Don Manuel's honour. This is indeed the sophisticated sophistry to which Benjamin alludes in *Ursprung*: all the aforementioned complications are solved in the ending through a *deus ex machina* figure (Pérez Magallón, "Una aproximación

²²¹ The extent to which Don Manuel and Doña Ángela fall in love is controversial. Robert Sloane, for instance, makes the point that he only marries out of knightly duty; see his "In the Laberynth of the Self: Character and Role in Calderón's *La dama duende*", in *Studies in Honor of Elias Rivers*, ed. by Bruno M. Damiani and Ruth S. El Saffar, Scripta Humanistica 50 (Potomac, MD: Scripta Humanistica, 1989), pp. 180-95. A similar point is raised by Matthew D. Stroud, "Social-comic Anagnorisis in *La dama duende*", *Bulletin of the Comediantes*, 29.2 (1977), 96-102". Pérez Magallón, however, strongly disagrees and instead argues that their love grows alongside the development of the plot ("Una aproximación general", pp. 32-34). More convincing is Thacker, who focuses on the fact that "she is *not* inspired by love" and that her rebellion, and thereby the crux of the play, lies "against the role society has dictated that she plays as an impecunious widow, not specifically against her lack of opportunities for romance" ("A Strategy for Self-Expression", p. 112).

general”, p. 35). For Benjamin, such a narrative cohesion, alongside the play’s closed structure, elicits an uncritical feeling of order and security. I argue, however, that the play’s sanguine ending begs thought-provoking questions about the nature of reality and about fiction’s capacity to move and captivate us. These are emphasised in Cosme’s concluding remarks, which, following the conventions of the genre, break down the third wall and directly appeal to the audience. His words not only show off Calderón’s craftsmanship; they also remind the audience that the upside down world of *La dama duende* is nothing less than fiction:

COSME: Gracias a Dios, que ya el duende
se declaró. Dime, ¿estaba
borracho?

DON MANUEL: Si no lo estás,
hoy con Isabel te casas.

COSME: Para estarlo fuera eso,
mas no puedo.

ISABEL: ¿Por qué causa?

COSME: Por no malograr el tiempo
que en estas cosas se gasta,
pudiéndolo aprovechar
en pedir de nuestras faltas
perdón; humilde el autor
os le pide a vuestras plantas (vv. 859-70).

COSME: Thank God the ghost finally declared herself! Tell me, was it all a drunken dream?

MANUEL: Indeed, it was not, and today you shall marry Isabel.

COSME: [It would be worth being drunk for that]. Sorry, but I can’t.

ISABEL: And why not?

COSME: Because I don’t want to waste time better spent by asking this kind audience to forgive our mistakes. [The author] humbly asks your good will and kind indulgence (Act III, translation modified).

Cosme is here expressing his relief that the mysteries surrounding the phantom lady have been unveiled — he is right to believe that the adventure was aimed at his master. In a Sancho-like manner, he has been robbed; he has been made fun at; his moments of rest have been interrupted; and he has also felt fear as a consequence of Doña Ángela’s play-within-the-play.²²² But the *gracioso* acknowledges the extraordinary nature of

²²² The influence of Cervantes’s influence on Calderón has been studied, amongst others, in Ignacio Arellano, “Cervantes en Calderón”, *Anales Cervantinos*, 34 (1999), 9-35.

Doña Ángela's deeds, which have been able to turn the world of his masters—if only fleetingly—upside down.²²³ Through the intoxicating power of fiction, Doña Ángela dupes the male characters so as to briefly reclaim her agency; when her fiction is unveiled, the patriarchal world takes over and thereby the male characters arrange that marriage is now the best solution. After the restoration of the patriarchy, Cosme enquires whether he has been intoxicated all along. Having sobered up to Doña Ángela's fiction, Don Manuel feels patriarchally empowered: he replies that he will arrange Cosme's marriage with Isabel on the condition that he, too, stays sober.

Cosme tells Don Manuel that it would be nice to marry Isabel, but that this cannot be done; in response, Isabel enquires after the reason for his disdain. Cosme's final verses are beautifully crafted by Calderón, and indeed full of *ingenio* ("wit").²²⁴ One can imagine that the actor playing him turns to the audience in this final address in which the author's and the *gracioso*'s voices become conflated. The reason why their marriage is impossible, he tells us, is that the audience has already listened to a long story; there is no more time left for another one. In the little time that is left, the author prefers to humbly ask forgiveness for the many mistakes of *La dama duende*.

Just as Doña Ángela's metafiction has been unveiled, so Calderón unveils, through the *gracioso*, the fiction of his own play. He does so with rhetorical elegance: the audience's *desengaño* — their transition from fiction's immersion to their daily lives—is coupled with Cosme and Don Manuel awakening. Fiction is compared to getting drunk, since perception is transformed and things appear upside down; once the

²²³ On the carnivalesque aspect of the play, see Hans-Jörg Neuschäfer, "Revendications des sens et limites de la morale. Le paradigme anthropologique de la doctrine des passions et sa crise dans le drame classique espagnol et français", in *Estudios de literatura española y francesa. Siglos XVI y XVII. Homenaje a Horst Baader*, ed. by Frauke Gewecke, Editionen der Iberoamericana 13 (Vervuert: Frankfurt am Main, 1985), pp. 105-23.

²²⁴ Critics have rightly argued that the *comedia de capa y espada* provided dramatists with the opportunity to show off their wit and craftsmanship (Pérez Magallón, "Una aproximación general", p. 16). Some, however, wrongly assume that such display of one's dramatic abilities is proper of superficial and uncritical artworks; see Karl C. Gregg, "Towards a Definition of the *comedia de capa y espada*", *Romance Notes*, 18.1 (1977), 103-06.

male characters sober up, Doña Ángela's power ends. From the audience's perspective, this final metatheatrical turn emphasises the distance between their everyday life and their experience at the playhouses: like Don Manuel and the other male characters, they too have been intoxicated by fiction. As mentioned earlier, they have been cast all along in a God-like position, watching from afar the events on stage. But Cosme's words remind them that this has been an illusion all along—in this case, schemed by Calderón so as to entertain them, winning over their attention, and reimagine social customs.

Their *desengaño*, just like Don Manuel's, signals the end of the show and brings them back to their patriarchal world. Yet this does not mean that the audience will remain unaffected by what has happened; they have felt the spell of fiction, and their final awakening, marking the ending of comedy, brings them back to a much more lacklustre reality. As we have seen, comedy opens up a space in which established borders, if only fleetingly, can be reimaged; and it does so by substituting the shock and violence that comes along with the questioning of ideological standards in everyday life by the fun and delight of entertainment, which encourages the audience to feel drawn to the world of the imagination and excited about the possibility of reimagining social norms. To echo the aforementioned words by Fray Manuel Guerra y Ribera, Calderón succeeds in weaving “los desengaños tan caídos, y los golpes tan suaves” (the awakenings so pleasurable, and the blows so softened).

All in all, the analysis of *La vida es sueño* and *La dama duende* has highlighted two Calderonian strategies, both in the tragicomic and in the comic mood, to challenge the audience's expectations while capturing their imagination in an entertaining manner. In *La vida es sueño*, the dramatist elicits the audience's sense of *admiratio*, which calls forth their immersion in the fiction by setting up expectations that are ultimately upset. This is, in turn, intimately linked to the play's aesthetics of the monstrous, which constantly surprises the audience so as to encourage them to abandon their assumptions

about the nature of reality. In *La dama duende*, Calderón plays with the spell of fiction so as to highlight the freedom of the imagination, which has the power to turn the standards of society upside down. In both cases, the awakenings of *desengaño* are not violent or painful, but rather delightful and thrilling. Ultimately, the aim has been to return to one of Benjamin's major sources so as to spell out an alternative to the assumption that responsible and thoughtful artforms must carry a melancholy mood and a destructive ethos which, in turn, obstruct the experience of letting ourselves be aesthetically immersed, captivated, and carried away.

CONCLUSIONS

It has been almost one hundred years since Benjamin was encouraged to withdraw the submission of *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* for examination at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Frankfurt. Although his name, according to Jennings and Eiland, “had passed into virtual oblivion in 1932”, his posthumous fame began in 1955 and was spearheaded by his friends Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno, and Gershom Scholem, all of whom recognised his intellectual uniqueness and were also deeply affected by the tragic circumstances of his death in 1940 on the Spanish border.²²⁵ Since then, Benjamin has achieved a quasi-mythical status within the fields of the humanities and social sciences; consequently, the secondary bibliography on the Jewish German writer is now enormous.²²⁶

This doctoral thesis has shown that Benjamin viewed canonicity with suspicion. In his unpublished essay on Calderón and Hebbel, he tells us that tradition withers the vitality of artforms because it bequeaths a fixed interpretation that becomes set in stone and thereby appears to be unquestionable; as I have shown, he dubs *Schicksal* (“fate”) such a fossilizing tendency of tradition. In *Ursprung*, Benjamin develops the project of questioning the authority of the literary canon, and he endeavours to build a countertradition which instead values disruption and discontinuity. This is why it is contradictory that, more recently, many Benjaminian tropes have become overused in the form of clichés, as Daniel Weidner argues; his status as an unquestionable authority runs against one of the main driving forces of Benjamin’s philosophical and critical

²²⁵ Michael W. Jennings and Howard Eiland, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2014), p. 11. On the construction of Benjamin’s posthumous fame, see Detlev Schöttker, “Walter Benjamin und seine Rezeption: Überlegungen zur Wirkungsgeschichte (aus Anlaß des 100. Geburtstag am 15. Juli 1992)”, *Leviathan: Zeitschrift für Sozialwissenschaft* 2 (1992), 268-80; David Bathrick, “Reading Walter Benjamin from East to West”, *Colloquia Germanica*, 12.3 (1979), 246-55; Jeffrey Grossman, “The Reception of Walter Benjamin in the Anglo-American Literary Institution”, *German Quarterly*, 65.3-4 (1992), 414-28.

²²⁶ See Ben Morgan, “Walter Benjamin Re-Situated”, *Paragraph*, vol. 41.2 (2018), 218-32.

project.²²⁷ If the project is worth remembering, we must therefore ask, along with Weidner, the following questions: “Why do we need such big name intellectuals?”, “what does Benjamin do for us?”, and “what is it about us that enables or even requires an author like Benjamin?” (“The Afterlife of Walter Benjamin”).

This doctoral thesis has considered *Ursprung* with such questions in mind. It has neither endeavoured to mythologise the book’s recreation of a melancholy mood nor the critical aloofness of Benjamin’s narrator. In its engagement with the methodology of *Ursprung*, it has questioned the assumption that the critic must hide and cover her everyday attachments, and that critical thought must take a melancholy mood as well as a destructive ethos.²²⁸ The fascinating world of Benjamin’s neo-Baroque has therefore provided a negative image through which to document an alternative path for criticism. Indeed, this path carries the critic away from a critical tradition that is suspicious of aesthetic attachment, absorption, and immersion. The objective has been to show that neither criticism or the arts require, for them to be valuable and thought-provoking, to school its practitioners and audiences into the position of detached decipherers; and that it is not dangerous, but rather desirable, to acknowledge the attachments that bind us to such practices in the first place.²²⁹ However, the reader might now query whether Benjamin’s theory of the Baroque has lost its actuality; that it no longer carries

²²⁷ Daniel Weidner, “The Afterlife of Walter Benjamin”, *The Future of Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Nitzan Lebovic, 5 (2015). Available at <https://importanceofbenjamin.cas.lehigh.edu/content/afterlife-walter-benjamin>.

²²⁸ See Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, IL, and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015). DOI: 10.7208/Chicago/9780226294179.001.0001; *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago, IL, and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2020). For further efforts to rethink the task of criticism in the early-twenty-first century, see Amanda Anderson, Rita Felski, and Toril Moi, *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies*, Trios, (Chicago, IL, and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2019). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226658834.001.0001>; and Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski (eds.), *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017). See also Rahel Jaeggi and Tilo Wesche, *Was ist Kritik*, Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, 1885 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009). It goes without saying that some of these still remain attached to the assumptions and vocabularies of the legacy of the Frankfurt School that this thesis sets out to reimagine; see, for instance, Rahel Jaeggi, “Was ist Ideologiekritik”, in *Was ist Kritik*, pp. 266-98, and John Michael, “Tragedy and Translation: A Future for Critique in a Secular Age”, *Critique and Postcritique*, pp. 252-79.

²²⁹ For an excellent example of critical scholarship which acknowledges — and, by doing so, productively reimagines — the attachments informing its argument, see Owen Flanagan, *The Geography of Morals: Varieties of Moral Possibilities* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).

significance in the modern day. In fact, having undertaken the analysis of the book, we may now ask ourselves: in which ways does the book illuminate the present? Which aspects of the present become especially salient through its lenses?

To begin with, I have argued that, once the mist of melancholy detachment is cleared, the elation of Benjamin's narrator comes to the fore with all its strength, and that this strength is the reason why *Ursprung* continues to inspire and fascinate readers. *Ursprung* revels and delights in the everyday practices of the bookish scholar, whose task is to bring back to life a plethora of lost and forgotten voices — a task that has become even more necessary in an age of rapid globalisation, growing inequalities, and which cultivates an obsession with fame. The melancholic mist, however, cannot be simply dispelled, for it is embedded within the work and plays the crucial role of obstructing what *Ursprung* considers to be facile and uncritical experiences of aesthetic immersion. Hence my analysis has made salient a contradiction of criticism that is seldom acknowledged: on the one hand, *Ursprung* makes a moving plea for questioning the authority and hierarchy of the Western canon and, to do so, vindicates the old-fashioned and the unknown; on the other, such an authority and hierarchy is replaced by a countertradition that remains attached to the canon's highbrow assumption that melancholy is a more serious and critical mood.

By going back to the poetics of the Spanish *comedia* and to Calderón in particular, this thesis has sought to further Benjamin's project of dismantling the canon and, consequently, to assert the value of popular art. It has thereby questioned the association between melancholy and critique as well as the academic suspicion of entertainment and aesthetic immersion. Indeed, and despite the Romantic association between Calderón, the sacredness of Catholic art, and highbrow culture, this thesis has defended the strategies through which his dramas appeal to and engage a popular and variegated audience in critical ways. In the poetics of the Spanish *comedia*, I have

singled out two techniques through which aesthetic attachment questions the order of reality. First, *La vida es sueño* sets up expectations that are ultimately disappointed in an entertaining manner, which leaves the audience in a state of dazzled *admiratio*. In doing so, it encourages the audience to relinquish their preconceptions and to see reality from a different perspective. Second, *La dama duende* encourages the audience to identify with characters who use the intoxicating power of fiction to turn the order of things upside down; and, as much as the illusion is dismantled when the performance ends, the spell of fiction does not leave the audience unaffected. Jonathan Thacker is right to point out that any dominant order “takes its own values to be truth, and is therefore undermined (revealed to be just another constructed way of viewing and ordering the world) when its roles are shown to be manufactured and manufacturable theatrically, rather than being essential”.²³⁰

Finally, this thesis’ engagement with *Ursprung* therefore makes salient the elitist nature of the divide between “high” and “low” art. It now becomes clear that the difference does not lie in the idea that the former shuns the spell of fiction whereas the latter exploits it in an ideological and manipulative manner; instead, it lies in the everyday practices of the audiences of such works. In the case of *Ursprung*, such practices amount to those of library dwellers and of the mandarin and learned elites in the Weimar Republic; in the case of Lope and Calderón, to those of the variegated public who flocked to the Spanish playhouses of their time. In questioning the highbrow suspicion of aesthetic immersion and attachment, this thesis hopes to clear the grounds for future research which not only takes popular culture seriously, but which also acknowledges the contradiction of undertaking criticism in a mood that disguises the attachments of its narrative voice.

²³⁰ *Role-Play and the World as Stage in the Comedia* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002), p. 179.

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