

Demonic Plants and Magical Language: Benjamin and Tawada reading Ottolie

Abstract

This chapter analyzes the reception of the “plant-like” character of Ottolie in the writings of Walter Benjamin and Yoko Tawada. Benjamin sees Ottolie as “unnatural” and foreign to plants, equating her “pflanzenhaftes Stummsein” with “das Ausdruckslose” an aesthetic force that could potentially transcend the mythic. Meanwhile, Tawada implicitly suggests that Benjamin’s reading left Ottolie’s corporeality and agency out of the picture. To understand Ottolie’s plant-like muteness, Tawada reintroduces the Goethean concept of the “demonic” and Benjamin’s reinvention of the term, arguing that Ottolie’s muteness is a demonic language that, despite often disregarded and ignored, could offer readers a new perspective of the text. By attempting to understand the mute language of plants and plant-like figures, Tawada aligns herself with a major motif of Benjaminian thought—the “magic” of language. She aims at translating the language of things to the language of man, thereby filling the gaps between currently existing systems of thoughts and writing.

Goethe's novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* tells the story of a group of friends – the Baron Eduard, his wife Charlotte, Eduard's best friend the "Hauptmann," and Charlotte's young niece Ottilie – living under the same roof and experimenting with their relationships and lives. The phrase "Wahlverwandtschaften" in the title refers to both the inevitable chemical reaction between calcium carbonate and sulphuric acid, which immediately recombine and form calcium sulphate and carbon dioxide, and the equally inevitable outcome of human relationships, in which certain individuals are fatefully attracted to each other. While the story is arguably about chemistry and people, or the chemistry between people, plants play a non-negligible role in the story. The story opens with a scene of grafting, gardens and gardening advices permeate the novel, and, perhaps most importantly, one of the characters, Ottilie, is constantly compared to plants. Goethe scholars have since long noticed this tendency, and some of them — particularly Friedrich Gundolf — also compare the progression of Ottilie's character with Goethe's theory of the metamorphosis of plants.ⁱ

In his essay "Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften," Benjamin presents Ottilie's "plant-like muteness" [pflanzenhaftes Stummsein] as an important theme throughout the essay, but he disagrees with Friedrich Gundolf, one of Germany's most powerful critical voices of his time, in comparing the figure of Ottilie directly with the existence of plants. Instead, Benjamin argues that Ottilie could not be more foreign to plants, since her innocent character is not "natural." Instead, Benjamin equates Ottilie's "plant-like muteness" with "the expressionless" [das Ausdruckslose], an aesthetic force that could potentially transcend the mythic. Albeit implicitly, Tawada suggests that this equation left Ottilie's corporeality, agency, and her own voice out of the picture. In order to read Ottilie's muteness, Tawada reintroduces the Goethean concept of the "demonic" as well as Benjamin's reinvention of the term, arguing that Ottilie's muteness is a "demonic" language that, despite often disregarded and ignored, could offer readers a new perspective of the entire text. By doing so, Tawada is

1. Ottolie and Plants

In the novel, Ottolie spends a lot of time in the garden, planting seeds in the flower-beds, taking pleasure in the way everything is growing, and listening to the gardener talking about the grafting of trees. She is genuinely upset when much of her work in the garden is destroyed by the mischievous Luciane, who squanders the greenery and branches on daily decoration of the rooms and the table. The narrator also compares Ottolie’s position in the household to the plants she takes care of: “indem nun die Pflanzen immer mehr Wurzel schlugen und Zweige trieben, fühlte sich auch Ottolie immer mehr an diese Räume gefesselt” (Goethe, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* 217, hereafter WV). After the death of Charlotte and Eduard’s child, Ottolie shuts herself in and refuses to speak to anyone, spending even more time in the garden, especially in front of the asters: “sie schien im Garten oft die Blumen zu mustern; sie hatte dem Gärtner angedeutet, die Sommergewächse aller Art zu schonen, und sich besonders bei den Astern aufgehalten, die gerade dieses Jahr in unmäßiger Menge blühten” (WV, 281). In her journal, Ottolie also expresses a strong curiosity towards nature, even though that curiosity is sometimes mixed with a sense of hesitation and fear: “Nur der Naturforscher ist verehrungswert, der uns das Fremdeste, Seltsamste mit seiner Lokalität, mit aller Nachbarschaft jedesmal in dem eigensten Elemente zu schildern und darzustellen weiß. Wie gern möchte ich nur einmal Humboldt erzählen hören!” (WV, 207) She also describes how even the poor beggars would immediately become active, as soon as nature offers them

something to do: “keines bittelt mehr, jedes reicht dir einen Strauß; es hat ihn gepflückt, ehe du vom Schlaf erwachtest, und das Bittende sieht dich so freundlich an wie die Gabe” (WV, 219). In the eyes of the schoolmaster, Ottilie is like a hidden fruit that would eventually develop into vigorous life.ⁱⁱ The strongest indication of Ottilie’s plant-like character is the parallel between Eduard’s plane-trees and Ottilie, which is emphasized throughout the book. The intimacy between Ottilie and the plant-trees is especially sharpened when Eduard finds out that the trees were planted not only in the same year Ottilie was born, but they in fact shared the same birthday.

2. Ottilie and Plants

During Ottilie’s boarding school period – when she still lives far away from the world of Christian values and ethics – she resembles an “innocent” plant. Often described as a natural, vegetal being, she is unable to adapt to the school environment or to meet the headmistress’s expectation, but she is nevertheless at ease with herself, learning and growing at her own pace. The headmistress reports that Ottilie is modest and agreeable to others, although the headmistress is not completely satisfied with Ottilie’s “zurücktreten” and “Dienstbarkeit” (WV, 27). The headmistress observes that, despite Charlotte sending Ottilie a variety of materials and money, the girl has not touched any of them; she dresses herself in a minimalistic fashion, only for cleanliness’ sake; she also eats and drinks too little. The schoolmaster reports a conversation between the headmistress and Ottilie, in which the headmistress criticizes Ottilie for her mediocre performance and her “dumm[es] Aussehen,” while Ottilie claims that it is the result of her headache (WV, 46). The young schoolmaster, witnessing this conversation, comments, “nun es ist wahr; niemand kann es wissen; den Ottilie verändert das Gesicht nicht, und ich habe auch nicht gesehen, daß sie einmal die Hand nach dem Schlafe zu bewegt hätte” (WV, 46). Despite failing to excel in the school curriculum, Ottilie seems to be naturally at ease with herself. The schoolmaster reports in his

letter that “solange ich sie unterrichte, sehe ich sie immer gleichen Schrittes gehen, langsam, langsam vorwärts, nie zurück. [...] Freilich ist es wunderbar: sie weiß vieles und recht gut; nur wenn man sie fragt, scheint sie nichts zu wissen” (WV, 28). For the schoolmaster, the reason why Ottilie does not seem to progress as her fellow students is because they have quite different capacities. Despite so, he believes that one day she will still develop into vigorous life.

When Ottilie moves in with Charlotte and Eduard, she gradually loses her “natural innocence” because the new environment is saturated with the language of fate, sin, and guilt, as Walter Benjamin points out in his essay “Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 138-140, hereafter GS). Charlotte invites Ottilie to live with them not only to offer her a better environment, but also to bring the relationship of the three friends back to a balance. As a result, Ottilie must be incorporated within this linguistic and ethical system – in a sense, “grafted” onto the tree of Eduard and Charlotte’s household, like the young branch we see in the opening scene of the novel – as long as she continues living there. Unlike her time in the boarding school, Ottilie can no longer live and learn at her own pace in the new house. She is often seen running around the household and taking care of everyone around her, paying attention to the likes and dislikes of Eduard. Evidence of any actions out of her own will gradually diminishes, until even her writing – both the content and the handwriting – has been replaced by those of someone else. The voice in her writing is deeply undercut by the fact that it is her habit to copy Eduard’s writing, to the point that she could perfectly mimic Eduard’s handwriting, as if he had written it himself. Even her personal journal opens with a “warning sign” that she was in the habit of copying in her journals: “einen guten Gedanken, den wir gelesen, etwas Auffallendes, das wir gehört” (WV, 219). The comment immediately leads readers to question the authenticity of any claims Ottilie made in her journal.

Later in the novel, Eduard and Charlotte's child Otto, of whom Ottilie has been taking care, falls into the lake and dies under Ottilie's watch. As a result, she renounces her love for Eduard together with language, food and drink, practically starving herself to death. She describes her intention in a letter to her friends:

Ganz rein war mein Vorsatz, Eduarden zu entsagen, mich von ihm zu entfernen. Ihm hoffte ich nicht wieder zu begegnen. [...] Nach Gefühl und Gewissen des Augenblicks schwieg ich, verstummt ich vor dem Freunde, und nun habe ich nichts mehr zu sagen. [...] Beruft keine Mittelperson! Dringt nicht in mich, daß ich reden, daß ich mehr Speise und Trank genießen soll, als ich höchstens bedarf. (WV, 278)

Although Ottilie states her mind clearly in this letter, for some commentators, her overall quiet and passive character, as well as her writing habit, both challenges the authenticity of this letter. Benjamin argues that Ottilie's rejection of food and water is not an ethical decision, but the result of a "drive." He also refers to Ottilie's silence afterwards as a "plant-like muteness" [pflanzenhaftes Stummsein], challenging the morality and agency behind her decision. Yet what does it mean to be mute like a plant? Is Ottilie a natural, vegetal figure, or is she acting out of her ethical obligations, as she states in the letter? What could the intimate relationship between Ottilie and plants signify? And finally, could we trust her "plant-like" language?

2. Ottilie's plant-like muteness

In Benjamin's reading, Ottilie's decision to die appears out of her control, and her will to die forms itself in a manner that is even incomprehensible to Ottilie herself. Since she renounces language altogether, and a moral decision must be communicated through language, her death cannot have resulted from an ethical decision. In fact, as Benjamin observes, food was always repugnant to Ottilie, so her rejection of food might not be an ethical decision. To Benjamin, the phrase that Ottilie repeatedly stresses, that she is "aus [ihrer] Bahn geschritten," and that she must take action to renounce her love for Eduard as a result, only means that "nur der Tod sie vor dem innern Untergange bewahren kann" (GS I,

176). He sees Ottilie's death as a drive that is imposed on her, despite the semblance of a choice out of her own will: "daher wird, dem vollkommenen Schweigen der Ottilie, die Moralität des Todeswillens, welcher sie bestellt, fragwürdig. Ihm liegt in Wahrheit kein Entschluß zugrunde sondern ein Trieb" (GS I, 176).

Although Ottilie, deprived of language, could not be a moral agent, Benjamin refuses to see her as a "natural" plant. Friedrich Gundolf, one of the most influential academic representatives of the Georg circle, argues that the characters in the novel could be compared with the existence of plants, particularly the Goethean theory of the metamorphosis of plants: "Durchaus nach Analogie des Verhältnisses von Keim, Blüte und Frucht ist auch Goethes Gesetzesbegriff, sein Schicksal und Charakterbegriff in den Wahlverwandtschaften zu denken" (Gundolf, 554). Goethe's theory of the metamorphosis of plants, as Gundolf mentions here, indicates that all organs of the plant are a modified form of the leaf. A regular or "progressive" metamorphosis is a step-by-step progression through alternating polar stages. The leaf becomes the calyx, then the petals, and finally the highly specialized male and female sex organs, whose union results in the production of fruit and seed. Throughout this process, the plant ascends "zu jenem Gipfel der Natur, der Fortpflanzung durch zwei Geschlechter" (Goethe, *Metamorphose* 3). Goethe's theoretical process of metamorphosis takes three major steps: first, the separation of the two sexes; second, the development of the plant, following two gendered systems, one vertical (masculine) and one spiral (feminine); and finally, the re-unification of the two sexes. "Nature's regular course" [der regelmäßige Weg der Natur] eventually reaches its goal in the reunion of two genders.

Benjamin strongly disagrees with Gundolf's point of view, for Ottilie's metamorphosis as by no means a development under an overarching guideline, such as Goethe's theory of the spiral tendency. Nor does it aim to "climax" in a conclusive re-unification of two sexes. The bourgeois institution of marriage and the natural principle of

sexual attraction, two forces that guide the characters' actions and struggles, fail to reconcile and re-unite, which arguably leads to disastrous consequences. Furthermore, Ottolie is not comparable to an innocent plant, because the character is deeply affected by fate: "denn Schicksal (ein anderes ist es mit dem Charakter) betrifft das Leben unschuldiger Pflanzen nicht. Nichts ist diesem ferner. Unaufhaltsam dagegen entfaltet es sich im verschuldeten Leben. Schicksal ist der Schuldzusammenhang von Lebendigem" (GS I, 138). Benjamin sees the disastrous consequences of the characters' actions as the result of their clinging onto the legal institutions of a Christian moral society even without concrete substances in their relationships. What lies behind the compulsive and fateful actions of these characters, Benjamin believes, is a drive [*Trieb*] or a mythic force that remains at the center of the novel as the ethical forces fade away.

Fate and guilt distance Ottolie from an innocent plant, yet for Benjamin, her muteness and passivity still resemble a particular plant, namely, the Christian symbol of innocence, the lily: "die strengen Linien des Gewächses, das Weiß des Blütenkelches verbinden sich mit den betäubend süßen, kaum mehr vegetabilen Düften" (GS I, 175). A white lily is often likened to the Virgin Mary, with its petals symbolizing Mary's pure virginal body, and the golden anthers, the radiance of her soul. For Benjamin, the Christian symbolic values associated to this plant are so strong, that the flower almost ceases to be vegetal. Even though all plants are naturally innocent, the innocence that the lily symbolizes is a religious one rather than a natural one. The lily is guiltless not because it is a being of nature and therefore unaffected by the fate of human beings, but because its beautiful forms resemble the Virgin Mary, who is free from original sin. Similarly, Ottolie is not "naturally" innocent in the same way that a plant is innocent, but only bears the resemblance of virgin innocence, an appearance that Benjamin calls "[eine] gefährliche Magie der Unschuld" (GS I, 175). In other words, she is only "like" a plant.

“Pflanzenhaftes Stummsein, wie es so groß aus dem Daphne-Motiv der flehend gehobenen Hände spricht, liegt über ihrem Dasein und verdunkelt es noch in den äußersten Nöten, die sonst bei jedem es ins helle Licht setzen” (GS I, 175-6), writes Benjamin. In Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, Daphne is pursued by Apollo, who was shot by Cupid’s arrow. Daphne flees to her father, the river god Peneus, who transforms Daphne into a laurel tree in order to protect her. Apollo catches her during her transformation, as her hair and hands turning into branches while the rest of her body remain unfinished. Apollo vows that he will have her, breaks off a branch, makes himself a laurel crown, and announces that it will be the symbol of triumph. Ottolie’s muteness reminds Benjamin of Daphne’s physical distress at the moment of transformation and her inability to resist. Her pleadingly upraised hands will soon be mutilated by Apollo, yet her body, which is already under transformation, prevents her from resisting or escaping from the violence. Similarly, although Ottolie dies by intentionally depriving herself of food, her voluntary death is not necessarily out of a moral decision. Her muteness is “pflanzenhaft,” that is, she is no longer fully human, yet she has not completely become a plant. Like Daphne, Ottolie is half-plant, half-human, therefore neither natural nor moral. Again, she is only “pflanzenhaft,” “like” a plant.

It is important to investigate what Benjamin (following Goethe) means by the word “natural,” for in his view, Ottolie is not “natural” like a plant, yet it is within her “nature” to starve herself to death. He claims that Ottolie’s plant-like muteness already contains her wish to die, even though it remains a secret until the end both to her friends and to herself:

in [Ottilies] Todestriebe spricht die Sehnsucht nach Ruhe. Wie gänzlich er Natürlichem in ihr entspringt, hat Goethe nicht zu bezeichnen verfehlt. Wenn Ottolie stirbt indem sie sich die Nahrung entzieht, so hat er im Roman es ausgesprochen, wie sehr ihr auch in glücklicheren Zeiten oft: Speise widerstanden hat (GS I, 176).

In the first part of the essay “Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften,” Benjamin argues that a fundamental motive for Goethean research into nature emerges from the ambiguity in the concept of nature between perceptible phenomena and intuitable archetypes (GS I, 147), a

problem that, as Benjamin believes, is never offered an account of synthesis in Goethe's studies, despite constant attempts. Goethe's theory of plant metamorphosis is based fundamentally on an "intuitive perception," which is a way of seeing the ideal archetype at work in a real natural object, such as the plant he saw in the Public Gardens of Palermo that inspired him of the theory of metamorphosis. In Goethe's theory, a single plant should have two corresponding unities, one ideal, and one empirical; and ideal unity of an individual plant exists as if the diverse parts of this plant have developed from an ideal archetype. While confronted by Schiller, who warned Goethe that his theory of metamorphosis is not an observation from experience, but an idea, Goethe replied that "das kann mir aber sehr lieb sein, daß ich Ideen habe ohne es zu wissen, und sie sogar mit Augen sehe" (Goethe, *Weimarer Ausgabe* I.4: 129, hereafter WA). This way of seeing, however, is inevitably a selective one, for it is difficult to incorporate the contradictions and inconsistencies of nature that one observes. In fact, Goethe was often annoyed by observations that contradicted with his ideas and failed to stimulate him.ⁱⁱⁱ

Benjamin, however, believes that Goethe's attempts to seek a synthesis between intuition and perception through his scientific studies will inevitably fail. He argues that the ur-phenomena that Goethe uses as the standard of his scientific research in fact exist only within the realm of art, which he also calls the "pure domain" [*reiner Bereich*], as opposed to the realm of sensuous nature, or the "empirical domain" [*empirischer Bereich*] (GS I, 148). Science is able to illuminate objects in nature with an idea, while only art is able to transform them in intuition. Goethe's attempt to bring intuition and perception together is therefore, as Benjamin calls it, a "contamination of the pure domain and the empirical domain," during which sensuous nature claims the highest place in the hierarchy, and allows its mythic side to dominate the totality of nature's appearances (GS I, 148). As a result, ur-phenomena cannot be used as standards of measurement in scientific analysis, and Goethe's attempt to do so, as

Benjamin argues, is an example of his idolatry of nature and the mythic elements in his concept of nature. “Wenn im extremsten Sinne also selbst die ‘Worte der Vernunft’ zum Habe der Natur geschlagen werden, was Wunder, wenn für Goethe der Gedanke niemals ganz das Reich der Urphänomene durchleuchtete. Damit aber beraubte er sich der Möglichkeit Grenzen zu ziehen” (GS I, 148).

In Benjamin’s analysis, Goethe’s concept of nature is not limited to what we normally understand as natural science or simply the natural world. It also includes a mythic force that cannot be expressed straightforwardly in any concept or words, which Goethe calls “the demonic.” Evidences of this mythic force could be found in Goethe’s autobiographical work *Wahrheit und Dichtung*:

Er glaubte in der Natur, der belebten und unbelebten, der beseelten und unbeseelten, etwas zu entdecken, das sich nur in Widersprüchen manifestierte und deshalb unter keinen Begriff, noch viel weniger unter ein Wort gefasst werden könnte. Es war nicht göttlich, denn es schien unvernünftig; nicht menschlich, denn es hatte keinen Verstand; nicht teuflisch, denn es war wohltätig; nicht englisch, denn es ließ oft Schadenfreude merken. [...] Dieses Wesen, das zwischen alle übrigen hineinzutreten, sie zu sondern, sie zu verbinden schien, nannte ich dämonisch, nach dem Beispiel der Alten und Derer, die etwas Ahnliches gewahrt hatten. Ich suchte mich vor diesem furchtbaren Wesen zu retten (quoted in Benjamin, GS I, 149-150)

The idea of the demonic accompanies Goethe’s vision all his life: it can also be found at the beginning of the first stanza of “Urworte, Orphisch,” and in the Egmont quotation from *Wahrheit und Dichtung*. It is the idea of the demonic, Benjamin argues, that emerges in the idea of fate in *Wahlverwandtschaften*, both of which can be traced back to mythic thinking. And this superstitious way of thinking is adopted to interpret material objects as symbols. Benjamin quotes a letter from Gervinus’ study *Über den Göthischen Briefwechsel*, in which Goethe claims that he observes objects that produce a poetic effect, and notes that they are symbolic. The letter, addressed to Schiller, is written in 1797, around the time of Goethe’s journey to Italy. Because of this observation, Gervinus reports, Goethe began to accumulate bundles of files including newspapers, clippings from sermons, theater programs, and so on,

hoping to save them for future use. (GS I, 153). Benjamin interprets this practice (which is not unlike his own habit of collecting books, quotes, and toys) as an example of Goethe's superstition and belief in signs and oracles: "Der Mensch erstarrt im Chaos der Symbole und verliert die Freiheit, die den Alten nicht bekannt war. Er gerät im Handeln unter Zeichen und Orakel" (GS I, 154).

The mythic element in Goethe's concept of nature is also reflected in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*. In Benjamin's reading, the "demonic" stands right at the center of the character Ottilie. "In den Wahlverwandtschaften aber ragen die dämonischen Prinzipien der Beschwörung in das dichterische Bilden selbst mitten hinein. Beschworen nämlich wird stets nur ein Schein, in Ottilein die lebendige Schönheit, welche stark, geheimnisvoll und ungeläutert als 'Stoff' in gewaltigstem Sinne sich aufdrängte" (GS I, 179). The demonic dwells in Ottilie's taciturnity, which is a sign of her "ghostly" [geisterhaft] origin (GS I, 179). In other words, Ottilie's "plant-like muteness" is, because of the mythic element of Goethe's concept of nature, an example of the "demonic." As we have seen earlier, Ottilie is simultaneously "natural" and "unnatural" because, on the one hand, she cannot be easily categorized according to a Goethean principle of natural order, such as the principle of the metamorphosis of plants. On the other hand, the language of Christian guilt and sin is unable to fully elucidate Ottilie's behavior. Like the lily, which is simultaneously a natural plant and a Christian symbol for innocence, Ottilie is stuck between two belief systems, one scientific, and one religious. Her plant-like muteness resembles the semi-human semi-arboreal image of Daphne, who could only save herself by (partially) transforming herself into a tree, and therefore depriving herself of any form of active resistance. In Benjamin's view, Ottilie's muteness, which eventually leads to her death, hint at a breaking point that momentarily releases the figure from constraints of scientific studies or religious beliefs, "enchants chaos momentarily into world" ["verzaubert Chaos auf einen Augenblick zur Welt" (GS I, 340)].

Ottolie's death, according to Benjamin, turns her into a work of art. She appears as a semblance, with the potential of momentarily revealing the essentially beautiful. Ottolie's death is seen as an artwork, because Benjamin believes that Ottolie's death as a mythic sacrifice, and the mythic, or "demonic" element in Goethe's concept of nature cannot be elucidated in scientific principles, only in art. In Benjamin's view, the double meaning of Goethe's concept of nature – that it should simultaneously intuitive and perceived in reality – often results in nature being seen as the model [Vorbild] of intuitable archetypes of artworks (GS I, 148). And, since this model is believed to be observable in reality, the ideal of art is understood as true and absolute, and that every work of art should reflect this ideal in one way or another. Benjamin challenges this concept of art by arguing that intuitable ur-phenomena could present themselves adequately to perception only in the realm of art, whereas in science, the objects of perception could be only be illuminated in thoughts, as ideas (GS I, 148). Therefore, Ottolie's death could only be interpreted as an artwork. Furthermore, Benjamin sees Ottolie's muteness, which eventually leads to her death, as intimately connected to a force within art itself that could challenge the false harmony in the world of semblance and enchantment, a force that Benjamin calls "the expressionless" [*das Ausdruckslose*]:

Das in ihm [ein Kunstwerk] wogende Leben muß erstarrt und wie in einem Augenblick gebannt erscheinen. Dies in ihm Wesende ist bloße Schönheit, bloße Harmonie, die das Chaos – und in Wahrheit eben nur dieses, nicht die Welt – durchflutet, im Durchfluten aber zu beleben nur scheint. Was diesem Schein Einhalt gebietet, die Bewegung bannt und der Harmonie ins Wort fällt ist das Ausdruckslose. Jenes Leben gründet das Geheimnis, dies Erstarren den Gehalt im Werke. (GS I, 181)

In a fragment drafted around the same time, Benjamin calls the expressionless a "critical violence" that completes the work by shattering into fragments, reducing it to the smallest totality of semblance (GS I, 832). Like the Hölderlinian caesura, which interrupts the rhythmic continuity of poetry, the expressionless is a power within the work of art that could reveal for a moment the essentially beautiful.

Due to space limitations, we will save the discussion of the expressionless in Benjamin's aesthetic theory for a later time. For the moment, we will concentrate on Otilie's "plant-like muteness," which Benjamin sees as an example of the demonic or mythic element that she represents. As we have seen above, this muteness is intimately connected to the "expressionless" that interrupts the language of art from within. Otilie's "plant-like" character confirms that she is an artwork, created under the influence of the mythic, rather than an intuitive manifestation of the ur-phenomenon in nature, as Gundolf suggests. At the same time, the "plant-like" character ultimately results in Otilie's death, turning her muteness into a moment of expressionless violence that has the potential to transcend the work of art beyond its mythic elements.

3. Plants and demons

Yoko Tawada also sees Otilie as a plant figure. In an essay "Metamorphosen des Heidenrösleins – ein Versuch über Goethe," she depicts Otilie as a silent flower planted in a garden of "Die Wahlverwandtschaften" (Tawada, *Sprachpolizei* 57). A keen reader of Benjamin, Tawada is also concerned with Otilie's "plant-like muteness." Like Benjamin, she, too, associates Otilie's plant-like character with the demonic. While Benjamin believes that the demonic in Goethe's theory of nature is an example of the author's idolatry of nature and his superstition, and that Otilie's "expressionless" could momentarily transcend the mythic element of the novel, Tawada sees the demonic as the transcendental power within art that could interrupt the semblance of harmony from within, instead of something that needs to be transcended by art. All three authors – Goethe, Benjamin, and Tawada – use the term "the demonic" [*das Dämonische*] as a placeholder for forces and motives that, for the most part, remains invisible and unidentifiable. Like a computer program, as Kirk Wetter's helpful example suggests, a demonic force mostly run silently in the background of a given operating system, which is usually visible and nameable. The demonic only manifests itself in singular

moment of crisis, when the function it belongs to becomes problematic (Wetters, ix). But the difference in their understanding of the “Dämon” is also significant.

In Goethe’s autobiographical work *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, the demonic is a metaphor of the unknown in nature that separate and connects them. In “Urworte, Orphisch,” a cycle of five stanzas written in 1817 and published in 1820 in *Zur Morphologie*, which mostly contains his morphological writings Dämon is listed along with four other Greek words, *Tyche, Eros, Ananke, and Elpis*, as the earliest and most essential ideas of Greek mythology and religion. Here, Dämon is portrayed along with other “primary words” [*Urworte*] as underlying program of development, or a “semi-religious cognitive model, akin to self-help or astrology” (Wetters, 37). In Goethe’s botanical writings, the demonic is comparable to the “*Urpflanze*,” an archetypal prototypical plant that supposedly contains all forms of plants of past, present, and future, while the principle of morphology mediates the general (all forms of plants) and particular (the singular *Urpflanze*). And for Benjamin, as we have seen earlier, morphology itself can be “demonic,” which he uses more like an equivalent term for “superstitious,” if the synthesis between the intuitive form of *Urpflanze* and plants as living organisms is actually believed to exist. For Tawada, the demonic specifically refers to a language that addresses an underlying force within a literary text that cannot be incorporated with the currently exiting “operating system.” It is not an example of Goethe’s superstition, but evidence of a force of resistance within the text against overarching, systematic interpretations that fail to take into account “insignificant” details.

In “Metamorphosen des Heidenrösleins,” Tawada presents two systems of languages, one traditional, and one unconventional and “demonic.” A traditional system of language can usually be incorporate within a certain system of thought or belief, be it religious, rational, or scientific. In *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, Mittler and Eduard’s language of guilt, innocence, and Christian ethics, is such an example. An example of the “demonic” language is that of

chemistry and chemical attractions that could address the various mysterious incidents in the story, such as Ottilie and Eduard's headaches. The death of Charlotte and Eduard's child Otto is an event that could be interpreted in completely different ways, depending on the language one adopts. “[Es] ist ein Ereignis, bei dem die christliche Moral, die Chemie und das Dämonische aufeinanderprallen” (Tawada, *Sprachpolizei* 58). In Eduard's “Christian” language, the child is born out of double adultery, therefore his death could be seen as God's punishment against such immoral activities. In the “demonic” language, however, the child's death will not be interpreted as a tragic event, for it is within his nature that he returns to water. Otto's appearance strongly resembles both the Hauptmann and Ottilie, despite being Charlotte and Eduard's child. In the “chemical” language, the Hauptmann's name begins with H, which is the symbol for hydrogen, whereas Ottilie's name begins with the symbol for oxygen. Otto is therefore the product of the chemical bond between hydrogen and oxygen, and, as a water child, he should eventually return to water. As Tawada suggests, “Die Sprache der Chemie kann das, was man sonst als Aberglaube abtut, besser zum Ausdruck bringen als die Sprache der bürgerlichen Moral oder die des Gesetzes” (*Sprachpolizei* 59). She believes that these moments of superstition and pseudoscience from a force of resistance inside the text that threaten to break language from within and render it self-contradictory, if not completely unintelligible. Meanwhile, they also loosen the systematic foundation of language and allows for a potential linguistic “metamorphosis,” as the title of Tawada's essay suggests.

For Tawada, Ottilie's “plant-like” language has a similar function as the language of chemistry as to collect things and events in a text – such as Ottilie and Eduard's headache and Charlotte's “unbewusste Erinnerungen” – that could not be incorporated in the language of bourgeois morality or of law and must be categorized as “surreal” or “superstitious.” The word “Dämon” only appears once in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, but it plays a key role in

both Benjamin's and Tawada's critical essays. It appears as Ottolie's own writing, in the letter she wrote after the child's death to explain her silence to the friends:

Warum soll ich ausdrücklich sagen, meine Geliebten, was sich von selbst versteht?
Ich bin aus meiner Bahn geschritten, und ich soll nicht wieder hinein. Ein feindseliger
Dämon, der Macht über mich gewonnen, scheint mich von außen zu hindern, hätte ich
mich auch mit mir selbst wieder zur Einigkeit gefunden. (WV 278, my emphasis)

She admits that she took a vow to stop eating, drinking, or speaking to resist the malign "Dämon," who gained power over her and forced her off her rightful path. Tawada comments, "das Wort 'Dämon' überrascht den Leser, wirkt auf den ersten Blick wie ein Druckfehler, weil es weder zur undramatischen Sprache Ottilies. Noch zum Erklärungsmuster der chemischen Bindungen, das im Text eine wichtige Rolle spielt, passt" (*Sprachpolizei*, 57-8). For Tawada, the word "Dämon" is surprising in its context, because it does not fit in with the language of the quiet, passive, undramatic Ottolie. It is a language of seemingly incoherent signs and letters that resists traditional Christian values and ethical interpretations, while hinting at feelings, events, and relationships that cannot be explained by a language saturated of sin and redemption.

Ottolie's "Dämon" is a clear sound of disharmony that challenges the reader's initial perception of the text. On further inspection, one dissonance leads to another, until one finds an entire network of discordant words underneath its harmonic appearance. These singular traces, loud and incoherent, are what make their otherwise easily ignored voices perceptible. In Goethe's texts, one of the loudest and fiercest voices of resistance could be found in "Heidenröslein," in which a seemingly innocent plant suddenly turns "demonic." A boy walks in the field, sees a little rose, and wants to pick it. He announces, "Ich breche dich, / Röslein auf der Heiden." The rose replies, "Ich steche dich, / dass du ewig denkst an mich, / und ich will's nicht leiden" (Goethe, *Schriften* 8:105). The rose's "ich steche dich" is a surprising response. During the Romantic period, flowers are usually portrayed as either a metaphor for fertility and femininity, or as the symbol for beauty and the longing for infinity.

The Heidenröslein, however, clearly refuses to be interpreted as a symbol or a passive figure: it not only speaks, but also threatens to react violently. Tawada writes, "...seine aggressive Reaktion auf den Knaben mit den Worten 'ich steche dich' passt keineswegs zu den traditionellen Mädchenbildern. Zumindest in Goethes Werken reden in diesem Ton sonst nur Hexen, aber nie eine Junge, morgenschöne Frau" (*Sprachpolizei*, 51). The "ich steche dich" is so loud and clear, that it threatens the legitimacy of the widely accepted reading of "der Heidenröslein" as a love poem addressed to Friederike Brion. It also, to a certain degree, challenges the traditional point of view of plants as victims and men as perpetrators: anyone who has ever suffered from pollen allergy, Tawada comments, knows how flowers defend their territories against human beings by attacking their nasal mucous membrane with pollen (*Sprachpolizei*, 50). Moments of sudden violence, such as Ottolie's "Dämon" and the Heidenröslein's "ich steche dich," are forces of resistance that serve as reminders of the often-ignored power underneath the appearance of an innocent, passive plant.

A final example of Goethe's demonic plant is the rose petals in the scene of Faust's burial, which are scattered in the air at by angels to scare the devils away:

Rosen, ihr blendenden,
Balsam versendenden!
Flatternde, schwebende,
Heimlich belebende,
Zweiglein beflügelte,
Knospen entsiegelte,
Eilet zu blühn. (*Faust* 11699-11705)

These rose petals appear to be harmless and innocent until they turn out to be deadly weapons and aphrodisiac drugs. Mephistopheles asks the devils to blow fire at the petal so that they will all wither and fade away, but once the petals caught on fire, they become poisoned flames. Devils flee from burning petals and Mephistopheles is caught on fire. The power of "love" that the roses bring is even more piercing and dangerous than the flames of hell: "mir brennt der Kopf, das Herz, die Leber brennt! Ein überteuflisch Element! Weit

spitziger als Höllenfeuer!” (*Faust* 11753-11755) under the aphrodisiac influence of the roses, Mephistopheles lusts after the angels, who meanwhile repossesses Faust’s soul.

Blüten, die seligen,
 Flammen, die fröhlichen,
 Liebe verbreiten sie,
 Wonne bereiten sie,
 Herz wie es mag.
 Worte, die wahren,
 Äther im Klaren,
 Ewige Scharen,
 Überall Tag! (*Faust* 11726-11734)

These beautiful, fragrant roses float and hover in the air, as if their stems and petals have wings. Tawada concludes her essay with an analysis of this scene: “die Blüten, die in der Luft schweben, sind fragmentarisch, ungebunden und gewichtslos. Sie sind von Stängel gebrochen, aber nicht tot. Denn ihr Körper besteht aus einer magischen Sprache, die das tote Heidenröslein wachruft und es wiederbelebt” (*Sprachpolizei*, 62). Again, these petals represent a “demonic” language, which has the power to awake and revive the dead Heidenröslein. These petals successfully drive away Mephistopheles’s devils, turn them upside-down, make them stand on their heads [“Satane stehen auf den Köpfen” (*Faust* 11736)]. If these words have the power of turning the world upside-down, are they merely words of truth and clarity as the angels claim? How far away are they from the language of “Lug und Trug und Traum” that the devils use to scare sinners away (*Faust* 11655)? In this moment of comical absurdity, it appears that something other than beauty, truth, and love has been freed from this language of rose petals, something that is no longer within the angels’ control.

So far, we have seen a few examples of what Tawada means by “das Dämonische,” and how traces of a demonic language could influence the overall text. All of these examples involve a plant or a plant-like character: Ottilie, der Heidenröslein, and the rose petals in *Faust*. But why is the “demonic” intimately connected to (literary) plants? The same question

is applicable to Benjamin's reading of Ottilie, since he sees Ottilie's "plant-like muteness" as evidence of the "demonic" in Goethe's concept of nature and some of his literary writings. It is worth mentioning that, Benjamin is not as interested in plants as in their representations, such as in photography. His essay "Neues von Blumen," a review for Karl Blossfeldt's plant photography album, portrays these photographs as artistic realizations of "Urbilder" of nature. Benjamin is less interested in direct observation of natural plants themselves, because he believes that mute nature is incapable of communicating itself. The primal images resting in nature are best realized in art forms, and that is the reason why Benjamin quickly shifts towards a discussion of art and beauty in the second half of the "Wahlverwandtschaften" essay. Since Ottilie is mute, she represents an inexplicable force within the novel that is inevitably connected with myth and superstition. Tawada's critique of Benjamin's reading is based on the premise that Ottilie can indeed communicate. She sees Ottilie's "plant-like muteness" as a demonic force within language that communicates in its own way. To be mute like a plant does not mean to refrain from language all-together: like animals, plants are also perfectly capable of communication. To be mute *like a plant* is not to refrain from language, but to speak and write a particular language that may sound mute to others. Plants talk to each other via smell (by spreading odorous chemicals known as volatile organic compounds in the air), touch (such as in the case of tendrils), and electrical signals.^{iv} They are also able to communicate with insects and mammals in their environment, as well as respond to various environmental cues. None of these means of communication could be directly "heard" by humans, and scientists could only observe this signaling system indirectly by, for example, looking at the behavior changes of the "speaker" plant and the "listener" plant. Like plants, certain animals also communicate at a frequency that normally cannot be heard by human beings. The common range of human hearing is 20 Hz to 20 kHz, whereas dogs could usually hear sounds between 56 Hz and 45 kHz. Therefore, a sound at 40 Hz can be heard by a dog,

but “mute” for a human. Similarly, the above-mentioned signaling systems could work perfectly between plants or animals themselves, but they may sound “mute” to a human ear. Therefore, Otilie’s “pflanzenhaftes Stummsein,” in Tawada’s interpretation, implies a language that is unique to plants and plant-like figures, but is often unheard and unresponded to by others.

4. Plant language, magical language

By re-thinking Goethe’s “demonic” and critiquing Benjamin’s reading of Otilie, Tawada is aligning herself with a major motif of Benjamin’s work: the “magic” of language. Her dissertation, entitled *Spielzeug und Sprachmagie in der europäischen Literatur: Eine Ethnologische Poetologie*, extensively reviews Benjamin’s “Sprachmagie” and his predilection for collecting children’s toys.^v In the introductory chapter, Tawada quotes Benjamin’s 1916 essay “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen,” where he introduces the idea of “die Magie der Sprache” (GS II, 143). God’s language is magical because it is creative: his words “let there be” and “he named” are directly connected with his acts of creation. God’s word is cognizant to men because it is name, the “reine Medium der Erkenntnis” (GS II, 148). The language of man is a reflection of God’s creative word and “der Name der Dinge” (GS II, 150), which should emerge from the absolutely infinite and immediate language of creation. While the naming words of God shines through the “[stumme] Magie der Natur” (GS II, 150), man’s language is not magic in the sense that words are identical with the essence of the thing. Instead, man’s “magical community” and communication with things is spiritual and immaterial. Human language could only be magical when it functions as a pure medium of the divine language that listens to and echoes it with the acoustics of the spoken words.

In a letter to Martin Buber in which he declined the offer to contribute to Buber’s journal, *Der Jude*, Benjamin points out that the bourgeois linguistic theory – or, in other

words, a rationalistic logocentrism – fails to notice the connection between the language of man and the magical creative language of God and, as a result, perceives the relation between words and things as accidental. Instead of seeing language as simply the communication of information, he believes that one should treat language as an immediate medium that aims at communicating its own “linguistic being” rather than its material content. He writes to Buber, “Schrifttum überhaupt kann ich mit dichterisch, prophetisch, sachlich, was die Wirkung angeht, aber jedenfalls nur *magisch* das heißt un-mittel-bar verstehen” (Benjamin, *Briefe* 126). As opposed to an instrumental, abstract language, a magical, “immediate” language could potentially emblemize God’s creative language that most intimately connects words and deeds.

Tawada’s response to Benjamin’s theory of magic of language is twofold. First, she claims that literary text must be read as a translation of the language of things in order to retain the trace of magic. Paraphrasing Benjamin, she writes that after the Fall, only a few languages, such as that of art, bears the trace of the magic language (*Sprachmagie*, 16). Since the language of sculpture and painting is a translation of the language of things into a higher language, literary language should have the same function. The language of Ottolie and the Heidenröslein is magical because it aims at translating the language of plants into a literary language of mankind. Second, Tawada believes that a magical language should address the gaps in our current thought systems that are often perceived as unspeakable or nonexistent. In *Spielzeug und Sprachmagie*, she uses toys in German Romantic literature as examples to confront the gap between play and work, children and adults, the profane and the sacred. Tawada reads Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things* as a historization of Benjamin’s theory of language, in which Foucault’s analysis of the shifts in the paradigms of thoughts between the classical and modern periods are read as concrete historical examples of the ineffable gap in language, and therefore prompt readers to reconsider their understanding of language

(*Sprachmagie*, 16). In the letter to Buber, Benjamin claims that language, particularly effective political writing, calls for a style that properly addresses the ineffable:

Mein Begriff sachlichen und zugleich hochpolitischen Stils und Scheibens ist: hinzuführen auf das dem Wort versagte; nur wo diese Sphäre des Wortlosen in unsagbar reiner Macht sich erschließt, kann der magische Funken zwischen Wort und bewegender Tat überspringen, wo die Einheit dieser beiden gleich wirklich ist. Nur die intensive Richtung der Worte in den Kern des innersten Verstummens hinein gelangt zur wahren Wirkung (*Briefe*, 127).

In language's magic spark, the speechless [Wortlosen] reveals itself in an ineffable caesura that interrupts language from within. In Beatrice Hansen's words, Benjamin's magical language "aimed at a Hölderlinian balance between sobriety and ecstasy (mania), a non-subjective ecstatic language, in which the cadence of discursive language was interrupted by the caesura [...] the caesura at once prompted the dissolution of the mythic layer of information, meaning, and subjective intention" (Hanssen, 57).

The two aspects of Tawada's response to Benjamin's theory of the magic of language are also reflected in her own literary practices. In her own writings, Tawada takes the translation of the language of things quite literally. In an essay entitled "Der Schriftkörper und der beschriftete Körper," Tawada tells a story about the creative power of language. It shows that "reality" is dependent on what is written, rather than the other way around.^{vi} The story is about an architect, who accidentally lets a drop of ink fall on his blueprint the night before he is supposed to hand in the work. Seeing this situation, the architect's wife decides to plant a whole on the spot where the ink fell. The second day, the architect's boss asks him about the drop of ink, and he responds that it is because a tree already stands here, and it should remain there for aesthetic reasons after the construction of the apartment block. In this story, a drop of ink in the realm of signs and words becomes a tree in the world of things, because the blueprint is supposed to faithfully reflect the environment in which the housing complex is built. What fascinates Tawada in the story of the architect and the tree is the unpredictable power of language that is often beyond the author's control: "ein Autor

beschreibt nicht einen Baum, der schon dort steht, sondern er setzt ein Zeichen, ein Schriftzeichen oder ein Satzzeichen oder vielleicht einen Tintenfleck, und die Wirklichkeit richtet sich danach” (*Schriftkörper*, 74). The author/architect did not write about a tree, but a tree appeared where the ink dropped. An unintended sign literally grows out of the blue print and becomes a living being. In the same way, written language could potentially shape reality in unexpected ways.

During the creative process of writing, new ideas appear, but they could not be fit into the text that is currently being written. These new ideas or texts are what Tawada calls “Überschuß,” or surplus of language, which, when left unattended, could be “harmful” to the original text – harmful in the sense that it may lead towards a different direction from what the original text intends. Authors often treat the surplus of language as waste, taking it out of the text, keeping it aside in the hope of recycling them in the future. The process of writing is like a waste production [Abfallproduktion], in which every act of writing creates some waste that will be recycled and become another text. But unlike a traditional recycling process, in which dead, useless materials are converted into new, yet lifeless products, the recycling of language has the potential to create new life. In the architect’s story, a drop of ink becomes a tree. The drop of ink is an example of the surplus, a byproduct created in the process of writing (or designing) that the author tries to keep off the page. The excess of language “versucht ständig etwas anderes zu behaupten als das, was der Autor zu meinen meint” (*Schriftkörper*, 70). Not only does it have its own intention, but it could resist and distort the intention of the author. The surplus of language shows that language has a life on its own and could grow towards unforeseen directions, and the parts of language are only considered a “surplus” because they cannot be deciphered by a readily available interpretive system.

Tawada’s poetological writings focus on the unexpected elements in language, towards which readers often turn a blind eye to. The “vegetal” language of Ottolie, der

Heidenröslein, the rose petals in Faust, and the architect's tree may sound "mute" to many readers, just like a significant number of people are "plant-blind," meaning that they tend to underappreciate the flora and fauna in their environment. As a result, they quickly resort to convenient yet complex concepts like the "demonic," which, as we have seen, are used as a placeholder for an unknown, undercurrent force that is not yet clearly defined. What may appear accidental, mysterious, or excessive in a text may turn out to be moments of resistance against a mainstream interpretation, or signals indicating an alternative way of reading that does not yet exist. This alternative reading may not be readily available to be discovered within the literary text (such as *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*). But we could, like scientists, begin by collecting samples and look at how plants, either fictional or natural, interact with each other and with their environment, and start from there.

ⁱ Benjamin and Gundolf are perhaps the most prominent Goethe commentators who compare Ottolie with plants, but they are not the only ones. For example, Robert T. Clark's "The Metamorphosis of Character in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*" (*The Germanic Review*, 1954, pp. 243-253) compares each of the main characters to a type of plants in the "Metamorphosis of Plants": Charlotte is normal and progressive, Eduard is retrogressive, and Ottolie represents the development of a "monstrous" plant.

ⁱⁱ "Ich verarge dieser tätigen Frau keineswegs, daß sie verlangt, man soll die Früchte ihrer Sorgfalt äußerlich und deutlich sehen; aber es gibt auch verschlossene Früchte, die erst die rechten, kernhaften sind und die sich früher oder später zu einem schönen Leben entwickeln" (WV, 28).

ⁱⁱⁱ "Und ich fand sie immer mehr ähnlich als verschieden, und wollte ich meine botanische Terminologie anbringen, so ging das wohl, aber es fruchtete nicht, es machte mich unruhig, ohne daß es mir weiterhalf" (Goethe: *Italiänische Reise*. Palermo, 17.4.1787. WA I 31, 147-148.)

^{iv} See Paco Calvo et al, "Are Plants Sentient?" *Plant, Cell & Environment*, 2017 (40), pp. 2858–2869.

^v See Yoko Tawada, *Spielzeug und Sprachmagie: Eine ethnologische Poetologie* (Konkursbuch Verlag Claudia Gehrke 2000).

^{vi} See "Der Schriftkörper und der beschriftete Körper," in: *Zuerst bin ich immer Leser: Prosa schreiben heute*, hrsg Ute-Christine Kruppe und Ulrike Janssen (Frankfurt a.M. Suhrkamp 2000), pp. 70-79.

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