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Of Ends and Endings: Teleological and Variational Models of Romantic Narrative

Thomas Pfau

This essay sketches the antithesis between a teleological and a variational model of development (Bildung) in nineteenth-century thought, with a particular focus on narrative. I argue that, in the course of that century, the initially dynamic logic of Bildung is gradually vanquished by an institutional model that shifts away from Goethe's contingent, open-ended logic of development and towards a notion of Bildung as the virtual and soon canonical property of information.

At first glance, the objective of this essay is a rather straightforward formalist one—namely, to explore a distinction between two kinds of narrative said to have emerged around 1800 and to have gradually hardened into two opposed and incompatible models of development during the nineteenth century. Franco Moretti's 1987 study of the European *Bildungsroman* offers a representative formulation when drawing a distinction between “two principles of textual organization: the ‘classification’ principle and the ‘transformation’ principle”:

When classification is strongest—as in the English ‘family romance’ and in the classical *Bildungsroman*—narrative transformations have meaning in so far as they lead to a particularly marked ending: one that establishes a classification different from the initial one but nonetheless perfectly clear and stable. ... This teleological rhetoric—the meaning of events lies in their finality—is the narrative equivalent of Hegelian thought, with which it shares a strong *normative* vocation: events acquire meaning when they lead to *one* ending, and one only. Under the classification principle ... a story is more meaningful the more truly it manages to *suppress itself as story*. Under the transformation principle ... the opposite is true: what makes a story meaningful is its narrativity, its being an open-ended process. Meaning is the result not of fulfilled teleology, but rather, as for Darwin, of the total rejection of such a solution. (7)

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Moretti's "classification" or, as I'll from here on refer to it, "teleological" model appears driven by a strictly "instrumental" or "operative" rationality whose sole concern is to secure a determinate product, result, or outcome. Yet Moretti's invocation of Hegel as a representative of this paradigm is misleading, since Hegel takes pains to safeguard his dialectical presentation of reason against all utilitarian reductivism and its conflation of the concept of a *telos* with mere "finality." Thus, to identify "the inner meaning of a philosophical work" merely with "its aims and results," even as it "creat[es] an impression of hard work and serious commitment," actually means "sparing oneself both. For the real issue [*die Sache selbst*] is not exhausted by stating it as an aim, but by carrying it out; nor is the result the actual whole, but rather the result together with the process through which it came about" (2). Shortly afterwards we find Hegel's famous pronouncement that "the True is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development." Hence, when following up with the observation that the absolute "is essentially a *result* [and] only in the *end* is truly what it is" (11), Hegel precisely does *not* mean some detached outcome or product. Rather, *telos* or "result" for Hegel can mean something only if, as living subject rather than separate substance, it has also "internalized" and now "remembers" (*erinnert*) truth as the total trajectory of its own becoming.

To be sure, Moretti concedes that appraising narrative strictly by its outcome is bound to yield an impoverished understanding. For not only does such an outlook "suppress" (or discard) as mere material scaffolding the myriad details along with their inherent, metaphoric potential that jointly comprise the flesh and bones of what we call "story." Additionally, to posit that "the meaning of events lies in their *finality*" gives rise to a strangely self-confirming model of critique—now held to conflate story with plot, "ending" (of *diegesis*) with the "end" (in the Aristotelian sense of *causa finalis*), and to read the formal *event* of closure as something given *a priori* and expressively distinct from a process said merely to have "led up" to it. Arguably, such a view proves as unsatisfying from an aesthetic point of view as (for Hegel) it is philosophically reductive. It bears remembering that such a naively instrumental and *a posteriori* concept of teleology is also ironized or otherwise dismantled by the conspicuous and self-conscious banality, sentimentality, or apocalypticism that shapes the closure of numerous European *Bildungsromane* (e.g., Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*, Flaubert's *Education Sentimentale*, Keller's *Grüner Heinrich*, Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, Musil's *Young Törleß*, or Mann's *Magic Mountain*). Thus the banality of a *telos* that involves social conformism, still operative in Goethe's *Meister*, will be emphatically rejected a generation later by Julien Sorel who, at the end of Stendhal's 1830 novel, prefers the classically-tragic spectacle of Napoleonic self-destruction to the open-ended humdrum of a "pardoned" and domesticated bourgeois existence whose complacent and mendacious façade he had so diligently studied and uncompromisingly demolished both in the Renal family and at the Hotel de la Môle.

The unease of developmental narratives with formal closure and with values of finality relative to whose attainment the entire process of *Bildung* and its narrative reconstitution might be construed to have been but a utilitarian *means* hints at a profound conceptual shift. We seem to have moved from the methodical and self-certifying skep-

ticism of the Cartesian *cogito* to a self-regulating structure whose evolution is no longer governed by an *a priori* design or supervisory intelligence. The displacement of an intentional by a systemic paradigm of rationality begins sometime after 1750, both in the statistical and necessarily impersonal language of the Scottish political economists and, after 1780, in a sudden and widespread concern with the historicity of biological forms and the nature of reproductive processes (Linnaeus, Lamarck, E. Darwin, et al.). As early as 1783, Johann Heinrich Blumenbach's *Über den Bildungstrieb* notices how, in marked contrast to mere "replication," biological reproduction involves the continual transformation or "metamorphosis" of its organic materials. The development of organic life cannot simply follow some archetypal blueprint, as preformationist thought had been arguing since Plato. Rather, development of organic forms is essentially self-generating. Blumenbach rejects earlier theories of generation as mere *replication* on the strength of a few, deceptively simple empirical observations: first, theories of preformation (then called "evolution") failed to account for the capacity of organisms to repair themselves after being damaged; Blumenbach's examples are polyps that would regenerate, albeit in diminished size, a part of their body that had been severed; second, as a theory of replication, preformationism implies that "the offspring ... ought to go on forever like their first parents." Such a theory obviously cannot explain variational differences such as they arise among members of the same species and family. Following Buffon, Blumenbach thus rejects the (neo-Platonist) hypothesis that regards all empirical variation as the degradation or pathological deviation from a single intended archetype. Hence one must posit a force that is isomorphous with the process of organic life itself, a "formative drive" of sorts (*Bildungstrieb*) operating independent of the consciousness of the particular life-form under investigation *and* not to be confused with the hypostatized, transcendent designer or watch-maker of earlier, preformationist thought.

Opposing any attempt at identifying some single substance or agency as the *cause* of life, one-time Blumenbach student Coleridge thus writes (in his 1816 "Theory of Life") that "to make A the offspring of B, when the very existence of B as B presupposes the existence of A, is preposterous in the literal sense of the word. ... I reject the organ as the *cause* of that, of which it is the organ" (502). Coleridge here echoes Kant's pivotal assimilation of teleology to organicism in the third *Critique*. In conceiving of teleology as a non-instrumental, non-intentional, albeit firmly purposive or functional (and hence rational) process, Kant lays the groundwork for what Tim Lenoir calls a "teleomechanical" model of development. In it, "cause and effect are so mutually interdependent that it is impossible to think of one without the other, so that instead of a linear series it is much more appropriate to think of a sort of reflexive series, $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \rightarrow A$. This is a teleological mode of explanation, for it involves the notion of a 'final cause'. In contrast to the mechanical model where A can exist and have its effect independently of C, in the teleological model A causes C but is not also capable of existing independently of C. A is both cause and effect of C. The final cause is, logically, the first cause as Aristotle might have expressed it" (25). To the strictly instrumental and intentionalist model of rationality that has shaped modernity since Descartes, the Romantic organicism of Blumenbach, Kant, Goethe, Coleridge, Schelling, and Schopenhauer

thus mobilizes once again the classically Aristotelian concept of teleology as immanent self-regulation and continuous self-realization. As Goethe's *Maxims and Reflections* recall, "the Greeks designated as 'entelechy' something potential becoming actual, a being that is always in active function," and "function is being (*Dasein*) thought of as action" (173). Hence the psycho-physiological complexion of the body cannot possibly be understood as but the sum of its constituent parts; neither can we claim some separate agency (*Lebenskraft*) as the cause of organic development, a soul or such that would appear to live independent of its organic substrate. Rather, Blumenbach's *Bildungstrieb* has to be thought as wholly coincident with the (teleological) functionalism of all the constitutive parts that make up a complex organism.

Now, if we fast-forward a century, we find that Romanticism's understanding of developmental processes as the manifestation (or Goethean "parable") of a self-regulating and non-intentional purposiveness or rationality to have lost its conceptual force and social appeal. Thus, after 1870, one can observe a marked recrudescence of utilitarian notions of finality and perfection, now posited and fetishized as the final *outcome* and sole *meaning* of developmental processes. Such a rebarbarized model of teleology is at its most conspicuous in the eventually discredited movement of social Darwinism (Herbert Spencer, T. H. Huxley, Ernst Haeckel). Yet the suppleness and humility of Romantic organicism as a way of grasping the functionally adaptive, variational, and infinitely variegated strategy of life is also challenged by late-nineteenth-century narratives that forecast the imminent closure of all development—either in a petit-bourgeois apotheosis to Western European scientific, economic, aesthetic, and indeed racial superiority (E. Düring, Treitschke, A. Bartels, H. S. Chamberlain, Céline, et al.), or in strenuously pessimistic, even apocalyptic narratives presaging the defeat of organic life and the human by a new regime of economic, biological, and administrative *technē* (Nietzsche, Simmel, Spengler, Mann, Weber, et al.). The latter narrative is already taking shape in the aesthetics and psychology of decline in Flaubertian and Baudelairean *décadence*, with its pitch further raised in the later Wagner, Nietzsche, and the *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism of d'Annunzio, Wilde, Pater, von Hoffmansthal, Stefan George, and the early Mann, among others. Late-nineteenth-century narrative thus shares a strikingly consistent basic plot—namely, the defeat of Aristotelian character (*ēthos*) and action (*drama*) by group-specific longings, resentments, and behavioral patterns that have been unwittingly assimilated—be it conventional self-assured philistinism, fanatical utopianism, or jingoistic hubris. As early as 1872, the naïve and self-cherishing teleological confidence of the new, Wilhelminian Germany draws Nietzsche's contemptuous and parodic imitation: "We are culture! We are *Bildung!* We are at the peak! We are the tip of the pyramid! We are the telos of world history" (1: 706). What in the dialectical and variational frameworks of Goethe, Beethoven, Hegel, and Darwin were organic potentialities containing the seeds of infinite productivity and creativity now have degenerated into Eliot's hollow men ("a Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion" ["The Hollow Men" 56, ll. 11-12]) mindlessly proselytizing their philistine "values."

How, then, can we discriminate between Romantic organicism and its farcical and reductive demise at the end of the nineteenth century? If not some naïve first cause

(*causa efficiens*) or some specious utilitarian outcome (*causa finalis*), what *does* impel and sustain morphological change along the organicist and dialectical trajectories conceived by Goethe, Coleridge, Beethoven, Hegel, G. Eliot, and Charles Darwin, among others? To answer that question one does well to remember that none of the writers and artists just mentioned ever construe the “end” of a teleological narrative to *resolve* outright the inherent tension or “polarity” between the discrete materials and premises that are the substratum of any developmental process. Instead, they all seem preoccupied with showing how processes (biological and aesthetic alike) gradually seek to *comprehend* their constitutive materials and, in so doing, develop their own, implicit or “proper” “notion” (*Begriff*). The most decisive *product* of evolutionary, especially variational processes is an understanding of their own, implicit *auto-telic* quality—that is, their quest for progressively more sophisticated states of self-awareness and self-description. Far from constituting a distinct outcome or commodity, knowledge in the organicist view of the world arises from and remains forever bound up with a process whose transformational logic leads up to a notion of its own intrinsic purposiveness.

Still, such comprehension requires the creation of complex and burdensome institutions of memory such as will allow the substratum of a *Bildung* gradually to become self-aware as the authentic “end” or “subject” of that very process. In his superb essay, “The Concept and Tragedy of Culture” (1911), Georg Simmel thus extends the teleomechanical model first articulated by Kant and Goethe into an agonistic theory of cultural production. Though deeply sympathetic to Goethean organicism, Simmel cautions that “the unity of the psyche is not simply a formal bond that forever encloses the elaborations of its individual forces ... [R]ather a development as a totality is carried by these individual forces and this development of the totality is inwardly preceded by the goal of a cultivation [*Ziel einer Ausgebildetheit*] itself for which all those individual abilities and perfections are considered a means to an end” (56). Ultimately, all “cultivation is ... a task lying in the realm of the infinite, since the utilization of objective factors for the perfection of the individual can never be considered finished” (66). And yet, Simmel notes, in continually devising objective vehicles or, really, *institutions* that are to mediate the psyche’s development (e.g., linguistic, aesthetic, and social grammars, museums, schools, universities, etc.), cultivation necessarily draws *on* and gradually succumbs *to* a lifeless, extraneous and artificial dimension. The latter (let us call it *technē*) manifests an “inorganic, accumulative capacity ... profoundly incommensurable with the form of personal life” (73) and hence destined to turn the human individual into “the mere bearer of a compulsion with which this [institutional, objective] logic rules developments” (72)

Simmel thus alerts us to the fact that the processes theorized by Romantic organicism necessarily give rise to the vast and variegated objective domain of mediating institutions that gradually usurp the meaning of “culture”: books, theories, education systems and norms, social and moral norms, technologies of memory (the archive, the museum, the idea of a curriculum, etc.). Hence, as the dynamism of *Bildung* calcifies into the inert, “stony” bulk of so many institutions consolidating and guarding cultural literacy (*Bildungsgut*) as a terminal possession, a startling reversal of Goethe’s and Hegel’s “liquefaction of fixed thoughts” (Hegel 20) appears to take place. The process

of culture congeals into an autonomous, disciplinary infrastructure, which, in turn, transmutes the once dynamic phenomena of psycho-physiological development into propositional knowledge and intellectual property—thus terminating the *process* of development by reconstituting it as a significant *result*—knowledge. Consequently, the objective domain of mediating, disciplinary and institutional pursuits not only separates off from the organic and dynamic process of life but, in the sense of Blake’s “book of brass” or “state mystery,” establishes itself as the sole authority capable of legitimating all individual, dynamic phenomena or manifestations of life.

Alert to this propensity of mediating institutions to determine their own goals and claims independent of their original mission, Hegel in particular struggled with balancing the Aristotelian, socially normative conception of the “good” or “end” (*telos*) coordinating all genuinely ethical human practice against modernity’s notion of an “instrumental” (Weber) or “operative” (C. Taylor) rationality solely concerned with and legitimated by the production of results, outcomes, or commodities. By contrast, Aristotelian *entelechy* is premised on the notion that “movement is in every case a displacement of that which is in movement” (*De Anima* 406^b 10)—that is, never a mere causal *transmission* but an intrinsic *unfolding* of energy. The famous Aristotelian definition of “soul” as *entelecheia* (“a substance in the sense of the form having life potentially within it” [412^a, 20]) reappears, albeit often without clear attribution or even awareness of its origins, in Romantic organicism and dialectics.¹ Both of these discourses posit that narrative cannot be reduced to a matter of external and contingent action either taken or observed by rational, contingently situated individuals clinging to their distinct, autonomous subjectivity and merely pursuing their separate goals. Rather, a process is truly teleological only if and when it reveals its sociality—when, in Hegel’s parlance, it is *for us*—and thereby is understood, not as a mere tool but as comprising our very “essence” (*Wesen*). As he exemplifies: “Though the embryo is indeed *in itself* a human being, it is not so *for itself*; this it only is as cultivated reason [*gebildete Vernunft*], which has *made* itself into what it is *in itself*” (12). In the dialectical view of the world, a process truly deserves that name only when it acquires and reflexively takes possession of all the attributes that, since Aristotle, had characterized life itself: dynamism, expressive and morphological differentiation, as well as awareness of itself *as* life. Hence, all process is, in Hegel famous expression, “substance become subject” (476). Both Goethean organicism and Hegelian dialectics thus posit that all ostensibly separate, external phenomena had, in fact, all along implicated and “constructed” the observing intelligence that initially conceived of itself as a separate and autonomous rational agency.

Curiously intransigent vis-à-vis Hegel’s overall systemic objectives, the observing intelligence of the empirical self (Hegel’s *natürliches Bewußtsein*) ultimately can never effectively transcend the development of what, in its varying “notion” (*Begriff*), it construes to be merely external matter. As Goethe notes, “the phenomenon is not detached from the observer, but is intertwined and involved with him” (*Maxims* 155). Crystallized through a complex and open-ended process of self-transformation or metamorphosis, the conscious human individual thus can do no more than chart its variational progression to date. Under no circumstances can it transcend the process

with which it is so wholly entwined or, rather, of which the individual itself is but a “parable” (*Gleichnis*). Simply put, *organicism by its very nature precludes the possibility of an objective meta-narrative*. Given the homeostasis of process and subject, the latter cannot logically achieve cognitive “autonomy” vis-à-vis its own genesis. Nor can the subject of development ever extrapolate from the evolutionary process to date by authoritatively *predicting* its future direction. For whatever future stages are yet to unfold will, at that time, also be found to have further altered the subjective intelligence realized through the very developmental trajectory in question. No matter how sophisticated its objective disciplinary and institutional mediating frameworks in the present, organicism can only posit the consubstantiality of material phenomena and subjective intelligence by charting progressive morphological change up until the present. As the “end” (*telos*) of an invariably unfinished development, it can go no further. Hence, in focusing on “radical reflexivity” (to borrow Charles Taylor’s term), organicist and dialectical thought grasps narrative as an open-ended, variational sequence of so many “positions,” “states,” or “moments.” Each of these furnishes a distinctive, if wholly unpredictable occasion for reflexive self-possession to an intelligence that has nothing else to go on except the variable phenomena that comprise its own formative progression (*Bildung*) in the first place.

With the rise of organicist and dialectical thought, a radically novel concept of narrative surfaces and quickly establishes itself as modernity’s quintessential medium—one wherein life develops and so gradually attains its own concept. Part of that discovery involves the Baroque and inherently mournful recognition of individual “consciousness” as but a transient parable (*alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis*) for the developmental process itself. It is here, too, that we see more clearly why Moretti’s juxtaposition of a teleological and a variational model of development (his “classification” and “transformation” principle, respectively) ultimately proves unsustainable. For we now find that in the wake of Kant, Goethe, Beethoven, and Hegel (to name but the most prominent voices), the long dormant ancient *mytheme* of metamorphosis so compellingly explored in its countless metastases by Ovid is not so much replaced by modern narrative as it is being “reoccupied” (to borrow Hans Blumenberg’s important concept). Within the intellectual and aesthetic configuration of post-Kantian Enlightenment, narrative emerges as a unique challenge to writers anxious to recalibrate Reason as a self-regulating, temporalized, and dialectical progression—in short, as nothing less than formulating *in nuce* the strategy of organic life. Henceforth, narratives of *Bildung* posit the individual organism as a contingent, and merely transitional vehicle ensuring the continuity of its particular species. Individual life here is lifted out of its ektypal, Platonic role as necessarily imperfect material instantiation (*hyle*) of an assumed, transcendent form (*eidōs*). Thus in nineteenth-century variational narratives of the kind tendered by Goethe, Schopenhauer, Darwin, or Tolstoy, “perfection” (be it as Rousseauvian *perfectibilité*, Godwinian “immortality,” or Kantian *Vollkommenheit*) ceases to be an operative category. Instead, organicist and dialectical thought corrects modernity’s utilitarian or operative reduction of teleology to brute finality with a far more supple, narrative dynamic. Henceforth, it is this unrelenting propensity of a narrative’s core materials or subjects to reorganize their own morphology—i.e., to

develop by continually differing from themselves—which constitutes both the formal signature of intelligence *and* the functional criterion of physiological life.

Let me close by drawing attention to two types of developmental narrative—both of which reveal its underlying preoccupation with setting limits to the open-ended, variational logic of development by projecting a definitive closure and outcome. The most successful protagonists of the European *Bildungsroman*, such as Wordsworth's emergent poetic persona in *The Prelude*, Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, Eliot's Daniel Deronda, or Tolstoy's Konstantin Levin and Pyotr Bezuhov all succeed to the extent that they gradually attain a reflexive perspective on their own development. To reach that level of awareness—one that grasps knowledge as an *event* rather than *result*—requires above all that they remain forever alert and responsive to the contingent and the unknown. The latter must not be misconstrued or outright appropriated as merely so many external events befalling one at irregular intervals but, instead, as realizations of inner potentialities (“unknown modes of being”) that would remain forever occluded if one were to embrace a singular and invariant identity. Thus, upon teaching his own son, Goethe's protagonist unexpectedly finds himself “observing nature through a new organ, and the child's curiosity and desire to learn made him aware how feeble his interest had been in the things outside himself and how little he knew; ... his own education seemed also to be beginning anew. ... Human nature only revealed itself to him by observing the child” (*Apprenticeship* 305, 308). As in his many earlier musings on the role of chance and coincidence, Wilhelm's reflexive insight, while ostensibly affirming his intellectual autonomy, actually threatens to unravel his persona even further. For he is constrained to admit that an apparently contingent event (*viz.*, his discovery that Felix is his son) activates a deep-seated, quasi-instinctual commitment of his cognitive and emotional resources to parenthood and, in so doing, effects a far-reaching transformation of his very sense of self. His development, in other words, is not governed by some subjective intention or self-conscious design but, instead, unfolds according to the dictates of chance recognitions whose appraisal takes the form of a Proustian *mémoire involontaire* rather than abiding within the tight methodical prescriptions of the Cartesian or even the Kantian subject.

My other, very brief example involves the mature work of Karl Marx. As is well known, Marx constructs modernity—particularly its most dynamic phase, the mid-eighteenth-century fashioning of speculative capital, public credit, and the descriptive meta-language of political economy—as a sequence of unrelenting social transformations. In a surprisingly candid tribute to bourgeois ingenuity, the *Communist Manifesto* thus remarks on the “constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation” by a new type of entrepreneurial intelligence, a phenomenon that “distinguish[es] the bourgeois epoch from all earlier times. All fixed, fast-frozen relationships, with their train of venerable ideas and opinions are swept away, all new-formed ones become obsolete before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into thin air ...” (224). Similar passages foreshadowing Schumpeter's “creative destruction” appear throughout Marx's later oeuvre, as do depictions of the obverse scenario. For the dialectical progress of history is repeatedly

opposed by a pre-modern, static, and calcified peasantry of which we read in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* that its “mode of production isolates them from one another” since “it admits of no division of labour in its cultivation, no application of science, and, therefore, no diversity of development.” Inasmuch as these small freeholders (*Parzellenbauern*) maintain “merely a local interconnection” and, hence, “the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond, and no political organization,” they are bound to prove historically stagnant and politically reactionary: “They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them” (317–318).

Curiously, Marx’s political commitment to a definitive telos—the abolition of class differences and the ensuing, definitive redistribution of all means of production—appears gratuitously superimposed on a dialectical narrative and conceptual template that favors subjects capable of perpetual self-transformation and open-ended development. That is, even as he values the bourgeoisie’s capacity and genuine propensity towards a perpetual revolutionizing of the prevailing economic arrangements, Marx does so only because of an *a priori* assumption—stated most emphatically in the *Communist Manifesto*—that such metamorphoses will eventually lead to the demise of the bourgeois class and its supersession by a static and undifferentiated, communist utopia. Yet this prognosis of an ending defined by the disappearance of all “polarity” (Goethe) and “difference” (Hegel) cannot logically be derived from the variational progression of a ceaselessly self-transforming and adaptive human species and its equally discontinuous objective mediating institutions (of language, culture, law, economics, etc.). In fact, Marx’s attempt to mine the dialectical concept of development for *predictive* purposes is *precisely the one move no longer sanctioned* by that model’s logic. For as the rigorous morphological constructions of biological or virtual life in Goethe, Beethoven, or Darwin all show, the variational model posits not “definitive perfection, not the embodiment of prescribed, static essences, but a process of continual, restless, open-ended, unbounded growth” (Berman 98). By its very nature, then, this paradigm *negates the possibility of a stable meta-narrative or meta-critical perspective*.

In dwelling on what, at first glance, seemed a straightforward formal discrimination, we have found that to take an interest in two opposed ways of building and motivating narrative sequences invariably means to confront the underlying question of emplotment. Romantic hermeneutics has certainly made it clear that plot is intricately entwined with the interpreting subject’s *a priori* commitments and powers of discernment and, hence, never a straightforward *effect* wrought by some narrative’s formal operations. What we call plot is never simply *produced by* the narrative but, rather, is *brought to it* in the form of values, norms, and expectations typically unexamined and, at the moment of interpretation, found to have been anticipated and now being dismantled as so many prejudices by the ironic logic of the narrative in question. Hence a meta-critical, predictive vantage point vis-à-vis a narrative trajectory that has *prima facie* spawned and refined our own cognitive powers proves logically impossible. If, as Goethe remarks in *Maxims and Reflections*, “we live in the midst of *derived* phenomena, and have no idea how we are to arrive at the original question” (153), drawing even the

most rudimentary formalist distinctions in the area of narrative will ultimately expose the meta-critical projects of speculative or historical dialectics as but an illusion of closure and so much cognitive quicksand. In the wake of Romanticism, narrative ceases to function as a stable and neutral medium for rational self-realization. Where Descartes had confidently proffered his *Discourse on Method* (1637) “merely as a story or, if you prefer, as a fable,” narrative after 1800 has all but disappeared from modernity’s template of a universal and impersonal methodology. Instead, narrative now assumes the role of an ironic or dialectical guardianship against the Enlightenment’s over-extension of causality, impartiality, and utility. In one way or another, nineteenth-century narrative thus always verges on meta-narrative after all, albeit one whose own cogency derives solely from the contingent blindness of those accounts relative to which it functions as critical commentary. Schlegel’s famous surmise in *Athenaeum* 216 that “our shabby histories of civilization ... usually resemble a collection of variants accompanied by a running commentary for which the original classical text has been lost” (46) succinctly captures the variational and non-instrumental status of post-Enlightenment narrative and its ironic take on the modern instrumental rationality or *technē*. Schopenhauer’s “despair,” Nietzsche’s anti-Socratic notion of the tragic, Max Weber’s “disenchantment,” Freud’s “discontent,” and Heidegger’s “forgetfulness of Being” (*Seinsvergessenheit*) will be later, equally forceful testimonials to the impossibility for modern narrative ever to attain timeless, meta-critical authority. All of them caution *us*, too, against backsliding into a crudely teleological and utilitarian model of critique valued merely for its short-lived disciplinary impact and transient professional rewards. As modernity’s greatest neo-Augustinian, Heidegger, had argued so strenuously some time ago: *technē* is the name for a pervasive dilemma rather than its solution.

Note

- [1] Hegel, for one, does acknowledge Aristotle’s influence. Thus, in the “Preface” to the *Phenomenology*, he notes that “Aristotle, too, defines Nature as purposive activity, purpose is what is immediate and *at rest*, the unmoved which is also *self-moving*, and as such is Subject” (12).

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