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FREDRIC JAMESON

The Experiments of Time: Providence and Realism

Phenomenology of the Happy Ending

Happy endings are not as easy to bring off as you might think: at least in literature; but they are in any case a literary category and not an existential one. It is much easier to have your protagonist end badly; but perhaps here the perils of an arbitrary authorial decision are even more evident, and the outcome has to be more openly justified by some larger ideological concept—either the aesthetics of tragedy or that metaphysics of failure that dominated the naturalist novel and still very much governs our imagination of poverty and underdevelopment. Nor is the happy ending quite the same as the “living happily ever after” with which youthful adventures so often terminate. Comedy, on Northrop Frye’s account the phallic triumph of the younger generation over the older one,¹ is a theatrical subset of that plot-type; but its novelistic equivalents already tend in a different direction, the providential one, which is my topic here.

Not only does the *Aethiopica* add a reconciliation with the father to the reunion of the lovers, it also (paradigmatically) separates them by way of a multitude of plots that must all be resolved in their individual stroke of good luck:

“The child you regarded as your daughter, the child I committed to your keeping all those years ago, is safe,” he exclaimed, “though in truth she is, and has been discovered to be, the child of parents whose identity you know!”

Now Charikleia came running from the pavilion and, oblivious of the modesty incumbent on her sex and years, raced like a maenad in her madness towards Charikles and fell at his feet.

“Father,” she said, “to you I owe as much reverence as to those who gave me birth. I am a wicked parricide; punish me as you please; ignore any attempts to excuse my misdeeds by ascribing them to the will of the gods, to their governance of human life!”

A few feet away, Persinna held Hydaspes in her arms. “It is all true, my husband,” she said. “You need have no doubts. Understand now that young

¹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), 163ff.

Greek is truly to be our daughter's husband. She has just confessed as much to me, though it cost her much pain."

The populace cheered and danced for joy where they stood, and there was no discordant voice as young and old, rich and poor, united in jubilation.²

The greatest modern version of this narrative cunningly marshals its two immense trajectories (the plights of each lover) to map the geographical and the class levels of a whole historical society: at the same time, *I promessi sposi* now, at the end of the Christian era, includes the reflexive and philosophical questions about the providential and the salvational as its very content. At that price, the reunion of the young lovers turns out to include a temporal perspective far vaster than the triumph of youth over age.³

The point to be made is that the salvational is not a religious but a philosophical category. We must not grasp the tradition I want to propose as the mere secularization of a theological drama: indeed, Blumenberg has famously taught us that this concept is a paralogism, designed either to discredit the religious presuppositions of alleged secularizations (such as Marxism), or to assert the unconscious persistence of religion throughout the seemingly modern and modernized world.⁴ In reality, we have here to do with empty forms, which, inherited, are reappropriated for wholly new meanings and uses, which have nothing to do with the historical origins of their borrowed articulations. Thus the very theme of resurrection itself—theologically the most glorious of all salvational representations—is scarcely to be understood in any religious sense: from its figural deployment in Proust ("l'adoration perpétuelle") to its literal celebration in Stanley Spenser's paintings (let alone in *The Winter's Tale*), resurrection expresses the euphoria of a secular salvation otherwise inexpressible in material or social terms, religious language here offering the means of rendering a material possibility rather than the other way round.

It is this possibility that the providential work embodies, and if I claim that it does so philosophically, I mean by that to imply that (unlike the long-existing theological concept) no philosophical concept for the matter exists independently and that therefore it is only by way of aesthetic representation that this reality can be grasped. But I also mean the word *philosophical* to imply that the local representation (the story of individuals, the empirical

² B. P. Reardon, *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 586–87.

³ See also "Magical Narratives," in my *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981).

⁴ Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985).

reality) must always in this form be shadowed by a more transcendental philosophical idea—just as I have asserted that the naturalist rendering of bad luck and inevitable degradation is presided over by a constellation of class and scientific ideologies (from entropy to the bourgeois terror of proletarianization, as well as that of the “decline of the West”).

It will be appropriate to illustrate the process in the very different register of science fiction: indeed, at the heart of one of Philip K. Dick’s grimmest novels, *Archaeologies of the Future*, we encounter a salvational episode of the most radiant beauty. Like so much paraliterature (the relationship between modern detective stories and specific cities is well known), it is often a literature of place and landscape, albeit imaginary ones: Dick’s Mars is the prototype of his characteristic desert of misery, in which the most dismal features of a provincial 1950s America are unremittingly reproduced and perpetuated against a backdrop of ecological sterility and the intensive use of low-yield machinery. Cultural reminiscences of Australia waft off this unpromising colony, which still has remnants of its aboriginal population (here called Bleekmen) and nourishes Tasmanian fantasies of extermination. Dick’s multiple alternating plots, whose virtuoso practice recalls Dickens or Altman and that typically include political corruption and dysfunctional families, mental illness and professional failure, would not be complete without the opening onto nightmare and hallucination, here incarnated in the autistic child Manfred, whose speech consists in the single word: “gubble.” It expresses Manfred’s view through the appearances of things to “the skull beneath the skin,” the horrible amalgams of machinery and garbage that constitute the deeper reality of the outside world and its population. It is a glimpse theorized by Lacan in his notion of *das Ding*, the monstrous indeterminate and inexpressible Other that bides its time in the “outside world” of each of us.⁵

But in fact Manfred’s situation is a time-traveling one: the real life of the mentally paralyzed child is “in reality” the aged, infirm, hospitalized old man he will in many years become, imprisoned in an early version of that “Black Iron Prison” (“the Empire never ended”) that haunted Dick’s later life and work.⁶ But here a redemptive solution is still possible, owing to the temporal simultaneity of the Bleekmen (patterned on the aboriginal cosmos), who, fleeing their own imminent genocide, are able to save another

⁵ Jacques Lacan, *L’ethique de la psychanalyse*, Le Séminaire Livre 7 (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 55–86.

⁶ Philip K. Dick, *Valis* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 48. I am grateful to Kim Stanley Robinson for this reference; he adds that “The Building, in *A Maze of Death* (chapter 9) is certainly a nightmare of a building, in a nightmare of a book. Then in *A Scanner Darkly* the ending happens in a forbidding mental hospital, ‘Samarkand House,’ and in *Galactic Pot-Healer*, the final Jungian project is to bring up The Black Cathedral (à la Debussy).”

orphan by rescuing the aged Manfred from his terminal confinement and carry him off into the eternal Dreamtime:

At the front door of the Steiner house one of the Steiner girls met them. “My brother—”

She and Jack pushed past the child, and into the house. Silvia did not understand what she saw, but Jack seemed to; he took hold of her hand, stopped her from going any farther.

The living room was filled with Bleekmen. And in their midst she saw part of a living creature, an old man only from the chest on up; the rest of him became a tangle of pumps and hoses and dials, machinery that clicked away, unceasingly active. It kept the old man alive; she realized that in an instant. The missing portion of him had been replaced by it. Oh, God, she thought. Who or what was it, sitting there with a smile on its withered face? Now it spoke to them.

“Jack Bohlen,” it rasped, and its voice issued from a mechanical speaker, out of the machinery: not from its mouth. “I am here to say goodbye to my mother.” It paused, and she heard the machinery speed up, as if it were laboring. “Now I can thank you,” the old man said.

Jack, standing by her, holding her hand, said. “For what? I didn’t do anything for you.”

“Yes, I think so.” The thing seated there nodded to the Bleekmen, and they pushed it and its machinery closer to Jack and straightened it so that it faced him directly. “In my opinion . . .” It lapsed into silence and then it resumed, more loudly, now. “You tried to communicate with me, many years ago. I appreciate that.”⁷

It is a deliverance into which one can no doubt read Dick’s later religious mysticism; yet the theme of modes of production (the modern and the archaic) also reminds us to reverse this direction and to sense a social and historical redemption at work behind the individual one.

Predestination and Collective Histories

And this is in fact the other axis that complicates our philosophical framework and that runs, not from success to failure and back, but from the individual to

⁷ Philip K. Dick, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005), 218–19. And for more on the relationship of this episode to Dick’s world generally, see my essay “History and Salvation in Philip K. Dick,” (forthcoming).

the collective. Far more than providence and the providential, the notion of predestination can illustrate our point here: for even in the realm of theology itself, this notion has been a “hard saying” that often and traditionally “sticks in the craw.” For predestination illustrates Kant’s two levels of the empirical and the transcendent almost better than any other attempt at a concept, for it claims to solve this dilemma (which it merely names), namely that of the distinction between the realm of freedom and that of necessity, that of the noumenon and that of the phenomenon, that of the transcendental and that of the empirical, paradoxically locating the latter in the power of divine, and the former in that of human subjectivity. What the concept of predestination asserts, in other words, is that an iron necessity governs my empirical acts and my personal destiny—this iron necessity is that of God’s providence and of his determination of that destiny from all eternity, and before time itself.⁸ I am, in empirical reality, one of the elect or one of the damned, and I can exercise no freedom in influencing these outcomes; no individual act of mine exerts any kind of causality in their predetermined course. However, on the level of my individual consciousness or soul (Kant’s noumenal realm of freedom), things stand utterly differently, and I can have no subjective sense of my election or my damnation: here I am left alone with my existential freedom and must necessarily choose my acts and make my decisions as though I were completely free.

Kant’s philosophy in general and his ethics in particular—very much contemporaneous with the novelistic tradition we are here constructing—are mere secularized descendents of the official solution to the problem, which is not particularly interesting for our purposes, even though it does involve a dialectic of the sign or even of the symptom, which is very contemporary indeed. It is resumed in the famous phrase, “the outward and visible signs of inward election”: and this rather casuistical cutting of the Gordian knot can be summarized as follows. Nothing we do can ensure our election (rather than our damnation): but if in fact we happen to be one of the elect (chosen from all eternity), our behavior on earth will reflect this condition and will therefore constitute an empirical sign of our noumenal and unknowable salvation in the transcendental realm. Hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue, someone famously said: and thus, even though it can have no causal effect, no genuine effectivity, we would do well to behave virtuously on the off chance our fate will be harmonious with this conduct. Only the more logical negative conclusion here—that if election is from all eternity, then it does not matter how I behave—has offered truly remarkable novelistic

⁸ For at least the modern revival of Augustine’s doctrine, see Bernard M. G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Reformation* (London: Longman, 1981).

possibilities, in James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. But the dilemma gets more productively restaged on the political and historical level.

Here we move from the individual destiny to the collective one, and the salvation of the soul is replaced by that of the human race itself, or in other words by Utopia and socialist revolution. But the well-known alternative within the Marxist tradition between voluntarism and fatalism absolutely coincides with the theological antinomy, which can thus be said to anticipate it and to "prefigure" its more secular problematic in a distorted, still figurative and theological, and essentially individual way. The Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks are themselves mere personifications of this primordial opposition, in which a conviction as to the objective movement of history is opposed by a militant sense of the power of human beings to make history. Clearly, nothing is more debilitating than an opposition of this kind, which tends to sort itself out into a passive/active one in which neither alternative is satisfactory. For to oppose a placid, Second International confidence in the "inevitable" movement of history toward a socialist state is not necessarily only to show faith in the shaping powers of human beings; it is also to encourage the most mindless forms of suicidal attempts to "force" history, to break through its logic prematurely, to encourage young people to die in what are causes lost in advance owing to the fact that "the situation is not yet ripe, not yet a revolutionary one." As with predestination, however, there is nothing to guide us in this choice and no empirical signs are available to allow us to have any certainty of "election," that is to say, of the possibility of revolution as the one supreme salvational or providential event.

But in this secular and collective version, in fact there is a kind of solution, and one not unrelated to the unconvincing theological one in such a way as to demonstrate that the latter was only really a distorted anticipation of the former. For here what is taken as voluntarism—that is, the collective will to force history—is itself seen, not as a subjective choice, but as an objective symptom, in that sense very precisely an objective component of that history itself. Thus, an infantile leftism or anarchist voluntarism now becomes that "external sign" that revolution is not yet on the agenda and that the situation has not yet politically "matured." What was not solvable on the level of Hogg's theological hero here becomes a piece of historical evidence, a historical sign fully as significant as all others. It is in the old theological spirit that one may also say that the passive "inevitabilism" of the Second International was itself a sign of immaturity and of an insufficiently developed political situation. This new interpenetration of the subjective and the objective thus now suddenly signals a transcendence of the old antinomy,

and a moment in which the providential and empiricism overcome as specific historical ratios. It thus also designates a new kind of social content for the novel as form and the possibility of new kinds of narration.

It is to these that we must now turn, with the help of such findings: the latter in effect signal the fundamental difference in possibility between the individual and the collective and suggest that we reinterrogate the novelistic form for just such consequences. The debate between revolutionaries about voluntarism and fatalism, to be sure, becomes a limited kind of specialized content for some officially political novel—what I have elsewhere called a sort of Third International literary dialectic in which this specific dilemma, most fully exacerbated by the peculiar position of Stalinist revolution in one country, gets played out.⁹ (Sartre's works are some of the most interesting versions of these tragic paradoxes, which tend to be invisible in an anticommunist focus.) But as with the theological material, it is not this specific content, but rather the larger form in general that interests us here.

"Tendencies" of the Bildungsroman

I now therefore want to return to the mainstream realist novel in order to make a few further remarks about the form-generating and form-producing value of the providential within realism itself. For the moment what is crucial for us is the distinction between the individual perspective and the collective one, when it comes to providence or happy endings. This turns out to be an evolutionary matter, for as in the purely theological realm, there is a decided historical movement from the individual destiny to the collective one (or from issues of individual salvation to those of political and revolutionary transformations, as in our preceding discussion).

But there are intermediate steps, and as it were external operators, that move us from the individual narrative to the collective one. To be sure, the first theological transfers take place naturally enough in the framework of an individual destiny, and it has been universally recognized that the very prototype of a truly individualized and isolated individual destiny, *Robinson Crusoe*, is saturated with providential lore of various kinds.¹⁰ The novel

⁹ See my Introduction to Peter Weiss, *Aesthetics of Resistance* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁰ The classic discussions are those of G. A. Starr, *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965) and J. Paul Hunter, *The Reluctant Pilgrim* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966).

uniquely enables the interiorization of the various external adventures and episodes that had hitherto formed the space in which the happy or the tragic ending was played out—the realm of accidents, the contingent, chance of a meaningful kind, and so forth. Later on, these will be simply omens and not causes, as when Julien Sorel finds a scrap of newspaper in a church early in *The Red and the Black*. The interiorization of chance now means that contingency can offer the opportunity for an inward experience or development. But I think that the debate as to whether Defoe himself was a Christian is misplaced: we have here rather the template for the organization of experiences in a new way, in which religious influence is itself a mere external and enabling condition. Such developments need to be seen synchronically, in obedience to Blumenberg’s warning about the pseudo-concept of “secularization.” To be sure, it is not wrong to say that the bildungsroman is then a secularization of this earlier, already secular “spiritual autobiography” of Defoe; but neither stage retains the meaning of the preceding one, but only the form. Thus it would be wrong to say that the bildungsroman is still religious in its (now secular) concern for the state of the individual soul: no, what is deployed now is a mere form that organizes its new social material in an analogous way.

For our topic, it may be said that *Wilhelm Meister* is the decisive turning point, and as it were, the true beginning of the nineteenth-century novel, the end of something as well as the beginning of something else, which is however its mutation and its adaptation to the new postrevolutionary society (a society that did not, of course, yet exist in Germany and scarcely elsewhere at that). This is a peculiarly central evaluation for such an odd and garbled book, immensely influential and yet a kind of literary white elephant, boring and fascinating all at once, and a perpetual question mark for the French and British traditions in which, as a text, it has played so small a role, yet which are incomprehensible without it, as we shall see.

The novel of formation, the novel of education?¹¹ It would be better to translate the term *bildungsroman* as the novel of a calling or vocation, a *Beruf*, to use that word which Max Weber charged with its most intense Lutheran accents in order to make his point about the new innerworldliness of Protestant behavior and virtue. Not that Wilhelm is at all secure in his ultimate vocation: the critics are at least sure that the latter is no longer the

¹¹ The perspective adopted here does not allow me to endorse Franco Moretti’s ideological analysis of the form, in *The Way of the World* (London: Verso, 1987), which remains the most stimulating and comprehensive discussion of this novelistic subgenre. It will be apparent below that mine is rather an ideological indictment of what I call ontological realism as such.

artistic calling or the surrender to genius that had been projected in the first draft (the *Theatralische Sendung*). Yet the rhetoric of the ending—so glorious and so determinate for several generations of bildungsroman if not of providential narrative—is strangely at odds with the actual situation (Wilhelm is about to set off on a trip to Italy, just like Goethe himself):

To my mind thou resemblest Saul the son of Kish, who
went out to seek his father's asses, and found a kingdom.¹²

Indeed, the principal role of “providence” here would seem to be a negative one: “Flee, youth, flee!” Above all, he is not to become a mere actor, and his onetime success in the role of Hamlet is owing, as Boyle rightly insists, to the preestablished harmony between his own personality and that of the Prince.¹³ But for the greater part of the play, the Prince is also tormented by the question of what to do, and what the superego—the father's Ghost (which also plays a significant part in *Meister*)—commands. Wilhelm's real father, however, proposes a life of commerce and trade, which, along with theatricals, is the one vocation quite decisively repudiated.¹⁴ I will suggest in passing that at the end of the novel, the authority of the Father has been displaced by that of the brothers, but I do not want to overemphasize this theme of the Big Other, which does not seem particularly important for Goethe here or elsewhere.

That “providence” is a fundamental theme of the novel, however, can be judged from recurrent discussions, which seem to propose a philosophical alternative between destiny and chance: “I easily content myself, [says Wilhelm] and honor destiny, which knows how to bring about what is best for me, and what is best for everyone.” To which the first of his mysterious acquaintances replies:

It gives me pain to hear this word destiny in the mouth of a young person. . . .
Woe to him who, from his youth, has used himself to search in necessity for something of arbitrary will; to ascribe chance a sort of reason, which it is a matter of religion to obey. Is conduct like this aught else than to renounce one's understanding, and give unrestricted scope to one's inclinations? We

¹² References are to Thomas Carlyle's translation of the novel (New York: Heritage, 1959), bk. 8, chap. 10, p. 657; and in the German, to *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1982), 626.

¹³ Nicholas Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2:336.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 239–40; see also Giuliano Baioni, “Gli anni di apprendistato,” in *Il romanzo*, ed. Franco Moretti (Turin: Einaudi, 2002), 2:127–33.

think it is a kind of piety to move along without consideration; to let accidents that please us determine our conduct; and, finally, to bestow on the result of such a vacillating life the name of providential guidance.¹⁵

That this is not merely the expression of a standard Enlightenment denunciation of superstition and religion, and an appeal to secular reason, may be externally deduced by the obedience to one's daimon so dear to this author—as well as from texts like *Urworte Ophisch*. Here, however, it is enough to point out that the warning of this stranger inserts itself into the very web of chance and coincidence that make up the novel's stream of events: it is therefore itself drawn inside the theme and interrogated for its own function as that predestined chance we call providence.

We thus arrive at the work's well-known secret: innumerable characters (although mostly divided socially between the wandering theater people, whose triviality estranged Goethe's first intellectual readership, and the aristocracy of this Germany of the principalities in which Goethe was to make himself so eminent a place); a veritable orgy of interpolated stories and gothic destinies, full of rather random recognition scenes and rediscovered kinships of various sorts; love affairs meanwhile, of the tentative sort riddled with flights and avoidances with which Goethe's biography and psychology have familiarized us—these materials scarcely seem to add up to any very consistent focus of representation or stylization, nor are any of them particularly powerful or commanding in their own right. But abruptly, at the center of the text, there takes place a long dream, in which characters from a host of different plot strands come together:

Strange dreams arose upon him towards morning. He was in a garden, which in boyhood he had often visited: he looked with pleasure at the well-known alleys, hedges, flower-beds. Mariana met him: he spoke to her with love and tenderness, recollecting nothing of any by-gone grievance. Erelong his father joined them, in his weekday dress; with a look of frankness that was rare in him, he bade his son fetch two seats from the garden-house; then took Mariana by the hand, and led her into the grove.

Wilhelm hastened to the garden-house, but found it altogether empty: only at a window in the farther side he saw Aurelia standing. He went forward, and addressed her, but she turned not round; and, though he placed himself beside her, he could never see her face. He looked out from the

¹⁵ Bk. 1, chap. 17: Carlyle, 63–64; Insel, 71.

window: in an unknown garden, there were several people, some of whom he recognized. Frau Melina, seated under a tree, was playing with a rose which she had in her hand: Laertes stood beside her, counting money from the one hand to the other. Mignon and Felix were lying on the grass, the former on her back, the latter on his face. Philina followed; but he screamed in terror when he saw the harper coming after him with large, slow steps. Felix ran directly to a pond. Wilhelm hastened after him: too late; the child was lying in the water! Wilhelm stood as if rooted to the spot. The fair Amazon appeared on the other side of the pond: she stretched her right hand towards the child, and walked along the shore. The child came through the water, by the course her finger pointed to; he followed her as she went round; at last she reached her hand to him, and pulled him out. Wilhelm had come nearer: the child was all in flames; fiery drops were falling from his body. Wilhelm's agony was greater than ever; but instantly the Amazon took a white veil from her head, and covered up the child with it. The fire was at once quenched. But, when she lifted up the veil, two boys sprang out from under it, and frolicsomenly sported to and fro; while Wilhelm and the Amazon proceeded hand in hand across the garden, and noticed in the distance Mariana and his father walking in an alley, which was formed of lofty trees, and seemed to go quite round the garden. He turned his steps to them, and, with his beautiful attendant, was moving through the garden, when suddenly the fair-haired Friedrich came across their path, and kept them back with loud laughter and a thousand tricks. Still, however, they insisted on proceeding; and Friedrich hastened off, running towards Mariana and the father. These seemed to flee before him; he pursued the faster, till Wilhelm saw them hovering down the alley almost as on wings. Nature and inclination called on him to go and help them, but the hand of the Amazon detained him. How gladly did he let himself be held! With this mingled feeling he awoke, and found his chamber shining with the morning beams.¹⁶

Here suddenly we glimpse a principle of a wholly different formal nature at work: all these various characters are to be united in a central phantasmagoria just as musical themes are intertwined, in the contemporaneous emergence of the sonata form; just as the dumbshow passed in review the actors to come. The demonstration of a deeper unity now no longer has to be made in any logical or Enlightenment or even causal way, but by the very logic of the dream as formal moment, the moment of the reprise. Here is a form of

¹⁶ Bk. 7, chap. 1: Carlyle, 402–3; Insel, 440–41.

closure utterly distinct from plot, but that demands its own verisimilitude: do we not now finally believe that all this holds together in some new principle of coherence? It is enough to think of Joyce's prodigious reassemblage of all his daytime motifs in the Nighttown scene in *Ulysses* (beyond which everything is anticlimax), or in cinema, that remarkable final hour of Fassbinder's *Alexanderplatz* in which everything that has happened in thought or deed returns oneirically in a new unity, to grasp what is formally original in this extraordinary moment of *Wilhelm Meister*.

But in Goethe, the oneiric superstructure is doubled by a very different infrastructural unity as well, and this is what sets *Wilhelm Meister* apart from all the generic norms and justifies its unique position as a synthesis of "world" and "soul" in Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*. Nor would I want to characterize this alternative unification—although certainly redolent of the eighteenth century, of Freemasonry and of the *The Magic Flute* of 1790—as narrowly Enlightenment: its basis is not Reason as a faculty but the collective as such.

For it famously transpires that the various chance events and contingencies that have marked Wilhelm's youthful career so far are all planned out in advance, as necessary errors (shades of the Hegelian dialectic!), and are the doing of a shadowy group of conspirators known as the Society of the Tower, whose principal figures he will come to know at the end of the book, and whose existence—with a certain Masonic hocus-pocus ("all you saw in the tower was but the relics of a youthful undertaking")—will be revealed to him.¹⁷ The plot is thus turned inside out: from a series of chance happenings it is suddenly revealed as a plan and as a deliberately providential design. And the Enlightenment emphasis on reasoned persuasion and pedagogy here reaches a kind of bizarre climax in which life itself becomes the "leçon d'objets," the theoretically calculated pattern of test and error that the old theological concept ("justify the ways of God to man") only dimly rendered in distorted fashion. The Society of the Tower is a better pedagogue than God, and far more self-conscious and theoretical about its teaching method.

But it is important not to let all this slip (in the content) into a vapid kind of humanism and celebration of eighteenth-century virtue (there is very little of Blutarch and Rousseau here), although there is another kind of slippage, a purely formal one, which we will want to take more seriously. Yet it is significant that the Lukács of *Theory of the Novel*, only a year or so before his commitment to politics and to communism, should not have glimpsed the

¹⁷ Bk. 8, chap. 5: Carlyle, 512; Insel, 564.

political significance of this “white conspiracy,”¹⁸ which very obviously anticipates the structure of the Party itself, and the dialectic of a collective leadership, which both reflects the social order and works back upon its already present tendencies to develop them. Lothario and his friends have just returned from the New World, and the revolution of the colonists against the tyranny of the ancien régime: their political party is not only out to transform the old social world by the modernization of agriculture (“Here or nowhere is America!”),¹⁹ it carries within itself the explosive spark of that element of the American Revolution that would expand into the French one, and become an international movement for the transition from feudalism to the republic—a movement then further elaborated in *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, with Goethe’s customary restraint (as befits that member of the late feudal bureaucracy he later also was). This is the collective task into which Wilhelm is to be initiated, exchanging that microcosm of the social that is the theater—Faust’s “kleine Welt”—for the “great world” of the sociopolitical. It is a unique solution to the formal problem of the political novel, which, a kind of *hapax legomenon*, can never be repeated, nor can it serve as a model, and which is flawed in its very exemplarity, as though designating itself not as the concrete solution but rather merely the intent to find one. But this calls for a larger theoretical speculation about novelistic form, one that is no doubt deeply indebted to Lukács but seeks to replace the notion of the unified subject or soul in his text with a less “humanistic” thematics.

Even before that, however, we need to bid farewell to that whole novelistic development of providential interiority that led from Defoe to *Wilhelm Meister* in the first place. The future of this formal path will no longer be subjective but objective, no longer individualistic but rather collective. But it is important to see that Goethe himself liquidates this earlier tradition within his novel, in what has always struck readers of whatever period and generation as the most peculiar of his extrapolations, namely book 6, or the “Confessions of a Beautiful Soul,” which from Hegel’s famous discussion onward has often been taken as a pathology of introspection.²⁰ The form it itself imitates, precisely by way of this self-sufficient extrapolation, the solipsism of interiority and of the subjectivity that seeks to enact its own virtue, even when issuing from a collective (the *Herrenhüter*), which still includes

¹⁸ George Lukács, *Theorie des Romans* (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1963), pt. 2, chap. 3. But see also the later *Goethe und seine Zeit*.

¹⁹ Bk. 7, chap. 3: Carlyle, 407; Insel, 446.

²⁰ See *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, chap. 6, sec. C, sub-sec. c.

the ancient almost extinguished vibrations of the great religious revivals and revolutions. Goethe has as it were sealed this noxious individualism away in a kind of cyst or crypt,²¹ in which the subjectivity can be separated out of the plot of his novel and formally excised (even though the book's author is as tightly knit by kinship into its cast of characters as all the other chance storytellers of the novel). The thus sealed-off confessions then mark the grave of the "spiritual autobiography" and of any reading of providence as an inward or psychologico-theological phenomenon.

Transcendence and Immanence in Realism

But, as Lukács so usefully warns us, the "novel" as a form is never a successful solution to any of its problems, they merely change their terms when an older problematic individualism has been removed. The new terms in which I wish to codify the possibilities in a kind of structural permutation scheme will be the more Kantian ones (contemporaneous with Goethe himself) of transcendence and immanence. But perhaps it is better to start with the more familiar older Hegelian terminology that passed into New Criticism without taking any of its dialectical baggage with it: namely the so-called concrete universal, or alternatively the thoroughgoing fusion of form and content such that you cannot tell one from the other any longer.²² This aesthetic was probably a neoclassical inspiration, produced by the return to antiquity popular in Goethe's circles, which Hegel frequented when he worked in Jena and sympathized with ever after (not many novels ever find mention in Hegel, who died just as the first great wave of modern fiction, with Balzac in the forefront, was about to hit land; Goethe of course famously mentions Stendhal).²³ Anyway, the unity of form and content thus far simply means that nothing stands out, there are no excesses either way wherever you inspect the artifact: no extra stylistic frills, no "extrinsic" or extraneous content poking out of the pillowcase. All this very much in the spirit of epic; and of course the ambiguity of the German word *episch*, also used for the novel and for narrative in general, means that the novel gets no special treatment.

²¹ See Jacques Derrida, "Fors," in *Cryptonymie: Le verbier de l'homme aux loups*, ed. Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok (Paris: Aubier Flammarion, 1976).

²² See W. K. Wimsatt, "The Structure of the Concrete Universal in Literature," *PMLA* 62 (1947).

²³ *Conversations with Eckermann*, January 17, 1831.

So this aesthetic of fusion can very conveniently be adapted to the language of immanence. *Episch* is immanent, in the sense that meaning is inherent in all its objects and details, all its facts, all its events. They are meaningful in and of themselves, and require no outside commentary or explanation, as might be the case when you introduce modern technology of some sort, or events like financial crises, which are not self-explanatory and whose very nature as “events” in the first place is not secured in advance, which have to be explained in order to come into visible existence as things or phenomena. Yet when this miraculously happens—not in older modes of production, but in our own—we call it realism and have an interest in accounting for such texts, which we understand as being unusual and few in number. They are better explained, however, if we add the word transcendence to our repertoire in order to identify what is no longer present in them.

Or, we could try another alternative, the one suggested by Barthes’s famous offhand remark that there is an incompatibility between meaning and existence in modern literature.²⁴ Transcendence is meaning, the immanent is existence itself, and so it is also best to enrich this layer of terms with an ontological significance. What is, whether in the text or in the real world, is not always meaningful (it is often therefore what we call contingent); what is meaningful is not always there as an existent, in the world, as is the case in with Utopia or nonalienated relationships. What we many now perhaps call ontological realism is found where these two coincide to the point at which we cannot tell them apart any longer or worry about the distinction.

What would be the opposite of all this? What would be a truly transcendent kind of text? Myths, religious texts or all sorts? But after all, we are here working within the framework of the already secular novel, and have ruled those texts out in advance; we have thus presupposed a certain immanence in the novelistic form to begin with.

Within this frame then, we can assume that what we call ontological realism is to be characterized as a truly immanent kind of immanence. In that case, and for purposes of differentiation, what would be a transcendental immanence? I think we can make a beginning by imagining this to be a kind of ethical literature or narrative: a narrative in which the categories of ethics—vice, virtue, evil, kindness, and sympathy, and on into anger, melancholy, and the like—are just at a slight distance from the narrated emotions

²⁴ Roland Barthes, “L’effet de réel,” in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 2:485: “La ‘représentation’ pure et simple du ‘réel,’ la relation nue de ‘ce qui est’ (ou a été) apparaît ainsi comme une résistance au sens; cette résistance confirme la grande opposition mythique du vécu (du vivant) et de l’intelligible.”

and feelings of the characters or from their characterological properties. In this situation of a barely perceptible gap between the characters' existence and what they seem to mean, the old dualism of the immanent and the transcendent reinscribes itself, however faintly. The "ethical" characters are not yet mere examples or illustrations, nor have they gone all the way toward those allegories in which nameless figures bear their ethical designations on their backs in the form of signs (I am Envy, I am Complacency), but we are close, and the mere glimpse of such a possibility is enough to cast an unsettling doubt over the assurances of a hitherto ontological realism. No sensible secular and historical person can any longer believe that the ethical categories are "in nature," are in any way inscribed in being or in human reality; and for the most part an ethical literature has come to reflect the closure of class—whether it is that of Jamesian aristocrats or Bunyan's tinkers. Ethical maxims and categories only work within a situation of homogeneous class belonging; when operative from one class to another, they absorb the signals of class struggle and tension itself and begin to function in a very different, sociopolitical way. At any rate, for the corpus of novels we are here considering, the novel that deploys ethical categories will be characterizable as betraying something like a transcendental status of social elements—the ethical categories and judgments—which looked like intrinsic and even banal elements of the social situation itself, until closer inspection revealed their operation to be somehow and barely perceptibly transsocial, metasocial.

In that case, would it make any sense to propose a parallel category of transcendental transcendence? I think so, provided we understand once again that we are operating within a secular corpus from which all genuine transcendence has been eliminated. We no longer have to do with religious or sacred texts, with texts bearing within them anything having to do with the divine or the angelic or even the supernatural (although at some point very early in our historical segment—the history of the novel—the ghost story reappears, with Defoe's *Mrs. Veal*, or Schiller's *Geisterseher*). So the transcendence we are evoking will be a transcendence bound and limited by secular immanence, a transcendence within our own "realistic" and empirical world: what form can it possibly take, and what would possibly be above this realistic world and yet still of a piece with it and flesh of its flesh?

I think that such transcendence could only be detected in one possible place, namely in the space of an otherness from what is, a dimension freed from the weight of being and the inertia of the present social order. It seems possible to me that this transcendence could conceivably operate in the past, by way of the historical reconstruction of societies that no longer exist: yet

insofar as, no longer existing, they nonetheless have been, the law of an ontological realism would presumably still be binding on them, and there is a way in which *Salammbô* or Walter Scott's novels or *Romola* or *The Tale of Two Cities*, is no less realistic than its contemporary counterparts. At any rate, there here opens up the very interesting problem of the historical novel as such, which we can no longer pursue.

But when we have to do with the future, with what does not yet and may never exist, it is a different story, and we are confronted with politics itself. Here we face the knotty problem of the political novel and political literature in general, and their very possibility of existence. Is it conceivable, within the world of immanence, for this or that existent, this or that already existing element, to breathe "the air of other planets," to give off even the slightest hint of a radically different future? That the realistic novel absolutely resists and repudiates this possibility can be judged from its conventional treatment of political characters, of figures whose passion is political, who live for the possibilities of change and entertain only the flimsiest relationship with the solid ontology of what exists right now. We need only pass in review a few of the most famous representations of such figures to be convinced, and I will adduce three exhibits here.

There is Dickens's treatment of the "missions": all the crazed philanthropists who crowd the pages of *Bleak House* around the central character of Mrs. Jellabee with her African mission and who wreak damage on all the people close to them. Mrs. Jellabee's husband literally pounds his head against the wall, her children are filthy and neglected, her oldest daughter escapes into a marriage of whose drawbacks she is scarcely cognizant, and her own daily life is a shambles—she is ill-dressed, living only for the African correspondence and the African cause. When it is remembered that in any case, politics for Dickens, in his supremely "liberalist" and free-market society can only be embodied in philanthropy (but better the personal, "ethical" type represented by Mr. Jarndyce, than this wholesale collective type), then it will be understood not only that these are figures of the political, but also that they represent the intellectual as well: the political intellectual, to whom these twin bugbears of abstraction and nonliving, of the loss of ontological life and human reality to pure thought and idle speculation on the not-yet-existent must be conjoined.²⁵

²⁵ Miss Wisk offers the generalized philosophy of the "mission" itself, being intent on showing "the world that woman's mission was man's mission; and that the only genuine mission, of both man and woman, was to be always moving declaratory resolutions about things in general at public meetings" (*Bleak House* [London: Penguin, 1996], 482).

Once we learn to read these figures of the political, and to detect them throughout realism and in other places than the officially political—the parliamentary novels of Trollope, for example, where the political as such is a perfectly proper and respectable specialized dimension of life and being as such—we find that the satire of the antiontological is everywhere in ontological realism and indeed goes hand in hand with the very structure of the form and is inseparable from it.

Thus Henry James's feminists (in *The Bostonians*) are supremely emblematic of the political intellectual, and a far nastier and more malicious repudiation of politics than anything in the experiment of the *Princess Cassimissima*, or indeed in the contemporary treatment of anarchism generally (although Conrad's *Secret Agent* certainly comes close behind).

Finally, the whole animus spills over in Flaubert and is very far from being a mere personal ideology or idiosyncrasy. Whoever has read the extensive representations of the great political meetings in *L'education sentimentale*—imitations in 1848 of the Jacobin clubs of the great revolution and far too long to quote here in the savorous detail they merit—knows how much bile was destined for the political intellectuals by Flaubert, who sees them as obsessives and maniacs necessarily plural in their nature, repetitions of each other and groups rather than individuals. Whatever the psychoanalytic interpretations of Flaubert's unique passion and loathing, such scenes must also be taken as empty forms, which are reproduced throughout his work, most notably in *St. Anthony* but also in the comices agricoles in *Mme Bovary*, in court scenes in *Herodias*, and at various key points in *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. As such, Flaubert has solved the formal problem of how to represent the unrepresentable in the present context: in other words, how to lend ontological weight to the representation of figures and elements defined virtually in advance as lacking being, as having little ontological weight in their own right, either as characters or as meanings. The empty form of the obsessive exchange and multiplication of the maniacs and their words (rather than thoughts) thus allows a representation to be set in the place of the ontologically thin (and indeed, in this respect, Flaubert's solution folds back over Dickens's, which equally relies on the multiplication and proliferation of such maniacs to fill in his canvas and give it the requisite density).

I mention all of this, not merely to document the fragility of the new category of transcendental transcendence in the history of the novel, but also make the usual point about the structural and inherent conservatism and antipoliticality of the realist novel as such. An ontological realism, absolutely committed to the density and solidity of what is—whether in the realm of psychology and feelings, institutions, objects, or space—cannot but be

threatened in the very nature of the form by any suggestion that these things are changeable and not ontologically immutable: the very choice of the form itself is a professional endorsement of the status quo, a loyalty oath in the very apprenticeship to this aesthetic. But since politics does exist in the real world, it must be dealt with, and satiric hostility is the time-honored mode of dealing novelistically with political troublemakers. Only Stendhal and Galdós offer mild exceptions to this rule, the one on the basis of the youthful inexperience of his characters (and also Stendhal's internationalism and relative abhorrence of narrower French "realities"), and the other no doubt in part as a result of the extraordinary political changeability of Spain. But neither one loosens the lines that hold his work firmly to the ground of being, however much the narrative balloon surges and eddies in the winds of history. Were such lines cut, however, we would no doubt be confronted with truly Utopian forms, such as Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?*, which would slowly drift out of the province of realism altogether.

Perhaps these two transcendental categories—the transcendental immanence of ethics and allegory, and the transcendental transcendence of the political temptation—also open up a new space in which that normal and discursive phenomenon untheorizable in terms of realism might be grasped: I mean modernism, whose novels are, as I have insisted elsewhere, not at all to be understood as some opposite number of realism but in a very different and incommensurable aesthetic and formal fashion. Thus there are modernisms that can also be perfectly well interrogated with the categories and within the limits of realism as such—one thinks of *Ulysses* for example, certainly a prime example of a stubborn and hard-fought attempt to hold on to the absolute being of the place and day, the untranscendable reality of a specifically limited secular experience. But such categories may no longer be the best ones to convey everything that is unique about such modernist works.

Yet there remains a fourth category in our scheme that has not so far been specified. We have positioned "great realism" in the space of immanent immanence, a kind of miraculous unity of form and content, a unique ontological possibility, on which we will waste no more effusions. We have then identified two slight yet menacing and perilous deviations from this formal plenitude, the first one in a kind of transcendental immanence, in which certain of the categories of being—the ethical ones primarily—separate themselves out from reality and hover above it as a kind of organizing device that threatens to turn the events and narrative actions into so many examples and illustrations. And we have glimpsed a further possible deviation, the political one—transcendental transcendence—according to

which the whole existing fabric of being is threatened by revolutionary and systemic overhaul and transformation.

But we have not yet taken into consideration the possibility that there could be something we might call immanent transcendence, in which a transformation of being would be somehow implicit in being itself, like a strange kind of wave running through matter, or a kind of pulsation of energy throbbing in the things themselves, without necessarily altering them or depriving them of their ontological status. The reader will have guessed that it is toward this final category that we have been working and that the immanent transcendence we have in mind is nothing less than the providential as such, its production what we have sporadically been calling the providential novel. Here truly we find what Lukács imagined himself to be describing when he evoked a realism of tendencies, which he understood as a representation of ontological change.²⁶ The examples were very precisely the passage of history throughout the regime changes of the early nineteenth century, as in *La cousine Bette*, which ranges from Napoleon to the first Algerian expeditions in the late 1820s; yet no one ever suggested that ontological realism could not handle history or the passage of time. It is systemic change that we have tended to rule out, yet Lukács's description of the "tendency" seems far better to describe the providential drifts at work in the novels we have been describing than anything else.

Conspiracies Black and White

We now return to those, and in the light of this "ontological typology" and also mindful of the unique structural properties of the *Wilhelm Meister* experiment, we need to offer some conjectures as to the historical development of these possibilities, that is to say, their concrete evolutionary realizations in those historically determined "evolutionary niches" (Moretti)²⁷ that the secular societies uniquely offered, in their various contingent ways.

The replacement of Providence by uniquely human energies was always a temptation for Balzac: the very character of Vautrin himself, as he desperately races to release Lucien (at the end of *Splendeurs et misères des courtisans*), just as he has magisterially pulled strings to secure the latter's good

²⁶ See especially *Writer and Critic* and the *Essays on Realism*. I believe that the theory of realism promoted in these essays is best grasped in terms of the way plot is able to represent historical tendencies, rather than as any static notion of "typical" social individuals.

²⁷ See his *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900* (London: Verso, 1998).

fortune in the early moments of this novelistic series—this image of supreme know-how and savoir-faire mesmerized the author of *La comédie humaine* throughout his life, offering an image of action to be narrated as well as a subject-position for the novelist himself. In this sense, we must accustom ourselves to rethinking the pallid category of the “omniscient narrator” in terms of sheer passion, as an obsession to know everything and all the social levels—from the secret conversations of the great all the way to the “mystères de Paris” and the “bas fonds.” Balzac was supremely what the Germans call a *besserwisser*, a know-it-all at every moment anxious to show off his inside expertise (which he was unfortunately less able to put into practice). But surely Dickens had the virus as well, who was so proud of knowing all the streets in London; and we may safely attribute an analogous concupiscence of knowledge to all the other great encyclopedic fabulators, from Trollope to Joyce.

What interests us more for the moment is the way this conception of absolute knowledge spills over into the intrigue itself. Vautrin’s status as the superman is sealed by his ultimate failure (with its human reward in his eventual promotion to chief of police—like the real-life Vidocq): but this failure simply marks the sterility of the dialectic of the One and the Many. What if the task of knowing the Many were rather assigned to the Many themselves, in the form of a Meister-like Society of the Tower?

This is precisely what happens in Balzac, beginning with the *Histoire des treize* (1833):

In Paris under the Empire thirteen men came together. They were all struck with the same idea and all endowed with sufficient energy to remain faithful to a single purpose. They were all honest enough to be loyal to one another even when their interests were opposed, and sufficiently versed in guile to conceal the inviolable bonds which united them. They were strong enough to put themselves above all law, bold enough to flinch at no undertaking; lucky enough to have almost always succeeded in their designs, having run the greatest hazards, but remaining silent about their defeats; impervious to fear; and never having trembled before public authority, the public hangman or even innocence itself. They had all accepted one another, such as they were, without regard to social prejudice: they were undoubtedly criminals, but undeniably remarkable for certain qualities which go to the making of great men, and they recruited their members only from among men of outstanding quality. Lastly—we must leave out no element of the sombre and mysterious poetry of this story—the names of these thirteen men were never divulged, although they were the very incarnations of ideas suggested to the imagination

by the fantastic powers attributed in fiction to the Manfreds, Fausts and Melmoths of literature. Today this association is broken up, or at least dispersed. Its members have peaceably submitted to the yoke of civil law, just as Morgan, that Achilles among pirates, gave up buccaneering, became a colonist and, basking in the warmth of his domestic fireside, made profitable use, without any qualms of conscience, of the millions he had amassed in bloody conflict under the ruddy glare of burning ships and townships.²⁸

Here, this promising conspiracy results in little more than episodes (although they are among the most remarkable episodes in all of Balzac). Elsewhere, however, a rather different dialectic sets in motion, which suggests that the providential conspiracy is transethical—is beyond good and evil, to the degree to which it can serve feudal or individualistic passions (as in the *Histoire des treize*) or philanthropic ones indifferently. So it is that Balzac will fantasize a white conspiracy with equal enthusiasm, this one however nourished by the more conservative traces of the religious orders, rather than the sulphurous fumes of the carbonari and the other great political confraternities of Balzac's youth. Charity also needs its Machiavellis; as the organizational figure in *L'envers de l'histoire contemporaine* (1842–1947) observes: “Is it not our task to undermine the permanent conspiracy of evil? to apprehend it beneath forms so mutable as to seem infinite? Charity, in Paris, must be as cunning as the thief. Each of us must be at one and the same time innocent and mistrustful; we must have powers of judgment that are as reliable and as swift as a glance.”²⁹ But if the “frères de la Consolation” are less exciting than the Thirteen, this has less to do with the moralism of the former than it does of the increasing “transcendence” of the providential conspiracy, which little by little comes externally to intervene in a situation to which it has a merely contemplative relationship of pity and moral judgment. Here then, we can observe the slippage of more purely immanent plots into their transcendental opposite numbers. Whether this movement can be reversed and develop into some more original novelistic structure is a question better addressed to Dickens.

Our Mutual Friend—for many readers the darkest, most exciting, and Wilkie Collins-like of Dickens's completed novels, and also the one in

²⁸ Honoré de Balzac, *History of the Thirteen*, trans. Herbert J. Hunt (Middlesex: Penguin, 1974), 21.

²⁹ Honoré de Balzac, *La comédie humaine* (Paris: Pléiade, 1977), 8:323 (*L'envers de l'histoire contemporaine*, first episode). My translation.

which the salvational note is most satisfyingly sounded, and sentimentalism lifted into a truly providential realm of being—this late novel testifies to the temptation of conspiracy in Dickens as well, and to the “master-strokes of secret arrangement”³⁰ whereby the great feuilletonist attempts to hold together plot strands so numerous as to defy memory itself. But here conspiracy reveals its structure by promoting itself to a heightened power. The systematic promotion of illusion fostered by the symbolically eponymous protagonist (“mutual” also means a participation in several plots at once)³¹ when he decides to take on a second existence after his alleged and public death—something that cannot be called a conspiracy exactly—in turn promotes a deception on the part of Mr. Boffin, the Golden Dustman (or junk collector) and ostensible heir of the miser’s fortune. Here, then, we enter the realm of genuine conspiracy, not diminished by its moral uses as test and lesson: it will no doubt promote the fortunes of the good and the discomfiture of the wicked, who do indeed recognize this human agency for Providence as such: such is indeed the last glimpse of meaning perceived by the obsessed Bradley Headstone, one of the darkest characters in Dickens, as he comes to understand his failure to dislodge his rival for Lizzie (the “separation” referred to in the following):

For then he saw that through his desperate attempt to separate those two for ever, he had been made the means of uniting them. That he had dipped his hands in blood, to mark himself a miserable fool and tool. That Eugene Wrayburn, for his wife’s sake, set him aside and left him to crawl along his blasted course. He thought of Fate, or Providence, or be the directing Power what it might, as having put a fraud upon him—overreached him—and in his impotent mad rage bit, and tore, and had his fit.³²

Yet however glorious the apotheosis of the Golden Dustman in this salvational denouement, which Dickens, evidently uncertain of himself, then redoubles in his postscript (in which Mr. and Mrs. Boffin miraculously survive a destructive railway accident), it cannot for most readers match the outcome of *Bleak House* itself, which will therefore have some lessons as to the providential slippages of the later work.

³⁰ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. Edgar Johnson (New York: Modern Library, 1960), 794.

³¹ “‘I may call him Our Mutual Friend,’ said Mr. Boffin” (116).

³² *Ibid.*, 816.

Dustbins, to be sure, they have in common, and old Krook—he of the spontaneous combustion, as in Zola—is no doubt a match for Mr. Boffin;³³ but we will understand nothing of the providential if we imagine it has only to do with the conventional happy ending and the marriage of Esther to her true beloved. On the contrary, the supremely providential moment, the truly sublime note of salvationality, lies elsewhere: it is an Event, in the most august sense of the term, and one that people feel approaching in the street: “an unusual crowd . . . something droll . . . something interesting . . . everyone pushing and striving to get nearer . . . and presently great bundles too large to be got into any bags, immense masses of papers of all shapes and no shapes, which the bearers staggered under, and threw down for the time being, anyhow, on the Hall pavement, while they went back to bring out more.”³⁴

Laughter, universal glee, is the sign of this event, in which a whole old world is swallowed up and a new one born: and no reader who has worked through the thousand pages and nineteen installments of this extraordinary novel will fail to be electrified by the outcome: “Even these clerks were laughing. We glanced at the papers, and seeing Jarndyce and Jarndyce everywhere, asked an official-looking person who was standing in the midst of them, whether the cause was over. ‘Yes,’ he said; ‘it was all up with it at last!’ and burst out laughing too.”³⁵ And this in an ante-penultimate chapter entitled “Beginning the World”!

These passages return us to the euphoria of our initial quotations, with a few additional findings. For one thing, it has become clear that the jubilation will necessarily be a collective one; it will tell the climax of the story of the Many rather than the One. In that sense, it bears a strong relationship to Kant’s idea of enthusiasm, which he associated with the French Revolution and whose jubilation at least partly underscores its kinship with the Sublime, a parallel we cannot further explore here, save to recall the profound ambivalence of the Sublime, for Kant, which must awaken monstrous feelings of terror and revulsion fully as much as those of the expansion of joy.³⁶

³³ Edgar Johnson compiles an impressive list of items, among them “soot, cinders, broken glass, bottles, crockery, worn-out pots and pans, old paper and rags, bones, garbage, human feces and dead cats” (ibid, xi, note 6).

³⁴ Dickens, *Bleak House*, 973–74.

³⁵ Ibid., 974.

³⁶ See Immanuel Kant, “General Comment on the Exposition of Aesthetic Reflective Judgements” (it follows paragraph 29), in *Critique of Judgment* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 126–40; and also J. F. Lyotard’s interesting commentary in *Le différend* (Paris: Minuit, 1983), 238–40.

The Web of Totality

But we must also recall the fundamental shift in the evolution of this kind of novel from the question of individual salvation to the interweaving of many plots and many destinies. George Eliot is subversively outspoken on the matter of point of view, democratically insisting on everyone's right to this narrative centrality and reminding us, in the middle of a chapter gravitating to Dorothea as naturally as water finding its own level, that her unattractive spouse, Mr. Casaubon, also "had an intense consciousness within him, and was spiritually a-hungered like the rest of us."³⁷ Such reminders are virtually a social Bill of Rights (or Droits de l'Homme) for the novel as a form and will be programmatically enacted by later novelists like Joyce or Dos Passos.

What this implies most immediately, however, is the shift from the diachronic to the synchronic: now not the fateful destiny of this or that privileged or at least narratively favored protagonist, but rather the immense interweaving of a host of such lots or fates will involve a prodigious shifting of the axes of the novel and usher in the serials of Dickens we have been examining, no less than the late work of George Eliot herself, virtually our central exhibit in this discussion.

For not only the fact that the very word *providence* is dropped fatefully in the course of virtually every chapter of *Middlemarch* (sometimes by the characters, sometimes by the author herself), but the deeper sense of this recurrence—the drawing into the light of this omnipresent ideology of providence and destiny, of the providential character of good and bad fortune—makes of this great work a reflexive practice of providential realism as such. This is to say, using a term that is more meaningful when sparingly appealed to, that *Middlemarch* can be seen as an immense *deconstruction* of the ideology of providence as such, a tracking down of its religious overtones and undertones, and an almost surgical exploration of its results and effectivities. I insist on the term *ideology*, for other ideas of interrelationship and inextricability would have been possible in this period of the Paris Commune and the unification of Germany: Darwinian visions, nationalist programs, the bitter experience of class antagonisms—all of these, along with later ethnic or gender forms, might well have presided over the narrative of collective necessity, and in fact sometimes did. But Eliot's peculiar identification of this essentially social experience uniquely reflects the survival and ideological function of religion in the English class compromise, and allowed her to

³⁷ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin, 1994), 278.

double a remarkable narrative synchronicity with a secondary investigation of the concepts through which the participants thought their experiences. (The term *deconstruction* was chosen to underscore the nonpartisan nature of the investigation, which does not overtly denounce these religious survivals, as outright ideological analysis would surely have wanted to do).

But her word *spiritual* is also misleading, to the degree that it suggests otherworldliness. To be sure, there is here a remarkable emphasis on intellectual labor. Earlier novelists were willing to tolerate glorified images of various artists, reunited under the general romantic rubric of “genius”: Balzac even indulged in alchemical inventors of genius (*La recherche de l'absolu*), and thinkers of genius (*Louis Lambert*) but can scarcely be said to have had the sympathy for what would later in the century develop into scientific research as Eliot follows it, with technical curiosity, in the story of Lydgate. *Idealistic* in Hegel's usage, we may recall, simply means “theoretical,” and Eliot brings a passionate curiosity to her depiction of all kinds of productive activity (including Garth's engineering).³⁸

But what is certainly central in *Middlemarch*, and nontheoretical fully as much as nonspiritual, is the “cash nexus” and the synchronic role of money in the play of these individual destinies (which bear the name of a collectivity). The novel is a historical one, no doubt (1830), and the intensifying grip of a money economy over the provinces is one ostensible theme the book shares with Balzac (in the France of an earlier period). But the financial essence of “providence” is the key to this particular unmasking or deconstruction, and it is worth comparing it with Dickens's version, only a generation earlier.

For *Bleak House* shares a character with *Middlemarch*, and Fred Vincy's “great expectations” is a virtual replay, in a wholly different register, of the fate of poor Richard Carstone, that equally amiable young man famous for being able to spend the numerical sum he has economized in previous purchases without necessarily having it. But Dickens has concentrated the thematics of money in one place—the famous trial—thus allowing him to denounce the psychological corruption of expectation as such (“there's a dreadful attraction in the place,” says Miss Flyte; “there's a cruel attraction in the place. You *can't* leave it. And you *must* expect”)³⁹ rather than in the money economy as such. But in *Middlemarch* there is no destiny that is not in one way or another touched by money. Dickens's “web” is thus occasional: “There, too, [at Jo's sickbed] is Mr. Jarndyce many a time, and Allan

³⁸ Ibid., 250–51.

³⁹ Dickens, *Bleak House*, 566.

Woodcourt almost always; both thinking, much, how strangely Fate has entangled this rough outcast in the web of different lives.”⁴⁰ But George Eliot’s web is constitutive, as the multiplicity of her figures, as the various webs, threads, lines, scratches (on a burning glass), and interweavings suggest. I leave it to the Casaubons of the English Departments to make an inventory of these recurrent figures (it being understood that no one with any interest in allegory and interpretation can afford utterly to despise Mr. Casaubon’s labors, however ill-fated).

We need to dispel two persistent errors about this narrative “fabric” and the meaning to be assigned to it. The first, despite what we have said about money and the material basis of this alleged attention to “spirituality,” is the religious connotation of a novel that begins with St. Teresa and ends with a memorable celebration of Dorothea’s goodness: “. . . for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who live faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”⁴¹ Surely, despite the strength of all the arguments against the concept of secularization that have been referred to above, such words, and the portrait of Dorothea that precedes and justifies them, testify to an unmistakable intent to secularize on George Eliot’s part: the will to invent a figure of saintliness for a worldly and commercial society, and to reinvent a demonstration of the well-nigh material power of the kindness that radiates from Dorothea, gripping those around her with an almost physical force. It is clear enough that Eliot wishes to celebrate modernity (Lydgate’s scientific passion, Garth’s satisfaction in sheer productivity) without sacrificing the components of an older communal and religious culture virtually extinguished by it. But the ideological intent of the author never constitutes the “meaning” of the book, but rather, as Adorno pointed out, functions as a component of its raw materials. It will be possible to reinterpret Dorothea’s centrality in another and nonethical way, as we shall see in a moment.

The other fundamental misconception about the novels of this period (and of the later nineteenth century in general) is that, on the strength of their keen sensitivity to the movements of feeling and inner perception, they are somehow “introspective.” But to range George Eliot (or Dostoevsky either, for that matter) among the novelists of introspection, from Benjamin Constant’s *Adolphe* to Proust, is to obscure everything that is truly and formally original about her work. What we have here—as compared with Dickens, for

⁴⁰ Ibid., 732.

⁴¹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 838.

example—is a significantly enhanced proximity to the relationships between individuals, a kind of intensified and virtually photographic enlargement of those barely perceptible adjustments to the Other, which Nathalie Sarraute, long after the fact, called “tropismes.” What was wrongly identified as a self-consciousness or reflexivity of the individual self (now increasingly endowed with that private or personal reservoir entitled the Unconscious) can on closer inspection be seen to be a minute and microscopic negotiation with the shock and scandal of the Other, a reverberation of muffled reactions back and forth as with the dance of insects confronting one another and attempting to gauge degrees of danger or attraction, if not neutrality. If a new theory of modernity be wanted, then it might just as well be this one, the discovery, in philosophy and in artistic representation as well, of the existence of the Other as what Sartre called a fundamental alienation of my Being. Philosophy, before Hegel’s Master/Slave dialectic, altogether ignored the existence of other people as a philosophical problem that changed the very nature of philosophizing; as for literature, as long as the “other person” or character is imagined to be a kind of self-sufficient substance in itself, which occasionally comes into momentary or violent contact with other objects like it but whose being is not fundamentally modified by the being of others, then it matters very little what kinds of psychological experiences are attributed to these independent tokens of narration. But when, as here, the other is seen to call me into question in my very being; when relationships take precedence over the beings in relationship and a registering apparatus is developed that can detect such perpetual changes; when connections are focused close-up in their intolerable proximity (“marriage is so unlike everything else,” Dorothea reflects, “there is something even awful in the nearness it brings”),⁴² then a new dimension, a new social continent, has been discovered, which is the microcosm corresponding to the new macrocosms of collectivity on the level of cities and social classes.

Only after this do the intricate molecular patterns of a Henry James or the violent spasms of cruelty and self-abasement of a Dostoevsky or the multiple subatomic languages of what we are pleased to call modernism itself emerge. We have already observed that the alternative modernism/realism does not correspond to a classification system, but rather to a methodological focus, in such a way that it can scarcely be paradoxical for a “great realist” like George Eliot also, and from another angle, to be identified as a nascent modernist.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 797.

What needs to be taken into account for this to become more plausible is the ostentatiously omniscient and relatively archaic character of the style itself: but the latter imitates proverbs and traditional collective wisdom instead of anything redolent of Proustian self-expression and thus disguises the innovative nature of its intersubjective raw material at the same time that it seeks to incorporate the latter into a quintessentially social knowledge rather than documenting the discoveries of some “new science” such as psychology or psychoanalysis.

This “web” of interrelationships is now on the one hand to be grasped as an immense and mobile concatenation of events—encounters, looks, demands, self-defenses—rather than a static table of equivalences; and at this point its synchronic nature also necessarily becomes visible, in the form of interconnections that fan out well beyond the reader’s field of vision and are yet modified by the most minute adjustments in the “lives” thereby brushing against each other.⁴³ What we must observe about Dorothea’s saintliness is that it not only prolongs and perpetuates its effects across a multiplicity of neighboring connections but that pain and suffering do so as well, and the various Dickensian wills—Mr. Casaubon’s and Mr. Featherstone’s, along with the deployment of money in his various projects by Bulstrode—are here transmuted into vehicles for the transmission of bad vibrations across the same immense capillary system. But what has been lost in the shift in the replacement of a diachronic providentiality—an attention to the salvation of the individual—by this synchronic vision is simply the ethical itself, or better still, any sense of evil as such. There is, in George Eliot, goodness, but its opposite is simply unhappiness; and we are forbidden to judge either Casaubon or Bulstrode as evil, even through their contemporaries may well do so.

The point is that, reinscribed in the web of interrelationships, what is painful or unhappy for one subjectivity in this immense network can, as it is transmitted over the links of a whole series, be transformed into something positive for others; just as the reverse can happen too.⁴⁴ But this possibility of the transformation of negative into positive, of suffering into happiness and back, clearly lifts these categories up into another suprapersonal dimension

⁴³ Ibid., 795.

⁴⁴ Mr. Skimpole’s Panglossianism (in *Bleak House*) may be said to anticipate this transcendence of good and evil in a comic and aestheticizing (or contemplative) register: “‘Enterprise and effort,’ he would say to us (on his back), ‘are delightful to me. . . . Mercenary creatures ask, ‘What is the use of a man’s going to the North Pole? What good does it do?’ I can’t say; but for anything I *can* say, he may go for the purpose—though he don’t know it—of employing my thoughts as I lie here’” (Dickens, *Bleak House*, 294–95).

and tends to efface older ethical or eudaimonic meanings. (It also forfeits the great game of the omniscient narrator, which is to know secrets that none of the characters involved will ever learn, ironically taking their unhappy ignorance to their graves. Here, “essence must appear,” as Hegel says, and the secrets, already appearing under the guise of their effects, must necessarily be revealed.)

But is not their misery—so vividly registered here in ways unequalled in the other novels of the time—a proof of George Eliot’s supreme insight into psychology? In fact, in both *Casaubon* and *Bulstrode*, what we confront are masterful diagnoses of what Sartre will later on call *mauvaise foi*, the bad faith of self-deception and agonizing and impossible attempts at self-justification. But these moments already contain otherness within them, in the form of judgment, in which the suffering subject interiorizes the gaze of the other and seeks to master and reorient it in his or her own favor. Indeed, as these tropismes become magnified by way of the novelistic or narrative medium, we glimpse a parallel magnification in the social itself, which is none other than the dimension of gossip itself, which enlarges the facts of interrelationship and transmits them onward to a circulation through the collectivity. It is the other face of my alienation by the other, and extends on into the vision of history itself as “a huge whispering-gallery” in which we are ultimately privy to “the secret of usurpations and other scandals gossiped about long empires ago.”⁴⁵

Yet now providentiality returns, in an extraordinary and unexpected guise, at the moment when its actions and effectivities seemed all but undecidable. *Casaubon* and *Bulstrode* end unhappily; Lydgate’s scientific ambitions are dashed, and his marriage loses all its enchantment; yet contrary to all expectations, Dorothea’s ends well, and the renunciation (*Entsagung*) for which the German tradition, from Goethe to Fontane, had prepared us—let alone the terrible and emblematic solitude of spinster and widow from Balzac to Maupassant—is here dispelled by an utterly unexpected happy ending, for which we did not even dare to have “hope against hope” (and which, in hindsight, renders somewhat exaggerated the elegiac last lines about her which I have quoted above).

But the truly providential in *Middlemarch* lies elsewhere, and to appreciate it, we must note another significant feature of the providential-synchronic that we have hitherto omitted. We have learned, to be sure, that the synchronic and the diachronic are not to each other as space is to time,

⁴⁵ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 412.

nor even as the ahistorical is to the historical, let alone the nonnarrative to the narrative; yet we would be justified in expecting time, history, and narrativity to undergo some fundamental modifications as they pass under a synchronic regime. When, as here, we have to do with the synchronic as a simultaneity of destinies and a coexistence of a host of different narratives, what happens to temporality is this: the simultaneous time lines become, as in Einsteinian relativity, difficult to reckon off against each other. It is simultaneity itself that becomes spatial, and in this new spatiality the various distinct temporalities can be adjusted against each other only with some difficulty, as in the voluminous historical concordances we might expect to find in Mr. Casaubon's papers. Indeed the two series of events run side by side like Einstein's trains: who can tell what time it is outside, let alone inside; there are many train tracks, parallel and infinite; they keep passing each other in some ideal present; their own times overlap, cancel, outleap each other, overtake, fall behind. But every so often they overtake, not the other's, but their own past; they speed ahead of themselves and run through the line a second time.

Here, then, occasionally, something miraculous happens; and it is just such a miraculous happening that we are able to witness in the destiny of Fred Vincy, whose hopes of an inheritance and the estate called Stone Court are properly dashed at an early crisis in the novel, in which "realism" demands that the unrealistic hope and expectation be brought to an expected unhappy end. This play with expectation constitutes a kind of novelistic "reality principle," which we find historically realized twice over in the classic Balzacian "hope against hope," and then in the gloomy fatalities of naturalism.

Here, on the contrary, it is the reality principle that must be joyously discredited; yet it is the test and the obligation of the form of providential realism to outwit sheer wish-fulfillment and daydream, to overtrump both fairytale endings and naturalist certainties with a new form of necessity. Fred Vincy will administer the estate after all (even if he does not technically inherit it), and this loop in time, in which the lost chance comes again against all odds, and the old hope is fulfilled after its definitive disappointment, is the concrete narrative embodiment of that religious iconography of resurrection with which we began, and the recuperation, by Eliot's voluminous realism, of the coming alive of the statue in *Pericles*: it is the salvational temporality of Ernst Bloch's privileged fable of the *Unverhofftes Wiedersehen* (a story by Hebel later rewritten and recapitulated by Hoffman), in which in extreme old age the widow of a dead miner is able to glimpse her long-lost

husband one last time again as youthful as on the day he disappeared. What interests us here, however, is the way in which these stirring images find their own unexpected resurrection in the most seemingly unpropitious of forms, the nineteenth-century novel itself. It is an ecstatic ending that previous novels could only achieve by the glimpse of the ghosts of Heathcliff and Catherine wandering together over the moor.

Postmodern Providentialities

Now we must rapidly conclude, with only the briefest of glances at the descendency of this form in contemporary culture, and in particular in contemporary film. For both Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and Goran Paskaljevic's *Cabaret Balkan* (1998, also known as *The Powder Keg*), if not, indeed, Milcho Manchevski's 1994 *Before the Rain*, seem to testify to a revival of effects structurally dependent on the apparent simultaneity of narrative time lines. Despite the bloodiness and violence of all these films, each conceals a salvational note underscored by the conversion of a professional killer, in the first-named of these works, to the old-time religion.

But it is to their prototype, in Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993), that we must turn for some more fundamental structural insight into this new and old form, which seems to reflect an intensifying feeling for the interrelatedness of the social totality. In much of Altman's work (*A Wedding*, 1975; *Nashville*, 1978; *Pret-à-porter*, 1994; *Cookie's Fortune*, 1999; *Dr. T and the Women*, 2000), the multiplicity of plot lines and characters frequently leads to providential sparks and fires; and these are also, as we have seen with George Eliot, beyond good and evil, which is to say that the providential outcome can absorb either a happy or an unhappy ending indifferently, from what is a kind of Spinozan elevation.

But *Short Cuts* is the most revealing of these works, insofar as it embodies the very gesture of totalization itself. The film is based, indeed, on a compilation of stories by Raymond Carver, which for the most part offer unrelieved glimpses of failure and private misery: the one exception, "A Small, Good Thing," in which a fatal accident is unexpectedly transfigured by a symbolic wake, is then itself amplified, in its providential content, by Altman's combination of all these separate stories into a web of episodes or multiple plots. Speaking of one of Balzac's shorter stories, Lukács once observed: "To treat this theme in a novel instead of a short story would require entirely different subject matter and an entirely different plot. In a novel the writer would have to expose and develop in breadth the entire process arising out of the social

conditions of modern life and leading to these . . . problems.”⁴⁶ Altman’s unification, however, achieves this miraculous transformation without any modification of the subject matter or plots of the stories, simply by prodigious enlargement of their frame and context and a virtual creation, *ex nihilo*, of the totality they now come to express and represent. It is a passage from the private to the collective, from the static-ontological to the dynamic and the historically actual—the whole concatenation of episodes ominously overflowed by the notorious med-fly fumigations of 1981 and shaken climactically by the long-awaited “major earthquake to come”—which reinvents the providential narrative anew for late capitalism.

⁴⁶ George Lukács, “Art and Objective Truth,” in *Writer and Critic* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1971), 54.

Magical Realism. 14 chs / week. This is the average realized release rate over the past 30 days. After his transmigration to the cultivation world, Shen Tian discovers that he can see the fortuitous opportunities and their providence haloes of others. In order to rub off some of the luck from these opportune characters, Shen Tian proactively gets close to them. Eventually, everyone realizes that no matter who it was, as long as they hang out with Shen Tian, they will gain lots of fortuitous opportunities! And there's no exception to this rule! From then on, Shen Tian was labelled as the most popular lucky mascot in the cultivation world! Fairy Qing Yue: "I once followed my Senior B Time perception raises a number of intriguing puzzles, including what it means to say we perceive time. In this article, we shall explore the various processes through which we are made aware of time, and which influence the way we think time really is. Inevitably, we shall be concerned with the psychology of time perception, but the purpose of the article is to draw out the philosophical issues, and in particular whether and how aspects of our experience can be accommodated within certain metaphysical theories concerning the nature of time and causation. The experiments can be performed using either photographs or computer-generated images. The subjects' response times were also measured. An analysis showed no correlation between the subjects' response times and their response values. This indicates that subjects did not respond any faster to images they rated as real than to those rated as not real. 3.7 Additional experimental details. In this set of experiments we looked at what happens to the reported realism as we manipulated three factors: the number of objects in the scene, the variety of object shapes, and the number of light sources. One might expect and assume that the subjects' responses would increase as more objects are added to a scene, the types of objects varied, or the number of light sources increased. I The Experiments of Time: Providence and Realism II War and Representation III The Historical Novel Today, or, Is It Still Possible 1. Index. 1. 10 See "The Experiments of Time: Providence and Realism," in Part Two of this volume. 6 antinomies of realism. with fatal consequences for both of these incommensurable dimensions.