Chapter 4

Jean Paul's Lunacy, or Humor as Trans-Critique

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Abstract The foremost theorist of humor in the German romantic period and one of its most popular novelists, Jean Paul Richter developed a poetics of antithesis at odds with the harmonious dialectics proposed by many of his contemporaries. In narrative form, characterization, and figuration Jean Paul insisted on deepening antitheses rather than seeking reconciliation. Cultivating the incommensurate, his novels give form to his definition of humor as “the inverse sublime,” placing Jean Paul in a line from Kant through Kierkegaard and on to Kojin Karatani and Slavoj Žižek. This essay traces the origins of Jean Paul’s style in his reception of Kant, Rousseau and the French Revolution, all of which to him signaled a clash between human finitude and the infinity of desire. Tracing this clash in formal and thematic features of Jean Paul’s major *Bildungsromane*, the essay elucidates what is at stake in his enigmatic claim that literature represents “the only second world” (i.e. the world of the resurrection) “in the first one.” Unlike Friedrich Schiller and the Jena Romantics, Jean Paul’s version of “aesthetic education” grounds the authority of literature on its ability not to synthesize polar opposites, but to let each pole critique each other mutually.

Keywords Jean Paul · Žižek · Humor · German romantics · Incommensurability · Epigram · Sublime

Jean Paul is one of few nineteenth-century German theorists of humor whose life and work were, in the pedestrian sense of the word, humorous. During his one year in Weimar, the eccentric novelist cut a decidedly comic figure. Stories abound about the odd behavior of this writer, whose conscious play-acting ran counter to the “noble simplicity and silent greatness” (*edle Einfalt und stille Grösse*) of the Weimar

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establishment.¹ In a letter to Goethe, Friedrich Schiller commented that Jean Paul appeared to have “fallen from the moon” (Goethe 1961, 114). He was, in other words, a lunatic.

What made Jean Paul appear crazy to the Titans of Weimar was as much a matter of social performance as literary principle, and indeed in Jean Paul’s life and writing these two matters are inseparable. The many anecdotes about his encounters with other writers play a significant role in the creation of the persona “Jean Paul,” a textual creation very much like that of Lord Byron or Jorge Luis Borges. Born Johann Paul Friedrich Richter in the provincial backwater of Wunsiedel in 1763, he created the pen name Jean Paul as a double homage to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and to the Apostles John and Paul (Jean Paul 2000, IV: 176).² The jarring hybridity of the half-French, half-German name was deliberate, as was the mixing of the sacred and the profane.

Richter’s pen name bears witness to a literary and performative style devoted to playing up contrasts and contradictions in a quixotically comic quest to work through the traumas of Enlightenment subjectivity through writing. His *oeuvre* comprises both a pinnacle of German romantic attempts to articulate a “literary absolute” and a high-spirited exposure of that project’s inherent limitations. In what follows, I will trace Jean Paul’s humoristic style on the levels of rhetoric, plot and self-conscious theory. In all three dimensions, Jean Paul’s writing revels in the tension between irreconcilables in search of an effect he defines as the inverse of the sublime, and which comprises his answer to the problems raised by Rousseau and Kant and a subtle alternative to the romantic program of Schlegel, Novalis and Tieck.

4.1 The Split Begins: Kant and Rousseau

Jean Paul came into his own as a writer at a time when German intellectuals were beginning to recoil from the violent outgrowths of revolutionary fervor across the border in France, while their own country remained politically divided, largely feudal and unevenly touched by the project of enlightenment. In the aftermath of the Parisian Terror, thinkers like Friedrich Schiller were beginning to explore indirect paths to emancipation through the detour of the aesthetic and in cooperation with monarchical power. Though Schiller’s classicism, Jena Romanticism and post-Kantian idealist philosophy differed widely and inspired extensive polemic, one

¹This formula for the aesthetics of ancient Greek sculpture, coined by J.J. Winckelmann in 1756, was one of the most often cited passages in the later eighteenth century and subsequently became a shorthand to describe (and oversimplify) the ethos of Goethe and Schiller’s Weimar (Pfothenhauer 1993, 48).

²All citations from Jean Paul refer to the 2000 edition edited by Norbert Miller and include the volume number in Roman numerals followed by the page number. In order to avoid unnecessary repetition, I will omit “Jean Paul 2000” in consecutive citations. All translations of Jean Paul are my own.

common characteristic of these three attempts at an auto-critique of Enlightenment was their attempt to overcome binary oppositions through mediation and synthesis.

This drive to harmonize developed in response to Immanuel Kant, the thinker of critique and antinomy, for whom the gap between “nature” and “freedom” may be bridged aesthetically, even while the distinction between “private” and “public” uses of reason reinforced obedience to authority as the condition for emancipatory thought to flourish. What is less obvious is how the dialectical patterns of thought worked out in the era of classicism and romanticism also constitute a response to the writer whose utopian stridency may have most inspired the French revolutionary Terror, namely Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Rousseau's work is no less riven with antagonism than Kant's, with ramifications both aesthetic and political. His writing appears equally devoted to the promiscuous power of the imagination and to a stern moralism that he associates with republican virtue. Running like a fault line through Rousseau's *oeuvre* is a conflict between poetry and philosophy not unlike that experienced by Socrates, with whom he identifies in his breakthrough essay blaming the arts and sciences for modern unhappiness. In *Emile*, Rousseau ascribes the psychic imbalance characteristic of modern society to the growth of the “imagination,” the same force from which his own work derives (Rousseau 1984, 44). Yet the genre of the novel gives Rousseau the means to resolve or repress this dilemma. He justifies his novel *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* with the claim that “Great cities must have theaters; and corrupt peoples, novels” (Rousseau 1997, 3). In the guise of the tutor-narrator of *Emile*, he plays an elaborate game with his pupil and protagonist, restraining the growth of Émile's imagination by controlling his experience—thus rendering his own literary imagination the vehicle of virtue rather than its foe (Coker 2009, 398–9).

The conflict between the infinite desire manifest in the imagination and the constrained possibilities of fulfillment preoccupies Rousseau as centrally as the conflict between “nature” and “freedom” exercises Kant and his German successors. While the German thinkers seek to overcome their conflict through conceptual mediation, Rousseau endeavors to resolve his in narrative strategies of containment proper to the novel. Jean Paul responds to both projects through a novelistic style that everywhere heightens contradictions rather than harmoniously resolving them. His is an aesthetic of the incommensurate, best characterized by the term he defines as an inversion of romanticism's signature break with harmony and measure: the sublime. Jean Paul calls this inversion “humor” and characterizes it as a distinctly modern aesthetic value.

4.2 Jean Paul and Philosophy: The Modernity of Humor

The concept of humor entered eighteenth-century German letters from the English novel, particularly those by Laurence Sterne, but like every other aesthetic concept quickly found its way into the whirlpool of philosophical reflection. Jean Paul lays out his theory of humor in the humorously titled *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, which Paul

Fleming has provocatively translated as “Preschool of Aesthetics” (Fleming 2006, 5). This translation suits the playfulness of the text even if it exaggerates somewhat the childlike connotations of the word *Vorschule* itself. However playful Jean Paul’s writing remains, he places his discussion of humor squarely in the terms of philosophical reflection advanced by both Kant and Hegel.

The generic contours of Jean Paul’s corpus already reveal philosophical ambition. By his own account his *oeuvre* consists of novels of three different types, plus treatises on poetics, pedagogy and, to a lesser degree, political and theological matters, all in keeping with the program of late Enlightenment intellectuals such as Rousseau and Pestalozzi. Although completed works like the pedagogical essay *Levana* answer to the generic expectations of their time, Jean Paul’s works also contain an array of supplements including prologues to prologues and such add-ons as the *Komischer Anhang zum Titan* (“the comic supplement” to the *Bildungsroman Titan*), itself a cluster of smaller narratives without other interconnection besides their titular attachment to the central novelistic text.

It is in one of these supplementary texts, “the history of my prologue to the second edition of *Quintus Fixlein*” (*Geschichte meiner Vorrede zur zweiten Auflage des Quintus Fixlein*), that Jean Paul’s theoretical engagement with humor begins. In this “history of his prologue,” the traveling Jean Paul confronts an “art councilor” (*Kunstrat*) at the entrance to a small town in his Fichtelgebirge homeland who rejects humoristic writing out of hand, since there was no such thing in antiquity. Jean Paul reflects “that humor...is only the fruit of a long-developing culture of reason, and that it must grow to maturity as the world ages, just as with the growth of an individual” (Jean Paul 2000, IV: 27). The stakes are already set for Jean Paul’s theoretical discussion of humor as characteristic of romanticism, which is to say, modernity.

By calling humor “the fruit of a long cultivation of reason,” Jean Paul connects it to the faculty with which Kantian critique identifies the infinite: “reason” (*die Vernunft*) as opposed to “the understanding” (*der Verstand*). He laments that critics of his time, whom he somewhat anachronistically calls by the eighteenth-century term “judges of art” (*Kunstrichter*), can neither enjoy nor analyze humor adequately (IV: 27). Though Jean Paul would later polemicize with Kant, this early text nevertheless shows his thought moving along Kantian paths, indeed remaining closer to Kant than the Jena Romantics who signposted their allegiance to the sage of Königsberg at every step of their journey, and who made it a program to overcome the limits of Kantian critique with Kant’s own materials.

In introducing “the concept of humor” in the context of the *Vorschule*, Jean Paul dives right into the Kantian problematic of finitude. Like Kant, he ascribes infinity to “reason” (*die Vernunft*) and asserts that “the understanding” (*der Verstand*) knows only “finitude” (Jean Paul 2000, V: 124). “Comic” (*komische*) literature, dealing with the object-world, can only contrast finite to finite; the infinity of subjectivity, which Jean Paul has defined as the domain of romantic literature, appears off limits to it (V: 125). If this is so, then “the comic” cannot become “romantic,” yet the intersection of the comic and the romantic is precisely where Jean Paul wants “humor” to be. Kai Rugenstein, who understands Jean Paul’s “infinite” in terms of

an ethical universality which the finite human subject can grasp but not put into practice, argues that the modern discovery of this subjective infinity is what enables “comedy” to become “humor” (Rugenstein 2014, 40–1). Jean Paul’s association of “humor” with modernity, as opposed to an antiquity that knew only the comic, anticipates Hegel, who establishes the same formula in his *Aesthetics*.

In the *Vorschule* chapter on “humoristic subjectivity” Jean Paul writes, “I split my *I* into the finite and the infinite factor, and derive the latter from the former” (Jean Paul 2000: V, 132). Humoristic subjectivity stages a confrontation between the “finite” and “infinite” sides of the self—Kant’s empirical and transcendental ego—instead of letting the former be absorbed in the latter, as in Novalis’s ambition to “get a grip on the transcendental ego” (*sich seines transzendentalen Ichs zu bemächtigen*) which the Jena romantic even announces as “the goal of education (*Bildung*)” (Novalis 2006, II: 418).³ This absorption of the empirical ego by the transcendental ego would yield a pure poetry of subjectivity unstained by the flaws of specific subjects: poetry, not of the subject, but of the pure conditions of subjectivity. Jean Paul critiques this pure poetry as Kant had critiqued pure reason.

Humor matures along with reason as the subject becomes conscious of the gap separating his infinite and finite selves: this is how Jean Paul understands Kant’s splitting the human subject between “the realm of freedom” and that of “necessity.” The place in Jean Paul’s theory where freedom and necessity intersect is “wit,” also an aesthetic value imported from Sterne’s England. Where Samuel Johnson had described “wit,” in a discussion of the metaphysical poets, as “the most heterogeneous ideas...yoked by violence together,” Jean Paul extolls wit as “the miracle-birth of our Creator-I (*die Wundergeburt unsers Schöpfer-Ich*)” (Johnson 1906, 34; Jean Paul 2000, V: 171).

Never averse to Christological figures, the former theology student completes this witty analogy with a full-blown metaphorical trinity: “and here the Holy Spirit, the third representation, which emerges as a third person out of the relation between the first two is...a miracle-birth (*ein Wunderkind*)” (V: 171). Every conjunction of two unlike things bound together by a metaphor or other figure of speech has, as a third term, the new unity implied by the comparison, contrast or equation: the Holy Spirit to the Father and Son of the first two terms. It is a clash of incommensurables such as that between the Hebrew God and the mortal Jesus that gives birth to the “spirit” evident in any witty comparison. Paradoxically, the Trinitarian analogy also underlines the limits of comparison: like mortal flesh and Godhead, the two terms remain radically distinct even after they have entered into a momentary unity through the relating power of the metaphor.

As Jean Paul intimates in his witty epigram linking the discovered relation between any two terms to the Holy Spirit, setting unlike things in relation is the substance of “spirit,” both the origin and activity of human subjectivity. The poet lives out this practice to an intensified degree, thus providing a concentrated display

³A comparable expression of the ambition of “early Romantic” synthesis can be found in Friedrich Schlegel’s assertion that “intellectual intuition is the categorical imperative of theory” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1978, 107).

of the activity that characterizes subjectivity as such. Jean Paul thus presents one version of a romantic ideology of art privileging the poet as an exemplary subject. Yet his argument problematizes another such romantic argument privileging poetic subjectivity, based on reflexivity. Already in the *History of my Prologue* Jean Paul pokes fun at the Jena Romantic pretention to “potentiate” everything to the point that poetry becomes a window onto pure subjectivity, as opposed to a subject encountering objects. Specifically taking aim at the notion of “the will to will,” (*das Wollen des Wollens*), the prologue’s narrator denies that there can be a “poetic representation without material,” any more than “a pure thought without material,” a possibility Kant had ruled out of bounds in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (Jean Paul 2000, IV: 26).⁴

Reading Jean Paul is a good antidote to poststructuralist clichés about language only representing itself. Insofar as Schlegel anticipates the poststructuralist movement, Jean Paul criticizes both contemporary and future Schlegelians by returning them implicitly to their source of inspiration: Kant’s critiques. Though Jean Paul did not see himself as a Kantian, in the *Vorschule* Jean Paul effectively transposes Kant’s critical schema onto the terrain of poetics. Where Kant’s critiques had criticized two standpoints on the mind, Jean Paul criticizes two standpoints on poetry: in both cases, naïve empiricism and self-deceived idealism. Unlike Fichte and the Jena Romantics, Jean Paul’s writing circles around something wholly other, which resists the subject’s claim to autonomy, yet also paradoxically makes autonomy possible. Thus Jean Paul qualifies the crucial romantic category of play with the assertion that “one plays around earnestness, not play” (Jean Paul 2000, V: 444).⁵ Because the Jena Romantics claim to absorb everything into their literary absolute, they end up just writing beautiful words, which Jean Paul likens to shimmering snow (V: 443–4). The subject has no substance without a relation to the object-world, so writing that tries to be about the subject alone ends up being about nothing at all: “poetic nihilism” (V: 31).

Rather than overcome the split between self and world, Jean Paul’s poetics acknowledges the self itself as split. He comes close to the psychoanalytic equation of subjectivity with a wound, and even to Žižek’s reformulation of this idea in the language of ontology: that the subject is a “gap” in the structure of being. “Man is the dash in the book of nature,” writes Jean Paul (I: 8), who states of poetry that “like Achilles’s lance, it must heal all wounds that it inflicts” (V: 35). The similar German quotation that Žižek takes as definitive of subjectivity, “only the spear that smote the wound can heal it,” comes from Richard Wagner, who incidentally may have chosen Bayreuth as his home base as an homage to the city’s other well-known inhabitant, Jean Paul (Žižek 2015, 136).

⁴ Jean Paul had leveled this accusation against Schlegel in particular (Jean Paul 2000, IV: 1145).

⁵ The difficulty of translating Jean Paul’s claim that *Um den Ernst, nicht das Spiel, wird gespielt* stems from the spatial dimensions of the preposition *um* (“about, around”). The sentence indicates that seriousness is the purpose or goal of play, but also suggests that play encircles or rotates around seriousness.

For Jean Paul, theory does not complete or even supplement poetic practice but is always part of it: hence the narrative and figurative style of the *Vorschule* and the poetological excursions that turn up throughout his fictional works. Yet the authorial personae do not turn the narrative into a solipsistic hall of mirrors—even if this is the intention of the narrator in the satirical *Clavis Fichtiana*, a text designed to dramatize Fichte's ego-based philosophy—so much as acknowledge that reality is always stained by the position the subject occupies within it. The stain induced in various novels by the presence of the character Jean Paul or other authorial personae is there to maintain the subject-object antithesis rather than let the fictional world be swallowed up in the integral whole of the subject, as for instance in Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*.

Jean Paul is a resolute dualist where the Jena Romantics tend toward monism, and his dualism enters his prose even on the sentence level: the structure of Jean Paul's "likenesses" (*Gleichnisse*) is a jarring hybridity like that of his name. What Jean Paul calls a *Gleichnis* frequently takes the form of an epigrammatic statement, whether terse or comically drawn out, that brings together two very different entities on the basis of a surprising similarity. As in a metaphor, one of the terms of the comparison is sometimes left implicit, as in the aphorism, "Man is the dash in the book of nature," in which the illegible gap or merely conjunctive space between two terms or clauses in a sentence without subordination is parallel to the place occupied by the human in the non-hierarchical ordering of beings in the world (Jean Paul 2000, I: 8). By contrast, one epigram that makes both terms explicit is the following: "The freezing of people begins with epigrams, just as the freezing of water with icebergs" (V: 202). This epigram against epigrams hints at latent tension between epigrammatic rhetoric and the larger narrative form in which it is embedded. While the novel opens the reader's emotional pores after the fashion of the pre-romantic cult of sensibility, the epigram seals them again in a return to reason. The epigram is condensed, the novel sprawling. Jean Paul's art oscillates from one to the other.

4.3 Polarity: From Plato to the Novel

While all of Jean Paul's fictional works contain epigrams, the novel *Flegeljahre* is epigrammatic in its innermost structure, exploring polarity on the level of character-constellation and plot as well as rhetoric. The novel's plot makes heavy use of the motif of the double: both protagonist and narrator come in duplicate. It narrates the childhood and early education of the twins Walt and Vult, whose names not only sound alike but convey, through abbreviated German and Latin phrases, nearly identical meanings: *Gott walte* and *Quod Deus Vult* (Jean Paul 2000, II: 600). Walt's quest is to live up to the terms set in a will left behind by a man named Van der Kabel, which he needs to satisfy in order to come into the deceased's inheritance and then take on his original name, Friedrich Richter, just as he had taken on the name Van der Kabel on coming into his own inheritance (II: 578–86). In this way

the novel plays with the idea of poetic tutelage, reflecting obliquely on its author's own unfinished project of becoming "Jean Paul."

Throughout the novel, Walt counterpoints the narrator's novelistic prose with pithy epigrams in a free-verse style that he claims to have invented, and which the novel's characters call alternately *Streckvers* and *Polymeter*, contrasting German and classical models for poetic invention (II: 622). The epigrams in *Flegeljahre* consistently hinge on a striking alternation of opposites. While the master of the epigram in Jean Paul's own time was Georg Lichtenberg, another paradigm for epigrammatic thinking is Plato. Of special interest to Jean Paul's writing is an epigram ascribed to Plato by Diogenes Laertius on the beauty of the boy the poet calls Aster (star): "Star-gazing Aster, would I were the skies, / To gaze upon thee with a thousand eyes" (1995, 302–3).⁶ This poem provides a paradigmatic example for the double structure of the epigram, bringing together irreconcilables, otherworldly transcendence as symbolized by the stars of heaven and the this-worldly beauty of a boy named "star," on whom the philosopher-poet looks down from his imaginary perch in the sky. This epigram sets the agenda for Plato's philosophy in the poetic medium that his metaphysics will have to disavow.⁷ This poem, along with an accompanying poem also dedicated to Aster, tantalizingly present Plato as both a victim of unrequited love and a *poète manqué* seeking to sublimate both romantic and poetic failure in an anti-poetic philosophy. The poems thus figure in the romantic quest to overcome Plato in nominating poets, not philosophers, the "unacknowledged legislators of the World" (Shelley 1977, 508).

Jean Paul seems to be thinking along the same lines when he names the poetic anti-philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder his generation's successor to Plato. He does this with encomia to Herder in both *Flegeljahre* and the *Vorschule* (Jean Paul 2000, II: 625, V: 58). The novel's praise of Herder comes with symbolic emphasis on stars, implicitly in allusion to the epigrams to Aster (II: 625 ff.). Jean Paul was not alone in his fascination with the founder of western metaphysics, whose apotropaic gesture against poetry takes place within a wholly poetic *oeuvre*. As with other romantics steeped in the Platonic contradiction, Jean Paul's veneration of Plato is fraught with implicit tension. Yet Jean Paul's way of working out this tension, unlike Percy Shelley's, takes novelistic form. If Plato is the philosopher of polarity, for whom all earthly things and actions remain shadowed by heavenly archetypes, Jean

⁶The Greek reads as follows:

ἀστέρας εἰσαθρεῖς Ἀστήρ ἐμός: εἶθε γενοίμην οὐρανός, ὥς πολλοῖς ὄμμασιν εἰς σὲ βλέπω

⁷Romantic fascination with the reversals implicit in this epigram are not limited to Jean Paul: see Percy Shelley's ironic allusion to the poem in an infernal vision of Plato as a slave of passion in "The Triumph of Life" (Shelley 1977, 462; l. 254–9). Shelley translated the accompanying poem, which serves as epigram to his elegy "Adonais" (390).

ἀστήρ πρὶν μὲν ἔλαμπες ἐνὶ ζῳοῖσιν Ἑῶρος,
νῦν δὲ θανὼν λάμπεις Ἑσπερος ἐν φθιμένοις.

Shelley's version reads: "Thou wert the morning star among the living / Ere thy fair light had fled; / Now, having died, thou art as Hesperus, giving / New splendor to the dead" (390).

Paul develops the novel as the genre most fit to explore polarity in a way that turns Plato on his head, or, as the case may be, sets him back on his feet.⁸

Plato's dialectic is teleological, subordinating the world of appearances to the world of Ideas, even while the former remains the medium in which the latter may be glimpsed or, as Socrates puts it in the *Meno*, "recollected" (Plato 1997, 883). In multiple senses, Jean Paul's novels bring higher and lower worlds into a confrontation without resolution or *telos*. In the *Vorschule* he lays out a tripartite typology of the novel based on the relative concentration of "high" and "low" elements in both a social sense and in terms of philosophical theme. Here he adopts his terminology from Renaissance painting, designating three different modes of modern art. Just as Hegel will soon single out Dutch painting as a paradigm of modern "humor," so too does Jean Paul designate novels like his own *Quintus Fixlein*, which focus exclusively on demotic, small-town concerns, as "Dutch." The "Italian style," meanwhile, characterizes *Bildungsromane* about the education of aristocrats and dealing explicitly with sublime philosophical themes, such as his own *Titan*. The "German style," finally, brings together both "high" and "low" motifs and characters (Jean Paul 2000, V: 253–5).

One of the "German" novels is *Siebenkäs*, published in 1800, shortly before Jean Paul got to work on the *Vorschule*. The title character is a Jean Paul-esque humorist caught tragically in the prosaic world of marital life. This protagonist is a "lawyer for the poor" (*Armenadvokat*) who compulsively amuses himself with witty likenesses (*Gleichnisse*) of the type Jean Paul celebrates in the *Vorschule*, and which proliferate in his own authorial discourse. His persona thus combines passion for linguistic mischief with a submerged social dimension: solidarity with the dispossessed, much noted by such contemporaries as Ludwig Börne of the radical literary movement "Young Germany," even if this solidarity rarely, in Jean Paul's fiction, reaches the level of explicit political advocacy. *Siebenkäs's* wife Lenette, whose portrayal borders on misogyny, cannot transcend the domestic life and meets her husband's flights of fancy with incomprehension.

Realizing how agonizing this particular marriage of opposites has become for both his wife and himself, *Siebenkäs* liberates his wife both from conjugal misery and the shame of divorce by faking his own death. Having subsequently "resurrected" out of the town's eye, he forms a bond with a young woman more in line with his way of life and thought. *Siebenkäs's* new love, Natalie, is English; she comes from the land of Sterne.

The themes of death and resurrection are central as well to two excurses Jean Paul has dropped mysteriously into the middle of his novel, without in any way integrating them into its narrative structure. The first of these was destined to make

⁸ Some critics read into this tension the entire problematic of the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns. Peter Horst Neumann notes the proximity of Walt's *Polymeter* to the Greek Anthology, which Herder had translated (Neumann 1966, 20–24), and Wulf Köpke argues that Walt's poems and their cool reception by the town's cultural authorities thematize the humoristic "collision" between classical Greek form and modern/romantic interiority, which condemns the poems to failure in the eyes of their pedantic judges (Köpke 1990, 51–2). Their judgment in turn exposes "the impossibility of poeticizing bourgeois life" (54).

Jean Paul's reputation in France, as translated by Germaine de Staël in *De l'Allemagne* and later taken up by the Symbolists: the "Speech of the Dead Christ from Atop the Cosmos, Saying That There is no God" (*Rede des toten Christus vom Weltgebäude herab, dass kein Gott sei*) (Jean Paul 2000, II: 266–71; De Staël 1959, 286–90). This text not surprisingly established Jean Paul to his French readers as the prophet of atheism (Pichois 1963, 255), a misleadingly one-sided impression, given that the pages immediately following narrate a rosy counter-vision purporting to expose the *Rede* as a bad dream (II: 272–6).

With or without its piously optimistic twin, the *Rede* sets before its readers a hermeneutic puzzle not unlike that offered by the parable of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. How do we integrate the surreal nightmare of cosmic emptiness into the mundane story of a collapsing marriage in a small town? Does the statement made by either of the dream-texts that intrude upon this novel apply to the novel itself as some sort of interpretive key? These are not the protagonists' dreams, neither are they asides delivered self-consciously by the novel's third-person narrator. Rather, the narrative voice of the two visionary excurses hints at a self-enclosed narrative persona, as it were, unaware of the novelistic plot he or she is interrupting.

The intrusion on the novel of the twin dream visions opens up an opposition between two different registers in the symbolic theme of "resurrection," between Firmian Siebenkäs's tragicomic mock-death and reawakening as Natalie's lover on the one hand, and the specter of the Dead Christ haunting a cosmos that has been emptied of messianic promise on the other. The latter vision is a reversal in and of itself, but when set against the earthly ploy of the devious "advocate for the poor," a further opposition comes into view: namely, between visionary earnestness and the play of small-town life (or the inverse: visionary play versus the earnestness of the everyday). In short, how does the cosmic vision of the dead Christ relate to the pedestrian story of Firmian Siebenkäs? It is unclear in what way the devious maneuvers of a witty but impoverished townsman relativize the terror evoked by the vision of an undead Christ living out his anguished realization that the Father has forsaken Him.⁹

These two registers do not point to a higher fusion, any more than the nightmare vision of the dead Christ and the beatific one that follows it form some higher synthesis. There is no unity of belief and unbelief on Jean Paul's agenda, nor is there a fusion of the cosmic and the everyday. In this "German" novel, "Italian" high seriousness and "Dutch" low comedy merely coexist, and though each may comment obliquely on the other, they do not become one or lead to a higher synthesis. Moreover, theological earnestness shines through fictional play as something the latter cannot wholly absorb, yet which has no other form of presentation beside the fictional and metaphorical. One is not the *telos* or concealed truth of the other.

⁹Incidentally, Jean Paul gave an epilogue to *Die Unsichtbare Loge* the title "Seven Last Words" (*Sieben Letzte Worte*), traditionally a designation of Jesus's last utterances before his crucifixion, which include, "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?" (I: 463–9).

4.4 Suspension of Disbelief: *Die Unsichtbare Loge*

The confrontation between heaven and earth comes to a head already at the beginning of Jean Paul's first novel, *Die Unsichtbare Loge*, which is also the first text he signed with his pseudonym. As in Rousseau's *Emile*, the narrator is the educator of the young male protagonist of this *Bildungsroman*, Gustav; the tutor-narrator's name is Jean Paul. Unlike *Émile*, however, Gustav has had an education of sorts before he enters the narrator's tutelage, and in the first part of the novel Jean Paul narrates his pupil's prior history, as well as his parents' courtship and early marriage.

In a parodic allusion to such heroic myths as the *Nibelungenlied*, Gustav's father has won his mother at a game of chess with her cagy father, who has never before been defeated by a suitor. There is, however, a further condition put on the marriage by the protagonist's prospective grandmother, a fervent Pietist: the couple must submit to a strict Pietist education for their first born-son at the hands of a local divine, who will take care of the child for the first eight years of his life in an underground cellar on the family estate. During such time the parents may visit their child only while he sleeps, so as not to interfere in the tutor's training. The child is not to make his parents' acquaintance until he has completed his course of study, which Jean Paul calls a "subterranean pedagogicum" (I: 52–56).

This bizarre scheme receives a further, Platonic, twist in the way Gustav's initial tutor, called "the genius" or "the guiding spirit" (*der Genius*, German/Latin for *δαίμων*), frames it. He tells his tutor that the cellar in which they are living is earth, the one lamp hanging from the ceiling the sun, and the world above the cellar heaven, to which Gustav will ascend when he "dies" and becomes an "angel," like all those currently dwelling there (I: 57). After eight years of schooling in music, drawing and religion, the tutor tells his pupil he has earned the privilege of resurrection, leads him up the staircase, and opens the door to the afterlife. The *Genius* disappears and Gustav's heavenly, that is, earthly life begins. His first gesture is to point ecstatically toward the shining sun and cry out, "God is standing there!" (*Gott steht dort!*) (I: 63).

If young Gustav mistakes the human world for a divine one, he is not alone. In the *Vorschule* Jean Paul himself calls poetic writing (*Poesie*) "the only second world" (that is, the world of the resurrection) "in the first one." *Poesie* "paints on the curtain of eternity the coming drama; it is no flat mirror (*platter Spiegel*) of the present but rather the magic mirror of the time that is not" (V: 447). Elsewhere in the same text he describes *Poesie* as "this sun-drunk world of wonders where godly forms (*Göttergestalten*) walk upright and blessed" (V: 39). These characterizations uncannily anticipate Theodor W. Adorno's program, laid out at the end of *Minima Moralia*, which calls for philosophy to

contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption.... Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be... as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because

consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite (*zur Spiegelschrift ihres Gegenteils zusammenschießt*). (German edition: 334)¹⁰

Jean Paul's "magic mirror" anticipates Adorno's "mirror script" not only in terms of one figure, but in total. In fact, as a commentary on his own *oeuvre*, Jean Paul's characterization of "poetry" (*die Poesie*, which includes prose) makes sense only in connection to Adorno's characterization of philosophy; the world Jean Paul depicts in his fictions is nothing if not "indigent and distorted," populated by penniless schoolteachers and "lawyers for the poor" as well as pompous courtiers who use copies of the stoic classics to beat their wives. If the standpoint of poetry lets resurrected humanity shine through empirical humanity, it is not by reason of a beautifying varnish but rather as an effect of total juxtaposition achieved by "poetry's" encyclopedic resurrection of the actual. The messianic light is an effect of fictionality as such, not an illusion added to things by naïveté.

Gustav undoubtedly *is* naïve, but in a way that calls to mind Lacan's famous dictum that "only those not duped, err" (*seuls les non-dupes errent*). Just after Gustav's ecstatic emergence, the narrator reflects for a moment in the future anterior about what the experience will have meant to an older Gustav at some point in the future. He imagines Gustav looking back at that moment in mournful memory of "a long-lost eternity" (Jean Paul 2000, I: 60). Eternity is a big thing to have lost, and requires restitution of a spiritual nature, which the novel amply provides.

Years after his formative experience of emergence into the earthly world, the mature Gustav writes a letter to his (now former) tutor Jean Paul explaining what the experience means to him. Having long since learned the truth about the purported "second world" in which he lives, Gustav is not disillusioned, but grateful. He gladly ascribes the progress of his moral education to the love nourished in him by his earlier tutor for the solar center of divine humanity, as well as his subsequent learned ability to distinguish it from the physical sun (I: 355–60). In an excursus, Jean Paul extolls Gustav as one of a select group of "higher people" (*höhere Menschen*) capable of living out transcendent values in a fallen, sublunary world (I: 221–4). Gustav has internalized the fictional scheme he learned from his tutor and transformed it into an ethical program.

A spiritual enrichment or even conversion due to the transformation of loss into memory is familiar from the romantic crisis-lyric: Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and Hölderlin's "Andenken" are canonical examples. In these poems, the poet reconstitutes himself as a creative subject or even founder of a community by absorbing a painful loss (Hölderlin 1951, 189; line 59).¹¹ "Recollection" or "internalization"—etymologically the word *Erinnerung* points to both meanings—transmutes experiential loss into aesthetic gain. By novelizing this model in the example of Gustav, Jean Paul combines it with another, more socially ambiguous,

¹⁰ For the original, see: Adorno 1951, 281.

¹¹ Hölderlin's poem "Andenken" closes with the well-known enigmatic statement that "but what is lasting the poets provide" (*was bleibt aber, stiften die Dichter*), establishing poets as founders (*Stifter*) of a communal legacy (Henrich 1997, 255).

phenomenon, which Slavoj Žižek has recently called “fetishistic disavowal,” and whose Lacanian formula is “I know very well, but nevertheless” (*je sais bien, mais quand même...*) (Žižek 2008, 250).

Žižek illustrates this phenomenon in his early book *They Know Not What They Do* in a long gloss on a Hopi religious ceremony as explained by the anthropologist Octave Mannoni. The Hopi children grow up attending festivals in which mysterious men dance in masks, and are said to be the gods themselves, who have come down among the people. At a certain initiatory moment, the men remove their masks and reveal themselves as ordinary men of the community. Instead of the ceremony inducing a traumatic loss of faith on the part of the children, it teaches them to impute a spiritual meaning to the dance, as the masked men become representatives of a higher spirit that can make itself visible to the people only symbolically. In Žižek's terms, the spiritual power of the dance now resides in the mask itself, not in anything the mask purports to conceal. The newly initiated tribesmen and women have made the transition from naïve belief to “symbolic commitment.” Both organized religion and “traditional authority” have been born (Žižek 2008, 245–9).

Jean Paul's novel stages this process as the origin of literature itself: an *as if* in which the narrator and his readers lodge a symbolic commitment. The world as it first appears to Gustav, a “realm of wonders in which men and women walk upright and sacred,” is literature itself, “the only second world in the first one.”¹² Another German writer to attempt a poetic theology in this way is Friedrich Hölderlin. As revealed in the elegy “Bread and Wine” (*Brod und Wein*), the remit of modern poetry begins when “the Father turns his face away from the people” (*als der Vater gewandt sein Angesicht von den Menschen*) (Hölderlin 1951, 94; l. 127). With the death of Christ, the ancient world's final demigod, the age of the heroes comes to an end and with it the plenitude of a world that mortals share directly with the gods. Naïve belief gives way to symbolic commitment as the poet steps forth to fill the void left by the gods in a posture of vigilance, resolved “to remain awake at night” (91; l. 36).

¹² The scene of Gustav emerging from the cave has become a battleground for critics seeking to define Jean Paul's “humor” by contrast with the Schlegelian notion of “romantic irony.” Herbert Kaiser takes Gustav's conversion very seriously, commenting that “[h]umor does not actually kill finite life, but... transfigures it, in that it suspends the earthly positing of the finite as an absolute—in the idea, that all life is life from the sun of God.... Humor... annihilates the finite, in order to create it anew in the light of the idea. Gustav's ‘death’ is his resurrection into the this-worldly” (Kaiser 1992, 26). By contrast, Paul Fleming reads the episode satirically, emphasizing the pleasure resulting from Jean Paul's narrative subjecting Platonic transcendentalism to the “magic mirror of fantasy” (Fleming 2006, 39–40). Fleming stresses the delight both Gustav and the reader experience when earth is substituted for heaven, not the way the ideology of earth-as-heaven informs both Gustav's ethical development and Jean Paul's consistent characterization of his poet-ics. To my mind, each of these critics settles for one moment of a polarity that would be more productively read dialectically, as a clash between infinite Idea and finite reality in which neither emerges unchanged, and whose only resolution comes in the form of a self-conscious *as if*. It seems to me that Kaiser sides with heaven and Fleming with earth because neither is troubled by the narrator's complicity with the transcendentalism that the novel's plot has exposed as fictional play; the dialectical view imposes itself the moment one considers the narrative voice to be constitutive of meaning.

While Jean Paul and Hölderlin converge in their framing of the poetic vocation, the difference in genre and tonality between Hölderlin's elegiac lyric and Jean Paul's novels could not be starker. This difference is what Jean Paul calls "humor." For Hölderlin the task of "remembering" or "internalizing" the naïve plenitude of childhood or pagan antiquity sanctifies the poetic vocation as a symbolic commitment, and Jean Paul effectively novelizes this formula, investing it with the humorous ambivalence typical of the novel as a genre. If humor is the "inverse sublime," as Jean Paul claims in the *Vorschule* (Jean Paul 2000, V: 125), then humor dominates his novelistic discourse just as the pathos of the sublime pervades Hölderlin's caesuras.

4.5 The Sublime, Humor and Modern Dialectic

Jean Paul shares with Hegel the historical scheme assigning comedy to pre-romantic—that is to say, pre-modern—literature, as opposed to humor, which is specific to modernity. Also modern is the sublime, which did not figure in ancient Greek aesthetics until Longinus appeared in the Alexandrian era. For Kant, the sublime plays a key role in inscribing the ethical subject's autonomy, marking the correspondence between "the starry firmament above me and the moral law within me" precisely on account of the incommensurability of that starry heaven—or gigantic mountain, or crashing wave—and the empirical self that it dwarfs (Kant 1977, VII: 300–1; X: 184–5). It is by overpowering the senses that the awesome natural sights provide a negative imprint of that other self, the self of reason, itself not open to representation.

The poetry of the sublime is thus an allegory of autonomous subjectivity, which opens its practitioners to the allegation aimed at Romanticism since John Keats characterized William Wordsworth as a poet of the "egotistical sublime" (Keats 2009, 295). Yet not every romantic-era treatment of the infinity of ethical subjectivity is celebratory. Rousseau located the origin of the mind in the explosive expansion of "imagination," which I have elsewhere labeled "a structure of comparison by which desire can realize its infinite nature, always transcending finite givens" (Coker 2009, 397). This implicit infinity of human desire, which cannot be satisfied by a finite world whose possibilities of fulfillment it continually outstrips, is analogous to the infinity of reason that Kant locates in the "kingdom of ends," a dimension invisible to the senses, whose only approximate image is in overpowering natural forces. Yet for Rousseau, the subject's infinity, cultivated by culture, is the source of unhappiness in the modern and enlightened world.

In an authorial soliloquy in *Emile*, Rousseau narrates the emergence of the "imagination" as a catastrophic event in the history of human consciousness. The widening gap between desire and fulfillment accompanying the expansion of imagination in the maturity of individuals and civilizations spells defeat for "happiness": "the nearer we are to pleasure (*jouissance*), the further we are from happiness"

(*bonheur*) (Rousseau 1984, 44).¹³ Jean Paul implicitly counters this pessimistic judgment in the *Billet an meine Freunde*, yet another prologue to the prologue of *Quintus Fixlein*, in which he gives his readers advice on how to be “not happy, but happier”:

I could never report more than three ways to become, not happy, but happier. The first, which leads upward, is: to drive so far out over the cloud of life that the whole world with its wolfs' dens, ossuaries and lightning rods seems to lie far beneath one's feet, shrunk like a little kindergarten.—The second is, to fall directly down into the garden and make yourself so at home in a furrow there, that, when you look out of your warm lark's nest, you also don't see any wolfs' dens, ossuaries and rods, but just ears of corn, of which each is a tree for the nesting bird and an umbrella and parasol.—The third and last—which I consider the hardest and cleverest—is to alternate between the first two. (Jean Paul 2000, IV: 10)

Jean Paul's program for increasing wellbeing without attaining “happiness” amounts to a preference for *jouissance* over *bonheur*: exuberance in poetic excess rather than the containment sought in self-denial and classical balance. His eudaimonistic formula is to go back and forth between two extremes, the encyclopedic bird's eye-view and blind “nesting” in the immediate. The two do not form a synthesis. Rather, greater wellbeing is to be found in the transitions. In this passage Jean Paul provides a model of what Kojin Karatani has more recently called “transcritical” thinking: letting each side of a polarity critique the other mutually (Karatani 2005, 1–25). Slavoj Žižek has since absorbed this model into a new way of thinking about Hegel's dialectic, just as Žižek's own style resembles Jean Paul's in its drive to juxtapose seemingly incompatible domains and point out concealed similarities. This style is nothing if not humorous.

4.6 Bayreuth versus Jena: The Polemic with Early Romanticism

Jean Paul's *Vorschule* stages a transcritical evaluation of two schools of poetics, which he calls “poetic materialism” and “poetic nihilism” (Jean Paul 2000, V: 31–40). Through this mutual critique of the two stances, Jean Paul advances his own poetics of antithesis just as Kant had advanced his “transcendental stance” in a confrontation between empiricism and rationalism. Through the structure of his treatise, he implicitly promotes a Kantian poetics at odds with the “literary absolute” through which the Jena Romantics sought to supersede Kant—even while dissenting from specific Kantian statements, calling Kant's definition of beauty circular or despairing over his placing immortality off limits to human reason (V: 40–41; VI: 1211 ff.).

In the *Vorschule* Jean Paul contrasts himself to the Jena Romantics in terms legible to contemporary trauma theory. He recognizes subjectivity as a wound, both smitten and cured by poetry, whereas Schlegel and Novalis want to “rip off the

¹³ In French: Rousseau 1995, 304.

bandage from the wound like a bond" (V: 31). Jean Paul privileges "earnestness" as the motive for "play," insisting that the ongoing dialectic between them will never reach a resolution. For Jean Paul the clash between opposites is an endless process of mutual appropriation, and in this he resembles contemporary dialecticians who break with earlier models of dialectic as a closed teleology.

Jean Paul's religious resonances appear in the context of the polemic with Jena Romanticism with its tendency to subsume "religion" into the dissolving energies of the "literary absolute." When Friedrich Schlegel declares "religion" the core of all human creativity, what he has in mind can hardly be the specifics of Christian revelation (Schlegel 1971, 241–2). Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy characterize the "religion" of which Schlegel speaks in his 1800 *Ideas* as "art itself...considered as the *representation* (absolute, without remainder) of the truth" (1978, 203). In the Jena Romantics' flirtation with "religion," Jean Paul perceives the hubris of a poetic subject that insists on containing not only the entire world, but also the infinite.

What is lost in this romantic game is the Judeo-Christian element of antithesis, the encounter between incommensurables that happens in prophecy and in the person of Jesus. Yet Jean Paul has gone one step further in proposing as the mirror of the "second world" of the afterlife a literary discourse marked off by the bounds of human finitude and overtly not "serious." Hence Friedrich Richter's pseudonym, which humorously brings together apostolic monikers with linguistic hybridity, and the fictional persona "Jean Paul" in whose voice all of the high-flying theological-poetical assertions resound.

Jean Paul sounds most like Schlegel when praising the subversive power of "wit" (*Witz*), descendent of Giambattista Vico's *ingegno* and engine for finding similarity in the dissimilar (Vico 1976, 313–4). Yet Jean Paul sets "wit" into a tripartite relation with *Scharfsinn*, the power of making distinctions, and *Tiefsinn*, the quasi-mystical perspective from which all things are alike. Difference comes into being against a background of indifference. The God's eye view of *Tiefsinn* is what enables *Witz* and *Scharfsinn* to profile each other (Jean Paul 2000, V: 171–2). It establishes the difference between difference and identity, as a vertical dimension enabling the horizontal play of difference in every witty comparison. The contemporary whom Jean Paul most resembles here is Schelling, even though the two traded barbs about which man's *oeuvre* the purportedly all-creative *Geist* found it most excruciating to write.

In a hint at the aleatory nature of his own writing as an ever-shifting web of analogies and likenesses, Jean Paul calls "wit" the "anagram of nature" (V: 47). He links an absolutized "wit" to the community of women in Plato's Republic, the Last Judgment and the French Revolution. The common link is "leveling" (47). This judgment is itself an example of wit yoking together seemingly unlike things on the basis of a concealed and surprising similarity, the more outlandish the wittier. With its attention to the French Revolution it competes with Friedrich Schlegel's designation of that event along with Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* as the three formations encapsulating "the tendencies of the age" (Schlegel 1971, 190).

Jean Paul's employment of figuration is performative: he defines wit with a witty epigram, metaphor with a metaphor. In the former, the performativity also serves as irony, foregrounding the differences that separate phenomena that wit would like to see as similar. By besting Schlegel in a contest of wit—Jean Paul's epigram is wittier than Schlegel's precisely in being more of a stretch—the one-time clown of Weimar also points to the limitations of his own vision in ways that would never occur to the Jena Romantic, high priest of his own seriousness even where he pretends to humor.

Another focal Romantic value, bequeathed to the Jena school by Schiller, is "play." Jean Paul works through this term in a playful epilogue to the *Vorschule*, in which his experimentation with narrative authority continues. The last three chapters of the text are "lectures" positioning the theorist-narrator Jean Paul as a lecturer to a university audience. The last of these lectures, the "Cantata-Lecture" (*Kantate-Vorlesung*) has an audience of one: Albano, the protagonist of Jean Paul's signature *Bildungsroman*, *Titan*. The lecture bears the very early-romantic-sounding title "On Poetic Poetry" (*Über die poetische Poesie*), but it is the wayward student who takes the position suitable to Jena adherents of "the literary absolute," proposing "an organic synthesis of the old realism and the new idealism," which his lecturer rejects as another version of "poetic nihilism" (Jean Paul 2000, V: 443–5). In the rest of their dialogue, Jean Paul insists on duality and antithesis, in opposition to his pupil and protagonist's longing for resolution and harmony.

While Albano defends "play" and "freedom" as final goals for poetry, Jean Paul insists on qualifying these values as paths of orbit around something absolute that lies outside of poetry, and indeed of human subjectivity itself. Like the two terms of a metaphor or the empirical and transcendental ego, "play" can exist only in relation to something that it is not; Schiller's fantasy of a human life redeemed by play finds its inherent limit. In a footnote, Jean Paul comments that "Schiller's play drive (borrowed from Kant) divides into a material and a formal drive, and the final synthesis will always be lacking" (V: 444 fn.). Play, the great mediator, to which Schiller looks for an embodiment of human freedom, is itself an unresolved play of antitheses. Driven on by its own contradictions, play circles "earnestness" like a moth around a flame.

4.7 Conclusion: Is there a Politics of Humor?

On the one hand, Jean Paul's writings are an example of romantic poetry transmuting loss into wisdom, conjuring presence from absence and pleasure from pain in the transfiguring mirror of poetic form. On the other hand, they call attention to the artificiality of this operation, puncturing the surface of aesthetic ideology. As we have seen, Jean Paul exposes this formula as a species of what Žižek, following Jacques Lacan, has called "fetishistic disavowal." Yet Žižek contends that this disavowal leads to the formation of "traditional authority"; its immediate context in his work is not literary but political (Žižek 2008, 249).

There remains the question of the implicit politics of Jean Paul's aesthetic dissonances. As is the case with many German romantic figures, the political question is a complex one which cannot be answered with reference to content alone. Though Jean Paul's "Italian" *Bildungsromane* narrate the moral development of autocratic minor princes, his contemporaries could read between the lines to infer a revolutionary and republican sensibility. In a eulogy he delivered for Jean Paul in 1825, Ludwig Börne proclaimed him "the poet of the lowborn...the singer of the poor," as well as "a priest of justice" (*ein Priester des Rechts*) and "the Jeremiah of his captive people," who "sowed the seeds of German freedom for our grandchildren" (Börne 1964, 787–799). Jean Paul was one of very few authors of the time who never recanted his youthful enthusiasm for the French Revolution. As a spokesman of the radical Young Germany movement, Börne saw Jean Paul as a prophetic figure heralding a revolution to come: "he waits patiently at the gate of the twentieth century for his people to come sloughing along behind him" (789).¹⁴

No doubt Börne's image of Jean Paul owes much to the pedestrian thematics of the latter's "German" and "Dutch" novels as well as the promiscuous mixing of high and low registers so shocking to classical standards of taste and decorum that even Friedrich Schlegel found it excessive (Schlegel 1971, 232). These poetic features of his work arguably reflect the class dynamic implicitly at work in their production. As one of Germany's first writers to live predominantly by the proceeds of book sales, unlike Wieland, Schiller and Goethe with their courtly patronage, Jean Paul occupies a special position within the bourgeois revolution on the level of his writerly practice.¹⁵

Though Karl Marx appears not to have much known or enjoyed Jean Paul's writings, the latter's response to Weimar has awakened sympathetic responses from later Marxist tradition. East German academic Wolfgang Harich devoted a book-length study to Jean Paul's critique of Idealism and hailed the novels as a realist "poetry of revolution" satirizing nascent bourgeois types, declaring his *oeuvre* an unexplored resource for "the spiritual heritage of the Left" and even the workers' movement (Harich 1974, 8, 552). Harich's appreciation of Jean Paul, whom he thinks Marx shortchanged out of distaste for Jean Paul's "utopian socialist" admirer Börne, thus derives more from thematic than formal considerations (Harich 1974, 554). More fruitful for our purposes may be Walter Benjamin's appraisal of Jean Paul as "the greatest allegorist among the German poets (*Poeten*)" (Benjamin 1978, 166). Benjamin characterizes Jean Paul's poetics as an exposure of the "injunction" that Weimar classicism posed to the German bourgeoisie, namely "reconciliation with feudalism through aesthetic education and in the cult of beautiful semblance" (Benjamin 1991, 415).

¹⁴ Translation cannot really capture the tone of Börne's lovingly frustrated evocation of the German people: "er wartet geduldig an der Pforte des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts, bis sein schleichend Volk ihm nachkomme" (Börne 1964, 789).

¹⁵ For more on Jean Paul's relationship to the book-market, in historical context, see: Ludwig Fertig 1989, 93–117, esp. 104–8.

Terry Eagleton is thinking along the same lines when he relates Friedrich Schiller's ideal of "aesthetic education" to Antonio Gramsci's notion of "hegemony." Though Schiller's praise of the all-mediating "play drive" opens onto a utopian vision of a world beyond constraint or alienation, it also provides a model for integrated capitalist subjectivity—of a person who loves his job, say—and is more specifically useful to the truncated subjectivity of a bourgeoisie that would not manage to remove the monarchical state until after World War I (Eagleton 1990, 102–120).

It is this ambivalent psychic balance that Jean Paul's dissonant aesthetics disturbs by inserting a strong dose of incongruity into every witty comparison, fusion of transcendence and immanence, or marriage between mind and body. Just as Adorno sought to expose the "tears and ruptures" of the world in the hope that such "consummate negativity" might coalesce into "the mirror image of its opposite," so too does Jean Paul explicitly offer his writing as a placeholder for future redemption: "a figured curtain" adorned with images of "the coming play" (Jean Paul 2000, V: 447). For both Adorno and Jean Paul, unresolved "negativity" is an allegory of reconciliation. As a professed Christian and avowed opponent of the Idealist cooption of religion, Jean Paul sometimes places this promised reconciliation in a physical afterlife. Yet some of his more attentive readers, from Börne to Benjamin and beyond, have had no difficulty displacing the divine utopia onto a secular future.

Jean Paul is a forerunner of those thinkers in contemporary critical theory who see dialectic as a sharpening of antitheses rather than a harmonious resolution. In this he is not alone in the nineteenth century: Kierkegaard, who brought "humor" to the attention of philosophers, similarly emphasized gaps, borders and the *salto mortale* between irreconcilables. Witness the similarity between Jean Paul's definition of humor, before whose eyes "everything is the same and nothing" (V: 125), and Kierkegaard's insistence that "you are always in the wrong before God" (Kierkegaard 1987, 346). Like his Jena Romantic peers, Jean Paul delights in comparisons between earthly things, engaging his readers in the endless play of similarity and difference; but radiating through the horizontal plane of comparison is a vertical dimension in which all things are found lovably wanting.

Yet this vertical dimension does not reveal itself simply in the earthward gaze of one looking down from the heavens. Not for Jean Paul is the presumption of having already arrived at the standpoint of the infinite, such that finite things become mere playthings of a self-sufficient subject. Jean Paul's "humor" does not usurp the position of "the old theology...looking down from the celestial world at the earthly one," which from such a perspective just "passes by, small and vain" (*zieht klein und eitel dahin*) (V: 129). Yet neither does it look up uncomprehendingly at the vastness of the cosmos, feeling sublimely overpowered. Jean Paul's thought-figure for the trans-critical perspective of humor is more difficult than either of these positions. Referring to a "bee-eating" bird known well known to contemporary encyclopedists (Encyclopædia 1817, 156–9), Jean Paul compares humor to "the Merops bird, which turns its back on heaven while nevertheless flying in that direction," all the while "drinking the nectar upwards, dancing on its head" (V: 129).

The resemblance to Walter Benjamin's "angel of history" does not help much without an awareness of the polemic that each image carries out with alternate versions of heavenward progress. Benjamin's *Angelus Novus* flying backward, a "wind from Paradise" caught in its wings as the ruins of history pile up progressively before its eyes, repudiates the social-democratic promise of linear progress toward a readily imaginable future (Benjamin 1977, 255); Benjamin teaches instead the imperative to redeem the ruined past through revolution, an act whose outcome is always uncertain. More subtly, Jean Paul's polemic in the image of the "Merops bird" is also against a form of progressivism: the asymptotic approach to infinity that the Jena Romantics saw both in the divagations of irony and in the ongoing project of a "universal poetry" in step with the "tendencies of the age" (Schlegel 1971, 174).

Having only the finite in view, humor reveals the infinite in its gaps and fissures. At the same time, it stands to reason that as the bird of humor flies backward and upward, more of the finite world comes into view, enabling the humorist better to "measure out the infinite by means of the finite and connect them" (Jean Paul 2000, V: 128). Indeed, the tendency to pile on material is evident in Jean Paul's writing from its very beginning: in the "notebooks" (*Merkblätter*) in which the penniless young Friedrich Richter compiled long lists of words, expressions and figures of speech copied out of other texts. These expressions then spread throughout the writer's later works, informing many of their "likenesses" (*Gleichnisse*). Reading the novels against the background of the *Merkblätter*, one sometimes gets the impression that one is witnessing the birth of narrative out of the spirit of parataxis.

Yet such additive procedures ultimately resist totalization. Legible in Jean Paul's *oeuvre* is not so much an actually or even potentially existing totality of spirit but rather a catalogue of confrontations between subject and world, and in each one the passionate demand for that which others in his time took poetry itself already to actualize: freedom. It is why his novel *Titan*, conceived as his programmatic response to the year he spent in Weimar and one of few major works Jean Paul regarded as "finished," closes not in the past or even future indicative, but the imperative: "awake, my siblings!" (*wacht auf, meine Geschwister!*) (III: 830). Not content to offer the pleasures of the imaginary, Jean Paul's *oeuvre* also demands symbolic commitment. This is the peculiar challenge it poses to its readers, both aesthetically and politically.

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