

ENDRE HÁRS
OF PROGRESS, BEFORE IT ALL STARTED.
HERDER AND THE NATURAL HISTORY
OF THE HUMAN BEING¹

This paper addresses an event which started to be perceived and conceived of a long time ago. A change emerged in the 18th century which resulted in the focus of attention being directed onto the interrelationship of past, present and future within the history of European thinking. From this point on, the sciences were also provided with a past characterized by its inaccessibility, and a future characterized by its openness for things to come. From this time on, it was the present that served as a reference point for everything retrieved from the past and everything anticipated from the future – things in the present were thought to have originated in the past and were expected to point forward to the future. My presentation visits this experience as a dilemma in the decades that preceded and then witnessed its emergence, within the context of contemporary natural history and anthropology. In particular the paper will focus on those writings by Johann Gottfried Herder in which specific narratives mediate the problem of a creation which has just come to its closure while at the same time still being in process; of a progress which is not developmental; of an event which is still suspended in its temporality. The anamnesis of the history of science is not for its own sake: the movements preceding the birth of the modern sciences provide important lessons for the process of their present day revision.

The episode in intellectual history I intend to invoke is a reminder through what detours 18th-century thought arrived at the modern experience of a temporal order of occurrences. What I also hope to communicate (and this is indeed a condition of success) is what Michel Foucault celebrated in his methodology of intellectual history as the experience of “discontinuity” (Foucault 1969, 9). We will see that what posed a challenge to a philosopher two centuries ago is today, as a scientific problem, relegated to the past. This past experience, I hope, can be endowed with a new sense and a renewed intellectual excitement to the extent it differs from contemporary possibilities of

¹ I wish to thank the Alexander von Humboldt-Foundation and Professor Dr. Albrecht Koschorke (Konstanz) for their help in the preparations of this paper.

thinking. Perhaps we will also see how reconstructing (and reflecting upon) this old train of thought poses a challenge for the present observer. My ultimate aim is to dislodge certain routines, to gain some distance, some breathing space from what is present to us. What may justify such a Foucauldian opening is that the following fits well into the context of Foucault's *The Order of Things. An archaeology of human sciences* (*Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, 1966) and François Jacob's *The Logic of Life. A History of Heredity* (*La logique du vivant. Une histoire de l'hérédité*, 1970). My argument, however, also moves away from these authors' preferences inasmuch as it attempts to seek out ways to orient itself in transigency instead of drawing up solid lines of periodization. There is a lot to discover in the space between Foucault and Jacob, who concentrate on French discourse, and research on Herder that largely ignores the French methods.

Johann Gottfried Herder, the author of *Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Humanity* (*Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, 1784–1791) experienced a twofold conflict with what is referred to as the divide of modernity (a watershed or an abyss, according to one's preferences) that is often associated, in the history of philosophy, with the publication of Kant's *Critiques*. The conflict was personal as well as literal since Kant personally reviewed the first then the second volume of *Ideas*, and showed no quarters to his old disciple from Königsberg. He accused Herder of confusing what he himself took pains to separate in his early works on the natural sciences, and what he later distinguished as a "physiological" and a "pragmatic point of view" within "a systematic treatise comprising our knowledge of man" (Kant 1798, 3) in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (*Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, 1798/1800). Since a "[p]hysiological knowledge of man", Kant claims in this latter work "investigates what *nature* makes of him", "theoretical speculation on the subject is a sheer waste of time" (Ibid.) unless it is supported by specific facts and observations. The competences of the philosopher thus distinguished from the natural scientist, the former can even afford, as Kant does, to speak disparagingly of "the play of nature" (Ibid.) as mechanistic and irrelevant from the point of view of the human world. According to Kant's review, Herder had moved into territories which had nothing to offer that would be worthy of the philosophical enterprise or fruitful in the study of nature. In the realm of the visible, observable world, Herder had employed concepts and hypotheses that referred to invisible effects and imperceivable relationships. What especially seemed to bother Kant was the Herderian postulate of organic powers. For the present-day reader of Kant's rebuttal, the stand-out hypothesis is the thought of an "affinity (*Verwandtschaft*)" within the chain of Being and the order of living nature, "where either one species would have arisen from the other and all from a single original species or perhaps from a single procreative maternal womb". This horrendous hypothesis, Kant adds, "would lead to *ideas* which, however, are so monstrous that reason recoils

before them; but one may not ascribe such things to our author [Herder] without doing him an injustice". (Kant 1785, 32)²

That Herder's *Ideas* appeals to invisible things in the context of sciences that deal with what the eye sees is not Kant's only objection. He claims that Herder also draws the suspicion of conceiving of things that cannot or should not exist. He relates occurrences leading from the creation of the universe to the emergence of man and even beyond, a story that, viewed from today, bears an uncanny resemblance to what is told in a science that was just about to be baptized biology. We can observe how "from the slime of the worm, from the calcareous abode of the shellfish, from the web of the insect, a better limbed and superior organization gradually rises." (Herder 1800, 41) and how "animal faculties" struggle to gain the "most free and perfect position" that humans can claim as their own:

"The crawling worm raises its head as much as possible from the dust of the ground, and the amphibia creep with bent bodies on the shore. [...] A glimpse of progressive Nature [...] occasions the depressed body of the brute to raise itself: the spinal tree shoots more straight, and flowers more finally; the breast is rounded, the haunches closed, the neck raised; the senses are more perfect, and concentrate in a clearer consciousness, nay even in divine thought." (Ibid., 85)

What sort of occurrence is implied in these lines? Is Herder seeing things, or Kant when he alludes to the "monstrous" implications of such trains of thought? This requires a more detailed explanation, bearing in mind not only the 19th-century consequences of what is imagined herein but hopefully some possible 21st-century ramifications.

"The principle of production" and the thought of a "thoroughgoing relationship" (Kant 1790, 186), according to which "e.g. certain water animals transform themselves gradually into marsh-animals and from these, after some generations, into land-animals" (Ibid., 237), as Kant says in his *Critique of Judgement* (*Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 1790), had a broad appeal at the time. Leibniz, in his *Protogaea* (1700/1748) writes, "There are those who go so far in their bold conjecturing as to think that all animals, which now dwell on the Earth, were covered by the sea, and have at some time been aquatic, and little by little, deserting their element, became amphibious and finally in succeeding generations forgot their first home" (Leibniz 1984, 26, § 6).³ Kant, in the remarks quoted above, does not only allude to the possible conclusions drawn from Herder but also to the theory of generation by Maupertuis or Diderot's

² Here, as elsewhere, Kant dismisses the problem of the chain of Being (the extension, order, hierarchy of living organisms) with a particularly uncomplicated nonchalance: "The smallness of the distinctions, if one places the species one after another in accordance with their *similarities*, is, given so huge a manifoldness, a necessary consequence of this very manifoldness" (Ibid.)

³ Then he goes on to say, "But that disagrees with the writers of the Holy Scriptures, to depart from whom is a religious offence." (Ibid.)

argument from 1753, in which, starting out from the similarities between certain organisms, he ponders the possibility “that in the beginning there was only a single animal which served as prototype for all the others, and that all nature has done is to lengthen, shorten, alter, multiply or eliminate certain organs” (Diderot 1754, 114). Kant was not unjustified in connecting Herder with these sources, as *Ideas* clearly attests to its authors’ utmost familiarity with the scientific literature of his day, and a willingness to combine in the most creative manner different and often radical conceptions.⁴ Nevertheless, if Herder draws on the work of the authors mentioned as well as Robinet and especially Buffon, he invariably finds a way to order occurrences in natural history (be they present, past or even future) that suit the particularity of his notion of humanity.

In the present paper, I will discuss the first two parts of Herder’s work, while I attempt to distinguish between a morphological, a genealogical and an evolutive-metaphysical perspective in the study of the emergence and evolution of organisms. First, the *morphological* aspect. To reconstruct the order of living beings, *Ideas*, like many works from the period, takes the Chain of Being as its starting point. Herder, however, supplements and even rewrites this great old-new model⁵ with a new set of theoremes that, in Jacob’s words, aims at not only “the arrangement of visible surfaces” but a more hidden “organization” (Jacob 1970, 16), “the relationships between the components” (Ibid., 74). The key of the new system is the type that in itself allows access, as in Buffon, to the unparalleled interplay of change and constancy in creation⁶, as opposed to transformation and the worldly history of living things. Herder’s concept of type, as that of Robinet, is also the kind of archetype that directs the seriality of organisms, drawing attention to man as the most successful construction⁷. In the order of beings, Herder observes the “predominant similitude of the principal form which, varying in numberless ways, more and more approaches that of man” (Herder 1800, 107). This “uniformity of structure” (Ibid., 39) can be seen in the skeletal structures of land animals as well as in the order of their internal organs, and can be retraced in the interrelations of form and function in even more distant organisms, albeit in more and more latent ways. There are two consequences for humans: since nature “seems to have fashioned all the

⁴ Wyder claims that Kant refers to Maupertuis on the one hand (a single ancestor) and Buffon on the other (productive womb) as the ones to whom Herder’s conception can be linked, and as such, it cannot be regarded as a transformational theory (Wyder 1998, 145). However, the fact that Kant can mention these theories in one breath shows that the conceptions invoked by Herder’s work cannot be separated with any ease.

⁵ See Lovejoy 1936, 183ff, 227ff.

⁶ The “constant conformity and [...] plan”, in the series of species, Buffon argues in the chapter on donkeys and the problem of mongrels in his *Natural History*, attests that “in creating animals, the Supreme Being desired to employ only one idea, and at the same time vary it in all possible manners, so that man might equally admire the magnificence of the execution and the simplicity of the plan” (Buffon 1753).

⁷ “All the varieties intermediate between the prototype and man [Autant il y a de variations intermédiaires du prototype à l’homme]”, Robinet writes, “I regard as so many essays of Nature, aiming at the most perfect, yet unable to attain it except through this annumerable sequence of sketches. [...] I think we may call the collection of the preliminary studies the apprenticeship of Nature in learning to make a man.” (Robinet 1964) See also Robinet 1768, 4; Wyder 1998, 118.

living creatures on our Earth after one grand model of organization” (Ibid.), humans are consubstantial with all other creatures. They are, however, also the telos of organizations “in which the features of all [animals] are collected in the most exquisite summary” (Ibid., 40). Theology is thus replaced by a teleology of nature that will eventually identify the essence of humanity as a standout feature stemming from the self-effacement of morphological characteristics.⁸ This mark of the human race will also reaffirm the atypical integration of the *homo sapiens*, started by Linné, into natural history⁹.

The second, *genealogical* aspect of Herder’s work builds substantially on all of the above. Herder draws on the tradition of natural philosophy that does not leave every detail of Creation to God, and does not operate exclusively with mechanomorphic but also increasingly with biomorphic components when modelling nature running its course¹⁰. Herder tends to conflate the strict separation made by Buffon (in determining the dynamics of nature) between the divine powers of creation and extinction on the one hand, and transformation that belongs to the competence of nature.¹¹ In Herder’s argumentation, the changes in nature derive not only from nature’s own economy but also reflect the continuation of the plan of Creation. The great parent of all [*die große Mutter*]” (Herder 1800, 11)¹² carries out the divine plan. What is more, she starts from chaos, and is herself the medium of Creation – a process that is open-ended and consequently, continues in dimensions accessible only to divine wisdom. “The ways of God in nature” (Ibid., ix) are what concerns Herder, and these ways are defined as “*formation [Bildung] (genesis)*” (Herder 1800, 111)¹³. In reconstructing them, Herder pays attention to the achievements of physics available at his time, and also takes into account knowledge of chemical-physiological processes, from theories of the creation and reproduction of life to descriptions of higher organizations¹⁴. Applying this logic to the type and its manifestations, Herder establishes that organisms were not created simultaneously but in a successive and temporally conditioned order. This thesis is supported not only by organic structures but also by the complex functionalities of the organizations vis-à-vis their geological and bio-geographical surroundings. The juxtaposition of the morphological and the genealogical

⁸ Cf. Gehlen’s reference to Herder (Gehlen 1940, 79ff).

⁹ *Homo sapiens* in Linné, writes Agamben, is a “[t]axonomic anomaly, which assigns not a given, but rather an imperative as a specific difference”; in terms of *nosce te ipsum* that motivates the naming of man “man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human”. (Agamben 2002, 25–26)

¹⁰ See Pross 1994, 97.

¹¹ See Buffon 1764, iv.

¹² See the reservations concerning the personification of nature in the preface to *Ideas* (Ibid. ix).

¹³ See Herder 1784, 1/159.

¹⁴ See Wyder 1998, 136; For a rich documentation of Herder’s scientific reading, see Herder 1784; also Nisbet 1970.

aspects leads to a kind of “progressionism”¹⁵ that develops with the argument, and which enables Herder to grasp occurrences in spectacular narrative segments.

“What a great and rich prospect does this point of view give us of the history of beings similar and dissimilar to us! It divides the kingdoms of nature, and the classes of creatures, according to their elements, and connects them with each other. Even in the most remote the wide-extended radius may be seen proceeding from one and the same centre. From air and water, from heights and depths, I see the animals coming to man, as they came to the first father of our race, and step by step approaching his form. The bird flies in the air: [...] and no sooner does it approach the earth in a hideous equivocal genus, as in the bat and vampire, but it resembles the human skeleton. The fish swims in the water: [...] When, as in the manatee, it touches the earth, it’s forefeet at least are set free, and the female acquires breasts. [...] Through the amphibia we ascend to quadrupeds: and among these, even in the disgusting unau, with his three fingers and two breasts before, the nearer analogy to our form is already visible. [...] Thus it is anatomically and physiologically true, that the analogy of *one organization* prevails through the whole animated creation of our Globe: only the farther from man, [...] and Nature, ever true to herself, must proportionally deviate from his standard of organization: the nearer him, the closer has she drawn together the classes and radii, to combine what she could in him, the divine centre of the terrestrial creation.” (Herder 1800, 41)

Mentioning the bat, the manatee and the sleuth, Herder reminds his readers of the great challenge posed by the notion of the Chain of Being: the challenge to think a continuity that is guaranteed by transitory creatures existing in the gaps between discrete animals. On the one hand, the three creatures here serve to offer a panoramic plenitude, and on the other, they demonstrate God’s *train of thought* in which one creature follows from the other. The order of beings is justified not only by an intention but also by a necessity, the functionality of the creature’s interaction with its surroundings. This functionality is what guides the realization of intentional purposes. Creatures emerge in accordance with systemic possibilities, a fact that by no means damages divine omnipotence, but certainly pushes metaphysical considerations into the background. Teleological argumentation, which observes creation on its road to a goal, can be thus reversed if one reconstructs the events from the teleonomy of what has already come into being. The existence of man reinterprets from hindsight the order of beings. The above quotation, however, also makes it clear that for the inquiry into typological, structural, environmental or functional affini-

¹⁵ Wyder separates Herder’s “progressionism” from the transformism of some of his contemporaries (de Maillet, Diderot, Bonnet, Robinet) that threw into doubt the constancy of the species just as he separates him from later evolutionism. Nevertheless, because of its specifically scientific orientation, *Ideas* cannot be interpreted fully according to a hermetic model of *creatio continua*, the Chain of Being, however temporized (see Wyder 1998, 136–138).

ties, a transformist notion of creatures is not a prerequisite¹⁶. The evolution mapped out in Herder may seem, from a later Darwinian perspective, a serendipiteous intuition, but the idea of *actual* genealogy is not present in Herder. Even this much has been enough to generate critical discussions on Herder's evolutionism, but the resulting consensus is that the experiences available at Herder's time rule out a reading of him as a precursor of something radically different. Conversely, it means that Herder's conceptions cannot be fully understood by way of what happened later¹⁷. As H. B. Nisbet writes, "[t]he doctrine of a Chain of Being could be and was applied in so many ways by Herder and his contemporaries that we should consider the theory of transformism or evolution by descent only as one possible consequence of a much wider body of ideas" (Nisbet 1970, 212). That is precisely what makes the reading of a text from this period, such as Herder's *Ideas*, so exciting. Herder, throwing into the wind the caution characteristic of authoritative researchers of his time (such as Albrecht von Haller),¹⁸ aims at a broad historical, philosophical adaptation of the achievements of the natural sciences. In so doing, he documents and mediates the experience of an opening, in which there is nothing yet that would delimit or overshadow the horizon. The earlier framework has lost its reassuring closedness, and the conditions of the later, total paradigm are not yet there¹⁹. The thinker can transgress boundaries without being aware of the significance or the consequences of these transgressions. Attention is given to things unthinkable within the given conditions. How the unthinkable gains shape in the texture of *Ideas* is what I intend to shed light on with the example of the third, *evolutive-metaphysical* aspect of the text.

The dynamics of the unknown is best demonstrated in Book 5 of *Ideas*, a book on organic powers. It contains argument that was received incredulously not only by Kant but by anatomists such as Blumenbach and Soemmerring (see Wenzel 1990, 149–150). Organic powers feature constantly in the first two parts of *Ideas*, but there they appear as the engines propelling the arrangement, functioning and reproduction of matter, which is not uncommon at the time. When Haller, devoted to the notion of preformation, makes physiological observations of irritability (*irritabilitas*) and sensibility (*sensibilitas*), occasionally he talks of powers (in the French),²⁰ and so does Caspar Friedrich Wolff, an outstanding representative of epigeneticism, in his discussion of essential power (*vis essentialis*).²¹ Another case in point is Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, who makes the instinct of growth (*Bildungstrieb*) the key to vital

¹⁶ Nisbet claims that the quotation "*simply* describes [...] the adaptation of the organism to its environment, and shows how Herder [...] was led by the doctrine of the Chain of Being [...]". (Nisbet 1970, 224, my emphasis – *E. H.*)

¹⁷ See Jacob's introduction on the potential perspectives of a scientific historical reconstruction (Jacob 1970, 1–18).

¹⁸ See Herder 1784, 2/184–191.

¹⁹ In Lefèvre's view, the significance of the Darwinian theory of evolution is that it provided answers to open questions of the period not only as a "discipline" but also as an overarching "integrational theory" (Lefèvre 1984, 18).

²⁰ Haller 1773, 104b–108b.

²¹ See Wolff 1764, 8–10, 160, 169.

processes (Blumenbach 1781). Herder, in the book of *Ideas* discussed here simply overshoots the mark when he lends special significance to life powers, and therefore also attempts to explain them in terms of natural philosophy. The concept of power offers him a way to bridge the gap between the material and the spiritual, and to represent the totality of "Being [*Dasein*]" (Herder 1987, 796), ranging from the Creator to the creatures, in a single formula reminiscent of Spinoza. Philosophical generalization reveals, from the highest divine power to (Newtonian) physical forces at work in the created world to biological powers, both in live and in lifeless matter, a consubstantiality in the texture of stratification. It is precisely this synthesizing experiment that makes the reader realize the instrumentality and the supplementarity of the concept of power²². Herder grasps and rethinks observations by the authors mentioned above at a point where they reach the limits of their research, and come to a halt at a certain obscure conceptuality. The concept of power thus simultaneously offers a general solution and draws the suspicion of being a *qualitas occulta*, a notion already out of vogue in both the philosophical and the scientific context of Herder's time.

In Book 5 of his *Ideas*, Herder seems to hesitate between monism and dualism when he distinguishes the external, visible side of organized bodies from their internal, invisible dimension – the former is responsible for shape while the latter is for emergence. He speaks of "a kingdom of invisible powers, standing in the same close connexion, and blending imperceptible transitions, as we perceive in the external appearances of things" (Herder 1800, 108). Organisms and the powers that create them are thus inseparable, representing the two sides of the same mechanism, as it were, a principle and its realization. And yet, curiously, Herder does separate them. Powers have different purposes than organisms. The former have infinite potential, the latter remain within a limited range of possibilities. "[T]he door of creation was shut" and, consequently, "new forms arise no more". But even if the order of creation limits the richness of organizations, they still serve as "ways and gates by which the inferiour powers [...] in future raise and improve themselves, within the limits of nature" (Ibid., 114). The organisms forming the Chain of Being are the visible forms of configurations of powers *feeding* off each other. Powers of vegetation assimilate material powers, whereas animal powers assimilate those of vegetation. On top of the chain of visibility stands man, "the greatest murderer among all animals" who "can assimilate to his nature almost every thing, unless it sink too far beneath him in living organization" (Ibid., 115). This motion, however, does not stop at the circulation of metabolism or the birth and death of visible structures. Nutrition, and "sound assimilation" (Ibid., 115) are only forms of events as experienced by organizations. At the level of powers, what occurs is a "trans-

²² "The main function of 'Kraft' in Herder's philosophical arguments is thus that of a synthesising concept, which, by its very generality and intangibility, is put to questionable use in eliminating traditionally irreconcilable antitheses." (Nisbet 1970, 9)

formation into superior vital forms” (Ibid.), a movement towards dimensions that transcend the possibilities of bodily existence as well as a similarly earthly imagination. Material spiritualized in man suggests further and more removed forms of humanity whose configurations of power are no longer constituted from the same basic material. “[G]odlike man”, whose earthly manifestation is but a “of our bud of humanity” (Ibid., 125), is seen as a universal traveler, following in all his shapes “his father’s call” (Ibid., 131).

In Herder’s speculations of powers, we can see the demand for a removal of an obstacle that hinders the morphological and genealogical progressionism of *Ideas*. The goal toward which the Herderian narrative of creation moves is limited, in the theological-Biblical framework imposed on natural history, by the conviction of the constancy of species and the finality of Creation. Herder is struggling with the problem that the story he is reconstructing ends before it begins. It is a desire resembling d’Alembert’s dream that is confronted with “facts” and finds a way around them in the distinction of powers. In Book 5 of *Ideas*, it is not powers that serve organizations but, on the contrary, organizations serve powers that are formed according to the exigencies of an occurrence unaffected by temporality (at least in its extension). Bodies pave the way for a project with an unforeseeable outcome. As the glorification of the human shape moves toward the divine, its transformations are not void of a *telos*, and yet, the goal is the way itself. The task is infinite, and the true challenge lies in the process of its solution. What guarantees this shift of emphasis is the attention paid to powers, whose history overwrites organizations just as, in the rhetoric of modern genetics, “programme” (Jacob 1970, 2)²³ overwrites life or the “reproduction of invariant information” overwrites “teleonomic structures” (Monod 1970, 17).²⁴ It must be declared at this point, to avoid any further ahistorical parallels or conclusions, that the contemporary relevance of Herder’s dream is hereby exhausted. Afterwards, Herder returns to roads already travelled by other thinkers in the period, the roads of potential life on other planets and of palingenesis, and he (very tellingly) stops at man as the point of reference for all other configurations of powers and bodily formation. Also, and this is the intended moral of the story, his dream remains in the confusing openness of speculations. A few years later, it will be one of Herder’s readers, Carl Friedrich Kielmeyer, who will force Herder’s aerial analogies concerning powers into the hard realm of observation and professional scholarship. (Kielmeyer 1793)

In Herder’s storiless narratives, there is potential – the potential of contradiction. In view of recent attempts in the philosophy of science at integrated or even holistic approaches, one looks at similar occurrences in a past on the other

²³ “The organism [...] becomes the realization of a programme prescribed by its heredity.”

²⁴ “[W]e shall arbitrarily choose to define the essential teleonomic project as consisting in the transmission from generation to generation of the invariance content characteristic of the species.” (Ibid., 14). It can be added that even chance, so constitutive for Monod, is not entirely absent from Herder’s system.

side of the divide of modernity with a mixture of nostalgia and envy. Perhaps what has happened in recent interdisciplinary experiments and declarations of intent has also been a similar testing of the consequences of what is thinkable? Who knows? And who knows whether the preliminary stage of progress, before it all started, contains allusions to what lies beyond progress and history (See Baudrillard 1986)? These, however, and with reference to Herder, I prefer to leave unsaid.

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CONTENTS

Foreword	7
HISTORY AND SOCIETY	9
GÁBOR GYÁNI Time in Historical Narratives and Beyond	11
ENDRE HÁRS Of Progress, before It all Started. Herder and the Natural History of the Human Being	22
MIHÁLY VAJDA Farewell to the Beautiful Future	33
CSILLA GÁBOR Meditation: Text – Practice – Occurrence	41
ZSOMBOR TÓTH The Making of Mohács... Occurrence, Regional Discourse and the Building of “National Past” in Comparative History. A Case Study	52
GYÖRGY KÖVÉR The Investigating Judge, the Pathologist and the Historian. The Narrators of the Tiszaeszlár Case	69
TÖHÖTÖM Á. SZABÓ How Does the Story Take Shape between Events and Ethnographic Interpretation?	84
IOANA BOTH The Return of Literary History	95
ATTILA HUNYADI Collective and Communicative Narratives of Memory. National Eponyms and Jubilees of Firms in the Economic History of Transylvania at the Turn of 19 th –20 th centuries	107
ÉVA GYIMESI Parallel Narratives	121
ÉVA ARGEJÓ The Legend of the State Security Glance	129
CRISTINA ANISESCU AND ADELINA ȘTEFAN Integrating the Occurrence into the Reconstructed Narrative of a Securitate File	142
DÉNES MÁTHÉ About the Style of Editorials under Dictatorship	156
MEDIA, ETHICS, CULTURE	167
K. LUDWIG PFEIFFER Imagination, Imaginary, and (F)Actuality	169
ÁGNES GAGYI Occurrences in the Manufacturing of Social Imagination	185
ISTVÁN BERSZÁN Historical Criticism – Orientation in Time(s)	193
JÁNOS BOROS Reason and History	206
AUREL TEODOR CODOBAN The New Paradigm of Communication: from Persuasion, to Manipulation and Seduction	217
JOLÁN ORBÁN Touching as a Philosophical and Artistic Event – Derrida, Nancy, Hantai	226
CĂLIN ANDREI MIHĂILESCU E-vent	236

ION MANOLESCU	
Cognitive Science and Literature. What Does the Mind Read?	242
CORIN BRAGA	
Positivist, Phenomenological and Experiential Anthropology	254
KRISTÓF FENYVESI	
Body, Interpretation and Epistemology – Friedrich Nietzsche’s Perspective	
Turn as a Catastrophe	264
GYÖNGYI ORBÁN	
The Happening of Truth	273
GYULA BOTOND	
Consciousness, Medium, Media – Reality Constructing	282
MÁRTA GRABÓCZ	
Recurrent Formulas of Narrativity in Music and in Extra-Musical Genres	292
BÁLINT VERES	
Occurrence in Music – Music in the Occurrence	306
INTERCROSSING AND PASSAGE	315
ÁGNES PETHŐ	
Deconstructing Cinema as a Narrative Medium in Jean-Luc Godard’s	
<i>Histoire(s) du cinéma</i>	317
IZABELLA FÜZI	
Image and Event in Recent Hungarian Film (The Man from London,	
Delta, Milky Way)	331
ZSOLT BEKE	
An Exhibition in the Name of Openness	342
ANDREA CSILLA ZÓLYA	
Intermediality in Literary Caricatures	352
GÁBOR TAMÁS MOLNÁR	
Fictionalizing Acts and Textual Events: “Bed and Breakfast” by William Gass	361
ZSUZSA SELYEM	
Where Is the Limit? And Why Is the “We” Telling the Story of the	
Second Vienna Award from 1940 in Pál Závada’s Novel <i>Idegen testünk</i>	
[Our Alien Body] Now, in 2008?	371
EDIT GILBERT	
Chances for a “New Realism”	377
PÉTER DEMÉNY	
Dawning Irony of the Graveyard	384
MIKLÓS TAKÁCS	
Trauma, Narrative Theory and Literature in the Interpretation	
of Tibor Cseres’ <i>Hideg napok</i>	391
ÁGNES KLÁRA PAPP	
Play, Festival or Carnival? Orientations in Literary Occurrence	399
IMRE HORVÁTH	
Towards a New Theological Style On Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Literary Criticism	408
RUXANDRA CESEREANU	
Cultural Practices in <i>The Thousand and One Nights</i>	420
ERVIN TÖRÖK	
Rhythm, Event and Aporia in Michael Kohlhaas	427
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	437
APPENDICES	451