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“BIS AUF DEN PUNKT DER LIEBE”: THE PHANTASMAGORICAL IMAGE OF THE SMALL IN ANTON REISER

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This essay proposes a reading of Karl Philipp Moritz’s Anton Reiser, focusing on the two component elements of its fundamental “Symbolik” (this is the standard translation of Goethe’s “das Symbolische” as used by Walter Benjamin when discussing works of art): material content and truth content. The first is approached via commentary, the second through an interrogation of the novel’s central enigma. Regarding material content, the essay discusses three quotations from Moritz selected by Benjamin in one of his radio ‘Hörmodelle’. I argue that these instantiate the novel’s ‘Symbolik’, and I call this the ‘phantasmagorical image of the small’. It manifests itself in the recurring motif of adventure and wandering, in the way the novel depicts the role of the imagination, and in the form in which it addresses the question of Reiser’s destiny. Regarding truth content, I concentrate first on a small but crucial detail. Reiser identifies with Werther in all ways except one, radically excluding the possibility of a love encounter. Anton Reiser’s enigma of the small is condensed in a phantasmagoria without any love-object. Second, I delineate the novel’s denouement in order to show that Anton Reiser offers, avant la lettre, a perspective on modernity alternative to that of the classic Bildungsroman.

KEYWORDS: *Karl Philipp Moritz, Anton Reiser, Walter Benjamin, Hörmodell, Modernity, Phantasmagoria, Bildungsroman, Die Leiden des jungen Werthers, The Small, Love, Master, People*

To Franco Moretti, the view of modernity represented by the classic *Bildungsroman* proposes a solution to the conflict that arises between the enlightened ideals of self-determination and the demands of socialization.¹ The *Bildungsroman* imposes a seamless overlap between an individual’s trajectory and its social integration into the community. It makes the world appear as a home immune to the aimlessness, meaninglessness or simple waste of life. Real homes are the spaces where everyday life tranquilly takes place. Indeed, one of the *Bildungsroman*’s main tasks is to show how pleasurable life can be in what Goethe called, in *Wilhelm Meister*, the ‘little

¹ Franco Moretti, ‘The Comfort of Civilization’, in id., *The Way of the World. The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), pp. 15–73.

world': a closed and miniature fairy-tale scene where the traits of characters coincide with the general order of things. This is a world perceived as symbolically compact, respectful of 'natural' inequalities and fundamentally non-conflictual. In it relationships form a stable and legitimate system, discrepancies disappear, and everybody both belongs and conforms. The social totality provides an overarching meaning to its different elements.

The *Bildungsroman* advances this view of modernity through the idea that the individual's gradual growth and formation is guaranteed by the control of the imagination. This is because the imagination is the source of two errors that impede the youth's path to maturity — that prevent the integration of the part into the whole. These errors are, for Moretti, twofold: restlessness and an intensity that exceeds meaning. The imagination is risky and dangerous, uncontrollable. It does not fit with a conception of the world in which the system takes care of everything, a fundamental harmony reigns, and everyone speaks the same language. The classic *Bildungsroman* narrates a view of modernity, Moretti concludes, according to which the French Revolution could have been avoided or, less counterfactually, ignored in the irreversibility of its effects. It developed, not accidentally, in Germany, where the revolution had no chance of success.

My objective in this article is to concentrate on Moritz's novel *Anton Reiser* in order to show that it subverts, even before the advent of the classic *Bildungsroman*, the view of modernity and enlightenment represented by this genre. What fundamentally characterizes the novel is the fact that it contains at its nucleus what I would like to call the phantasmagorical image of the small: constant movement, the representation of an infinite division of space, and the mixture of imagination and reality. This image is essential to Reiser's subjectivity, to the form and content of his dreams, wanderings, expectations and encounters with destiny.

In Section 1, I argue, following Walter Benjamin, that the phantasmagorical image of the small constitutes the novel's "Symbolik": that which binds its material content and truth content.² Material content is approached via commentary and deals with a novel's structure, compositional technique, and the selection of its main motifs. Truth content is not so easily perceptible and only appears, with the passing of time and thanks to the work of the critic, as an unresolvable enigma. I also provide here a preliminary commentary on the three quotations by Moritz transcribed by Benjamin in a radio 'Hörmodell' broadcast by Radio Berlin on the 16th February 1932. These citations succinctly condense the image of the small that I see as central to the novel. Very briefly, the first deals with the relationship between imagination and rationality; the second is an image of the infinitely small that conveys Reiser's desire, but also ultimately his fear, of being at home with himself — what the narrator calls his destiny; and the third enacts a twist upon the second and conceives the transient moment, represented as a small home, as the only real thing. Benjamin's 'Hörmodell' also furnishes us with a first historical contextualization of *Anton Reiser* in the new literary culture emerging in Germany at the time of its writing.

Section 2 further analyses the novel's 'Symbolik', instantiated in the three quotations, as providing us with a theoretical framework that I term the dialectic between

² Walter Benjamin, 'Goethes Wahlverwandschaften', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), I 1, 123–201 (p. 152).

Enlightenment and Romanticism. With respect to the material content, I also show here that the 'Symbolik' manifests itself in Reiser's many adventures and wanderings in social space, and by definitively structuring the novel from beginning to end. The first quotation embodies the depiction of Reiser as someone who, in an eminently enlightened way, tries to determine his life according to his own understanding of it, using his romantic imagination, however, to an exaggerated degree. The second citation illustrates what the narrator conceives as Reiser's destiny, his own particular being-in-the-world. This destiny is framed as a series of movements hither and thither within the same recurrent structure of a repeated event, with neither progress nor development. I also argue that the third citation effectively inverts the second, and suggest a reading of the novel that opens up the possibility of dealing with destiny without ever being able to totally break free from it. Finally, and most importantly, I show how the novel reveals that the imagination's two errors, restlessness and intensity, cannot in any way be mastered. *Anton Reiser's* 'Symbolik' subverts the view of modernity represented by the classic *Bildungsroman* because, as a result of the infinite proliferation of the image of the small, there is never an overarching meaning or integrating totality in which one can find a lasting home in the world, a fully pleasurable life. The only occasional homeland is the transient *Augenblick* that disrupts one's destiny.

Section 3 probes further into the commentary of the novel's material content in order to gradually approach its truth content. I introduce here the concept of the phantasmagorical in order to describe the image of the small, and also offer a brief historical contextualization of the use of this concept in Germany in the late eighteenth century. What I find absolutely intriguing in the novel, and here resides the key to its 'Symbolik', is that Reiser identifies with Werther in every aspect except, ironically, one: the possibility of a love encounter is radically excluded. Referring to a comparison that Werther makes between a lightless magic lantern and a loveless world, I argue that the enigma of the infinitely small in *Anton Reiser* can be reduced to precisely the image of a magic lantern that contains no object of love. Reiser's sorrows, precisely because of their infinite character, are of a radically different kind to Werther's. And, in relation to them, I also analyse here the function of the small and singular obstacles and accidents that regularly confront him.

Anton Reiser testifies to an extreme existence that virtually excludes pleasure and any idea of integration into the social whole. In Section 4, I argue that its central enigma, which also shines through at the end of the novel, offers an alternative view of modernity to that of the classic *Bildungsroman*, one that we can only perceive today, with the passing of time. The classic *Bildungsroman* was written as a disavowal of the French Revolution. This revolution proclaimed the suppression of all established authorities and privileges, and did so in the name of the people and the nation; immediately being succeeded, however, by Napoleon's paradoxical defence and mastery of it in the name of military conquest over peoples. The novel's enigmatic last sentence — according to which everybody belongs to a 'zerstreute Herde'³ — is more radical than what the revolution promulgated and achieved. It defends a perspective on modernity from which all beings stand on an equally

³ The expression, of course, comes from Jeremiah 50:17.

scattered footing, for which there are no masters and, still more importantly, no unified people.

In making explicit and analysing the central enigma within its symbolic construction (the emptiness of the magic lantern), and in bringing to light the way its striking and curious ending can serve as a new universalization of the modern condition, this article ultimately attempts to show why *Anton Reiser* is still so powerfully and profoundly alive for us today.

I

Different commentators on *Anton Reiser* have shown the centrality to the novel of the motifs of space and movement. These motifs are threefold, and all relate to Reiser's subjectivity: having to do either with his association of ideas and images with the locations traversed by his wanderings; with his feelings of openness or confinement, expansion or contraction; or with his perception of proximity and distance, which Moritz denominated in his *Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde* with the technical term 'Gesichtspunkt' — something that is often accompanied by romantic affliction.⁴ In a similar fashion, the text uses verbs ('schweben', for instance) that allude to the constant movement hither and thither coterminous with Reiser's oscillatory moods and desires. Mark Boulby has shown that some of the novel's specific spatial symbols (especially walls and gates) have a central role in articulating the narrative's structure, and function as thresholds both for Reiser's life-trajectory in general and its different episodes. Recently, Andrew Cusack has utilized the Bakhtinian concept of the chronotope (in reference to the walled town, circumambulation and the excursion) to link Reiser's experiences of space and time with the activity of his imagination.⁵

Following Benjamin's terminology in his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, I want to argue that all of these motifs, as elements of Goethe's writing technique, constitute the novel's 'Symbolik'. Benjamin takes this term from Goethe himself. The 'Symbolik' is that which necessarily and indissolubly binds, and makes visible the binding of, the material and truth content of a genuine work of art. The material content of a novel is approached by an analysis of its technique and a minute

⁴ Catherine J. Minter, 'The Psychology of Association in Karl Philipp Moritz's *Anton Reiser*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 44 (2008), 67–75 (pp. 73–75); Edwin Zeydel, 'The Relation of K. P. Moritz's *Anton Reiser* to Romanticism', *Germanic Review*, 3 (1928), 319–20; August Langen, 'Karl Philipp Moritz' Weg zur symbolischen Dichtung', *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, 81 (1962), 169–218 (pp. 203–18); William G. Durden, 'Parallel Designs: Space, Time and Being in Karl Philipp Moritz's *Anton Reiser*', *Germanic Review*, 54 (1979), 67–71; Mark Boulby, *Karl Philipp Moritz: At the Fringe of Genius* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1979), p. 25; Eckehard Catholy, *Karl Philipp Moritz und die Ursprünge der deutschen Theaterleidenschaft* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1962), pp. 29–40; Monika Class, 'K. P. Moritz's Case Poetics: Aesthetic Autonomy Reconsidered', *Literature and Medicine*, 32 (2014), 46–73 (pp. 51–52); Raymond Immerwahr, '"Romantic" and its Cognates in England, Germany, and France before 1790', in *'Romantic' and its Cognates. The European History of a Word*, ed. by Hans Eichner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972), p. 74.

⁵ Faye Stewart, 'Literature and Loss, Death and Desire: Toward a Vocabulary of Queer Attraction in Karl Philipp Moritz's *Anton Reiser*', in *Karl Philipp Moritz: Signaturen des Denkens* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 45–64 (pp. 58–64); Andrew Cusack, 'The Biographical Imagination in Moritz's *Anton Reiser*: A Chronotopic Reading', *Orbis Litterarum*, 70 (2015), 234–62.

commentary on its main motifs. At the beginning of a work's history, material and truth content appear so united that the latter is indiscernible. Thus, neither contemporary commentators on a novel nor the author himself could have been aware of what remained hidden in it. With the passing of time, thanks to historical distance and the work of the critic, however, the genuine work of art is revealed to contain a truth content that is nowhere near as perceptible as its material content, one that only filters through as an unresolved enigma discernible in the technique. For Benjamin, the interpretation of what is curious and striking in the novel, of its material content, is prerequisite to the critic's delving into truth content. For the more significant the work, the more inconspicuously and intimately its material content and truth content are bound together. The critic then gradually moves on to inquire about the enigma of the novel's 'Symbolik', its central nucleus, and thereby becomes slowly capable of penetrating into the truth content.

In order to elucidate *Anton Reiser's* 'Symbolik', I would like to briefly concentrate on Benjamin's 'Hörmodell' 'Was die Deutschen lasen, während ihre Klassiker schrieben'. In my view, the three quotations from Moritz that Benjamin transcribes here very precisely encapsulate the novel's 'Symbolik'. The three most important characters in this 'Hörmodell' are Moritz himself and the voices of Enlightenment and Romanticism, duplicated by two 'Literaten'. A 'Sprecher' sets out the material background, which is also that of *Anton Reiser*: Germany's retarded development, with respect to other European countries, in industry and commerce. This context was thoroughly contradictory. The classical era of German literature and philosophy coexisted with massive amounts of inferior publications. The vindication of enlightenment cohabited with religious orthodoxy and superstition (the terms 'Lesewut' and 'Lesesucht', used by critics and pedagogues of all kinds, indicate a concern with the 'epidemic' of reading and its 'corrupting' enlightening effects). Traditional hierarchies, I would add, were also beginning to collapse; the world of work was changing at an incredible pace; and socialization, by means of the incremental assumption of a profession, was ceasing to be predictable, becoming defined instead by the logic of the erratic exploration of social space, often resulting in mere wandering and loss. The public world of urban centres was fragmented, composed of separate but overlapping groups in conflict, and a substantial portion of the population remained on the margins of social, economic, and political life. Finally, any possibility of full-scale domestic revolution was inhibited by this atomization of social life, the lack of a revolutionary 'Third Estate', and a considerable degree of anti-enlightenment subservience.

In one very important passage in the script, which can allow us to begin to approach *Anton Reiser's* 'Symbolik', the 'Literat' who defends the Enlightenment refers to an 'unvergleichliche Stelle' of Moritz's *Kinderlogik*. Moritz is attempting here to eliminate superstitious belief in gods by logically explaining their existence as a result of human imagination:

Die wirkliche Welt existiert zwar auch in der Idee des Menschen, aber die Ideenwelt unterscheidet sich dadurch, daß sie außer der Idee des Menschen gar nicht da ist. — In diese Ideenwelt gehören nun alle Erzählungen von Hexen und Gespenstern; alle Feenmärchen; auch gehört die ganze Mythologie oder Götterlehre dahin durch welche die Welt schon seit den ältesten Zeiten mit unzähligen neuen Wesen bevölkert worden ist, die außer der

Einbildungskraft des Menschen nirgends waren. — Dahin gehörte: Apollo, Mars, Minerva, Jupiter, und alle Götter und Göttinnen im Olymp.⁶

This extremely interesting passage introduces a problem central to *Anton Reiser*, that of the relationship between imagination and reality. It is from another of Moritz's books, but expresses very well the role that the imagination is accorded in the novel. What it makes clear, in classic enlightened fashion, is that stories about witches and ghosts, as well as myths about gods, belong to the world of ideas, do not exist outside of the imagination of human beings. Theirs is a purely imaginary and ideal existence. The passage also says, however, something about reality. Is reality defined as non-imaginary, as not belonging to the world of ideas? Yes, partially, but it also shares something with this world, namely, the fact that it belongs, although not entirely, to the ideas of human beings. The difference, then, between the real world and the purely imaginary world of ghosts and witches is that whereas the latter only exists in the ideas of human beings, the real world also exists beyond these. The real world exists both in the ideas of human beings and beyond them. It is worth noting at this point that both here and in *Anton Reiser*, Moritz fails to differentiate clearly between the ideas of human beings and the imagination. The passage could also be taken to mean, then, that the real world exists both in the imagination and beyond it. This interpretation is valid in the sense that Moritz, unlike Kant, does not differentiate between philosophical ideas, ideals as moral principles, and the 'Ideale der Sinnlichkeit', the fictional products of the imagination.⁷

A little later, Moritz himself intervenes in the discussion to say something that appears in the first part of *Anton Reiser*, as one of the many fruits of Reiser's vivid imagination:

Vielleicht ist es eine Schrulle. Aber es berührt mich ganz sonderbar, wie der Mann hier am Schluß zu sich zurückkehrt, bei sich selber zu Hause ist. Das ist immer meine größte Sehnsucht gewesen. Ich weiß, meine Herren, Sie können das nicht verstehen. Aber ich will Ihnen eine kleine Jugenderinnerung erzählen, die mich bei trübem Himmel noch jetzt manchmal heimsucht. Zehn Jahre war ich damals alt. Wenn dann der Himmel umwölkt und der Horizont kleiner war, fühlte ich eine Art von Bangigkeit, daß die ganze Welt wiederum mit eben einer solchen Decke umschlossen sei wie die Stube, worin ich wohnte. Und wenn ich dann mit meinen Gedanken über diese gewölbte Decke hinausging, kam mir diese Welt an sich viel zu klein vor und es dünkte mir, sie müsse wiederum in einer andern eingeschlossen sein und das immer so fort. (AR, 113)⁸

⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'Was die Deutschen lasen, während ihre Klassiker schrieben', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), VI, 641-70 (p. 654). Karl Philipp Moritz, *Versuch einer kleinen praktischen Kinderlogik*, in *Werke*, ed. by Heide Hollmer and Albert Meier (Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1997), II, 81-173 (p. 129). Further references will be given in the text as KL and page number.

⁷ Karl Philipp Moritz, *Anton Reiser*, in *Werke*, ed. by Heide Hollmer and Albert Meier (Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1999), I, 85-518 (pp. 159, 504). Further references will be given in the text as AR and page number; Martin L. Davies, 'The Theme of Communication in *Anton Reiser*: A Reflection on the Feasibility of the Enlightenment', *Oxford German Studies*, 12 (1981), 18-28 (p. 36).

⁸ 'Was die Deutschen lasen', pp. 656-57.

This is an image that conveys Reiser's fear of the small as something that is at first self-enclosed and suffocating, and that then opens and closes again, *ad infinitum*, as a necessary and abysmal chain of events. This is the novel's recurring motif, one that points to its central 'Symbolik', and it is important to remark that Benjamin adds that it is also Moritz's 'größte Sehnsucht'. It is a very good illustration of how the motifs of space and movement refer to Reiser's subjectivity, and how they are all products of his imagination. Moreover, the bringing together of fear and desire expresses what the novel terms destiny: the idea that Reiser's life is fatally determined by the miserable circumstances of his birth. This life is moved by a desire that produces a course of events that can only repeat themselves, and from which there appears to be no escape.

This image is interpreted by another character as a contradiction of the epoch. The Enlightenment was supposed to provide us with a home in which human freedom and mastery of the world unproblematically reign. It can easily also turn, however, towards turmoil and disquiet — towards a 'mise en abyme' logic in which the desire for a home reveals itself to be nothing more than an unfathomable and endless movement towards the self. What can be done? The second 'Literat' believes that rather than eradicating religion and belief, both should be combined with enlightenment and applied knowledge. Faced by the Enlightenment's self-contradiction, Moritz finds this amalgam more than a little comforting:

Das ist der richtige Weg und soll es auch sein. Denn in dem ganzen Umfang eines mächtigen Königreichs kann einer doch nur in einer Stadt und in der ganzen Stadt doch nur in einem Haus und in dem ganzen Haus doch nur in einem Zimmer jedesmal wirklich wohnen. Aber der Ort täuscht den Menschen wie die Zeit. Er glaubt, Jahre zu Leben, und lebt nur Augenblicke. Er glaubt, eine Stadt zu bewohnen, und bewohnt nur den jedesmaligen Fleck, wo er steht oder liegt, das Zimmer, worin er arbeitet, das Gemach, worin er schläft. (KL, 172)⁹

Benjamin selects here another passage from Moritz's *Kinderlogik* that serves as a counterbalance to the previous quotation. In my view, it is another paradigmatic illustration of the novel's 'Symbolik', this time in relationship with lived time. What is proposed is a further but different image of the home: this is perceived as small, a mere room, but it is also said to be the only real thing. The important nuance is that the little home is not described as a location where somebody is placed (the space between four walls), but instead as someone's life in the here and now. Life is an activity, working or sleeping, that is being performed anywhere by anybody at any transient moment. Space and time can be measured and partitioned, but they function to deceive us. Our own existence, life, is incapable of this; it simply is. It is thus false to believe in temporal and spatial divisions, years and kingdoms. It is only one's own life, the small home in the particular moment, that is real.

⁹ 'Was die Deutschen lasen', p. 657.

Some commentators on the novel have noticed its very particular understanding of the Romantic; others have put the emphasis on the narrator's defence of enlightenment; and, finally, still others have in my view correctly seen that what is at stake here is a mixture of elements of early German Romanticism and Enlightenment. *Anton Reiser* begins, for instance, with a preface that outlines the narrator's take on the problem of how to understand and deal with Reiser's excessive imagination. The book 'soll die vorstellende Kraft nicht verteilen, sondern sie zusammendrängen, und den Blick der Seele in sich selber schärfen' (AR, 86). The narrator admits that this is no easy task; and we will be told many times that the unleashed powers of imagination can produce, at best, self-deception and, at worst, vast amounts of suffering. With respect to this, Mark Boulby has written about the dual status of the book, the fact that it claims to be both 'ein psychologischer Roman' and 'eine Biographie'. He reminds us that the word 'Roman' connotes illusion, exaggeration, and the departure from reality; and also makes clear that Reiser's inclination towards 'Das Romanhafte' is intended to indicate what is 'fremd und wunderbar', 'sonderbar' (AR, 373), novel-like. Reiser's subjectivity, then, characterized by its constantly being at the threshold of delirium, and by its production of all kinds of daydreams as surrogates for real life, accounts for the book's double characterization.¹⁰ Indeed, I want to add that the term 'das Romantische' (AR, 504), as that which irresistibly attracts Reiser, and the adjective 'romantisch' (applied to dreams (AR, 301), his friend Philipp Reiser (AR 311), nature (AR, 387, 454), walks (AR, 491), views (AR, 475), his room (AR, 509) and, of course, ideas (AR, 332, 379) only appear in the novel in parts three and four, the closer we get to 'der eigentliche Roman seines Lebens' (AR, 286). The adjective refers to a way of seeing, and thus even life in general appears to him under its aspect (AR, 332). In all of these senses Moritz is similar to Wieland (the first German writer to use the adjective) in that he associates 'romantisch' with the imagination in order to both recognize and disapprove of its wondrous powers.¹¹ In sum, the term 'Roman' (and all of its derivations) belongs to a constellation of ideas that refer to the author's own classification of his text as a genre; to Reiser's subjectivity as prone to the heated sprouting of fantasies (occasionally cooled by the exercise of reason or the encounter with reality); to the idea of perpetual mobility; and to a point of view that casts the appearance of things in a dream-like and unconventional light. More generally, Edwin Z. Zeydel has clarified other elements that can be taken into account in order to relate the book to Romanticism: the access to nature via the imagination; the dispassionate and ideal-oriented effort to attain individualism (as against the passionate strivings of the *Sturm und Drang*); and the integration of emotion and reason.¹² The narrator indeed states that mysticism and metaphysics coincide precisely because the imagination can sometimes give birth to ideas like those produced by reason (AR, 377). These points remind us of the defence of Romanticism

¹⁰ Mark Boulby, 'Anton Reiser and the Concept of the Novel', *Lessing Yearbook*, 4 (1972), 183–96 (pp. 185–88).

¹¹ Immerwahr, "Romantic" and its Cognates in England, Germany, and France before 1790', pp. 53–84 (pp. 55–61).

¹² Davies, pp. 19, 37; Zeydel, pp. 295–327.

mounted by the second 'Literat' — of the way in which it connects and even unites what the Enlightenment considers as separate.

Anton Reiser also reflects the Enlightenment's preoccupation with education, socialization and the ideal of self-determination. Martin L. Davies has demonstrated that Moritz's research interests (aesthetics, stylistics, logic, education, travel) possess the scope of someone who adhered to the Enlightenment project, but that his two novels offer a critical perspective on this project, without ever coming to abandon it. As regards the hero, Davies recognizes in him two distinctive features of the Enlightenment. Firstly, he tries to acquire literacy in order to improve himself. Secondly, he manages, at least to a small extent, to exchange ideas with others in a productive way. These are the two ideals that Reiser pursues in the midst of a reactionary social system. As to the narrator, we recall that already in the preface to part one, right after he has admitted that concentrating on the faculty of the imagination is no easy task, he also advocates a pedagogical mission for his text, and declares that man has to direct his attention towards himself (AR, 86). Later on, he interrupts his story several times in order to address his reflections and moral hints to readers who are supposed to be educators. As Arnim Polster has shown, the book begins by situating itself amongst contemporary debates between late-Enlightenment German pedagogues about children's reading but goes on to offer a very distinctive perspective on this issue. Briefly, the attitude of these pedagogues was one of preoccupation and unease. It is true that, assuming this position, the narrator everywhere appears to be criticizing the reading habits of Reiser, which he considers to be the result of the problem of addiction. In its decoupling of hero and narrator, the novel points to Reiser's lack of *Bildung* in order to suggest *ex negativo* its proper course. The novel also explains, however, that it is Reiser's desolate upbringing, and the different damaging authorities that he encounters, that account for his numerous pathologies, including that of the compulsiveness of his reading. And, in addition to his critical stance, the narrator also shows how Reiser develops his own sense of judgment and taste. Moreover, he presents Reiser's own point of view. This is certainly frequently inflected by a lack of self-esteem, by depression and alienation, but it also reveals itself capable of autonomously distinguishing between good and bad, and of self-confidently orienting the activity of reading in order to obtain pleasure and intellectual stimulation. Polster thus concludes that *Anton Reiser* evolves from an Enlightenment view of childhood to a Romantic one.¹³

Reiser is someone who desperately attempts to determine his life according to his own understanding of it, as the Enlightenment project proclaims. Yet the novel also asks what happens when our ideas are predominantly influenced by a wildly 'romantisch' outlook. In my view, this problem is better framed if we again take into account the novel's central 'Symbolik' as instantiated in the three quotations

¹³ Arnim Polster, 'On the Use and Abuse of Reading: Karl Philipp Moritz and the Dialectic of Pedagogy in Late-Enlightenment Germany', in *Impure Reason: Dialectic of Enlightenment in Germany*, ed. by Daniel W. Wilson and Robert C. Holub (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), pp. 465–84 (p. 472). See also Rolf Selbmann, 'Karl Philipp Moritz: "Anton Reiser" (1785/90)', in *Der Deutsche Bildungsroman* (Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler), pp. 49–57 (pp. 54–55); Michael Minden, 'Agathon, Anton Reiser, Hyperion', in *The German Bildungsroman* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), pp. 60–126 (p. 84).

selected by Benjamin. This traverses the whole book, explaining its technique and main motifs: its material content. The Enlightenment cannot fully control the imagination (Romanticism) because, according to this 'Symbolik', these two phenomena always have to be conceived as being dialectically interrelated. In *Anton Reiser*, the two errors of the imagination, restlessness and intensity of meaning, cannot in any way be mastered. Indeed, in relation to this, the novel's 'Symbolik' also constitutes the very specific way in which it anticipates the three traits of youth, mobility and self-exploration that Moretti identifies as central to the *Bildungsroman*.¹⁴ Finally, and most importantly, this 'Symbolik' defines *Anton Reiser* as radically subversive, *avant la lettre*, of the hegemonial view of modernity represented by the *Bildungsroman* (once again following Moretti's terms).

The first quotation crystallizes the many modes of description of Reiser's raging imagination. It states that stories about myths and ghosts only exist in the imagination and ideas of human beings, but that reality exists in both these domains, and also beyond them. The first claim is exemplified by Reiser's listening, as a boy, to his mother's and aunt's fairy-tales about witches and spells. The latter claim is fleshed out in two ways: firstly, the narrator never depicts the imagination as a stable entity or complete vision; secondly, he describes its relationship with reality (and with rationality) in many, sometimes contradictory, ways. Indeed, the novel thematizes the fact that the imagination, and as a consequence Reiser's life, is never to be comprehended in its entirety, or that when this occurs it is only for a short space of time. For example, in part one, on a solitary walk, Reiser reaches the gate of Brunswick and remembers an earlier day when he arrived there with his father. A peculiar emotion overwhelms him: the image of the whole appears to be infinitely pierced by the infinitely small. At other moments, the imagination is depicted as an impetus, a constant flow of events functioning to expand the scope of Reiser's ideas and create (crucially, to the point of insanity) alternative worlds.

This perpetual movement of the imagination is also manifested by the novel's expression, in many contradictory ways, of its relationship with reality (and rationality). Sometimes, fantasy is featured in conflict with reality, as if they were two irreconcilable forces. At other times, there is an attempt to place fantasy under the control of what we might call the reality principle. There are also a few moments in which fantasy is described as being held back by the scrutiny of rationality and education, or by the rule of Reiser's intellectual powers. And, finally, Reiser's fantasy appears much more frequently as possessing the upper hand with respect to the influence of real things. It is often characterized as being inflamed with rapture, heated and excessive, and as being directed to delightful visions of the future. It expands the breadth of Reiser's soul to encompass within it a more radiant world, one composed of dreams that counterpoise the misery of everyday existence. Sometimes it produces hope, joy and pleasure, but mostly it comes at a high price and results in self-delusion and a heavy load of sorrow. It opens up his

¹⁴ Moretti, 'The Bildungsroman as Symbolic Form', in *The Way of the World*, pp. 3–13 (p. 4–5).

mind, enlarges the scope of his vision, and provides him with an alternative world. Finally, however, to his great dismay, it bursts like a bubble.

What is at stake here is also the motion of Reiser's own self. He constantly experiences transitions: from dreaming to wakefulness (and vice versa), from one state of mind to another (from hopefulness to hopelessness), from place to place in his journeys, from job to job. These transitions can occupy a few pages, a number of long paragraphs, or a single sentence. Sometimes the narrator explicitly refers to the 'Übergang' from one state to another, as in the beautiful reflections in part one in which he tells us that we can begin to distinguish dreaming from waking only when things start to fall into order and place (AR, 159–60).

The many and contradictory movements within and beyond the imagination that are encapsulated in the first quotation are not only characteristic of what Moritz says about the going astray of the enormous powers of the imagination. As expressions of the 'Symbolik' of the novel, they are also essential to its plot. This can be clarified by considering the two other images from Moritz that appear in Benjamin's script.

With a few essential brushstrokes, the second image represents Reiser's perpetual mobility, his 'romantisch' and adventurous life, as a series of recurring encounters with what the novel calls his destiny. It characterizes Reiser as an infant and a youth; what is at stake is his own distinctive way of being-in-the-world. This is made manifest by the narrator, who says, right after he has coined the image, that Reiser himself (in stark contrast to all of his other experiences up until this moment) has never read or heard anything on this subject; it is something that pertains only to him. I should stress one important detail, namely, that in the 'Hörmodell' Benjamin makes Moritz/Reiser insist on the incomprehensibility of this passage to his interlocutors. What is in question here is the task that the novel sets itself in the preface to part one, namely, self-exploration, what the quotation refers to as the return to himself, as if he were his own home. Reiser's longing for a home, however, is what terrifies him the most. Why is this? Because his desire and fear together express his destiny as an inescapable movement, a never-ending journey, within and beyond the narrow confines of his tiny world. In the same way that the imagination reveals itself to be in constant movement in relationship to something that is both within and beyond it, Reiser's existence is structured as a movement within and beyond the diminutive confines of a home.

This structure traverses the entire book because it constitutes its central 'Symbolik'. Take, for example, the opening pages. Part one begins with a description of the world that preceded Reiser's birth: his father's religious beliefs and the oppressive atmosphere that ruled over his family and, by extension, his series of first acquaintances. This atmosphere is concentrated in the house where Reiser's father lives, that of his mentor Herr von Fleischbein, about which it is said on the novel's first page that it 'von den ihrigen durch eine hohe Mauer geschieden war, die es von allen Seiten umgab'; '[es] machte für sich eine kleine Republik aus' (AR, 87). The pietist books of Madame Guion reign here with their doctrines of the return to nothingness and the eradication of selfhood. Reiser's father reads these doctrines; his mother the Bible. The child begins to read as well, and this opens up for him an entirely new world. In the first place, he reads anything that he can get his hands on; later, he discovers the virtues of a good story; and, in the last instance, when

he is eleven years old, he comes across 'verbotne Lektüre' (AR 108): romances, of course. His parents constantly fight, and he is constantly miserable, finding an outlet in the design of destructive games. Benjamin says that when someone is threatened by the real world, and encounters no form of escape, he attempts to remove the pain by playing with the image of this world in a reduced form.¹⁵ Reiser burns down tiny paper houses, and leads an entire dwarf army into destruction. The dread of confinement and the search for wider horizons are his life's constants. After having read one of the romances, he imagines himself to constitute the centre of a small but ever increasing circle of people, which then expands to include animals, plants and inanimate beings, in order ultimately for everything, all existing beings, to end up moving around him.

A little later on, Reiser's existence is described as if it were contained within a small confined space (an island, or the little village where he lives). The imagination of this space produces bliss, but he needs to flee this (AR, 111–12). Reiser's life (and thus the writing of the novel itself) moves ever onward and back as if it were pushed and pulled by the recurrent expansions and contractions of his soul. We read that, in Hanover, he attends Latin classes, that this experience allows him to ascend to a great height, but then suddenly stops, precipitating a dizzy descent (AR, 120–21). A few pages afterwards, we see him travelling to Brunswick with his father, and on stage after stage of the journey are confronted by the constant movements hither and thither ('Hin- und Herschwanken') of his soul (AR, 124). We accompany Reiser in the shifting movements of his life: from one space (a drying-room) that is so small and narrow that he can only crawl inside it (AR, 143–44) to another (a Gothic church) characterized by a lofty vault and long windows (AR, 145); from the workshop where he works (a dark and terrifying chamber) to the pleasant view outside, which Reiser considers to be his territory; from one village, which at a certain point fills him with claustrophobic feelings, to the next; from a relationship with an authority figure that becomes increasingly intense, to this same relationship now conceived, following its rupture, as vanishing inexorably into the distance (AR, 138). Once again, this series of transitions do not follow each other in a linear pattern. They are instead movements to and fro, shifting positions of the same recurrent structure, without any progress: Reiser's destiny.

The third passage is another instantiation of the 'Symbolik'. It is based on an image that is similar to the second, but which can be juxtaposed to it, and in the final instance can serve as its counterpoint and reverse. Spaces gradually become here smaller and smaller as the order of subsumption proceeds: a kingdom, a country, a town, a house, a room. This can be read as an illustration of a way of dealing with the structure delineated in the second image, the structure of the destiny that (apparently inescapably) awaits Reiser. If space and time as structuring elements are considered to be deceptive, then might it not also be possible for the fateful structure that gives a pattern to Reiser's life to reveal itself, at certain times, as not entirely consistent? What proves the deception of this structure, as this passage states, is the sheer act of living (sitting, lying down, sleeping and working) in a minute and transient moment.

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'Altes Spielzeug', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), IV I, 511–15 (p. 514).

This shows that the structure of Reiser's destiny, the multiple transitions within his imagination and the manifold motions of his self, is not a purely logical construction existing in the abstract. This structure is something that is first and foremost lived and, as such, needs to be dealt with, something that is open to the twists and uncertainties characteristic of the transient moment. Elliott Schreiber has described Moritz as a thinker of the sublime 'Augenblick'.¹⁶ The novel's 'Symbolik' can serve to explain precisely why. It is clear that, from the very first page, the narrator sets himself the task of showing that Reiser's life is unbearable, for most of the time at least, as a result of his miserable destiny. The effects of this are undoubtedly appalling, and Reiser often reaches a level of abjection that converts him into an absolute social outcast. This is not, however, the whole story. In *Einbahnstraße*, Benjamin enigmatically wrote that 'das Vermögen der Phantasie ist die Gabe, im unendlich Kleinen zu interpolieren, jeder Intensität als Extensivem ihre neue gedrängte Fülle zu erfinden'.¹⁷ Doesn't this idea perfectly fit Reiser himself? His powerful imagination (the constant creation of images, the everlasting interest in stories, books and theatre, whether good, bad or indifferent) allows him to experience life with an incredible degree of intensity. This intensity is a sign of those moments in life that allow for the possibility of destiny being shown to be deceptive. These are exceptional instants in which Reiser's life becomes a life of incomparable plenitude. They are indicated in the novel in several ways. Firstly, through the detailed description (at crucial moments when everything appears to be dislocated or out of place) of either Reiser's surroundings (diminutive dens, labyrinthine towns, romantic landscapes) or his wavering emotions and extreme experiences; experiences that, as we have seen, can reach the point of madness. Secondly, through the explicit signals locating the arrival of a decisive moment in his life (AR, 421), or an alteration of his gloomy destiny (AR, 153, 183, 187, 374). Thirdly, through the italicization in the text of certain words or sentences that say something entirely specific about Reiser's thoughts, experiences and fragile integration into society. Fourthly and finally, through the rhythm and style of the text's composition, which conveys the perpetual self-collapsing of the narrative (and of Reiser himself) in ever ascending and descending arcs. The intensity of life, and the revelation that follows from this, that destiny can sometimes be deceptive, do not amount, however, to the possibility of totally breaking free. Destiny must be confronted face to face, assumed to the very end, something has to be made of it. The image of the small as something infinitely contained in something larger leaves a space precisely for contingency: at any possible instant, something new can appear.

Anton Reiser's 'Symbolik' reveals that the most intense and powerful moments are those in which Reiser appears in radical solitude, in absolute disconnection from the social world. It is here that we genuinely approach the mystery of his self: his fundamental restlessness and excessive imagination. It is here too that Reiser confronts his destiny as something crystallized in the image of a cavity confined within the expansive openness of nature/society/humanity/the earth/the world/life. From the perspective of this image, this openness is viewed as a

¹⁶ Elliott Schreiber, 'Toward an Aesthetics of the Sublime "Augenblick": Moritz reading *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*', in *The Topography of Modernity: Karl Philipp Moritz and the Space of Autonomy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), pp. 15–35.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'Einbahnstraße', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV 1, 83–148 (p. 117).

proliferation of progressively and serially augmenting spaces that, at the same time, gradually disappear from Reiser's gaze into the distance. The small defines a fantastic perspective that impels him to perceive himself as absolutely insignificant, forsaken and contemptible in the midst of an infinite vastness, but it also affords him the intense and wondrous sensation that his proximity to, and disappearance into, nothingness is the only real thing; his only real home.

We should now recall Moretti's definition of the view of modernity represented by the *Bildungsroman*. For in contradistinction to this view, *Anton Reiser's* 'Symbolik' offers its own specific and alternative view of modernity, the contours of which we can certainly discern more easily, with historical distance, than its contemporaries. Firstly, and crucially before the advent of the *Bildungsroman*, it shows that *Bildung* cannot control the imagination. Secondly, it proposes a view of the world in which, as a consequence of the never-ending multiplication of the small, there is neither the possibility of creating an overarching meaning nor of organically integrating the part into the whole. In this infinite world, the home in which one lives is pure restlessness, a continuous movement beyond its confines, the infinite source of horror and suffering. Finally, it also shows that the *Augenblick* is, at times, the only homeland: the intense and transient moment that disrupts one's destiny and proves the deceptiveness of kingdoms, countries, towns, homes and, I would add, peoples.

3

The real and the imaginary switch positions at an incredibly fast pace in Reiser's intensely feverish experiences. These movements are, I would claim, phantasmagorical effects of the image of the small. Reiser is located at some threshold or interstice; or from inside a room, he looks outside; or he leaves a town and casts a glance back. In these liminal instants, the inside and the outside, and the light and darkness that accompany his visions, fade and collapse into one another. The result is an intoxicating illusion that reveals the core of Reiser's deeply felt fears and desires, and converts them into simultaneous pleasures and sufferings. In fact, at two points in part three the narrator explicitly refers to the specific optical mechanisms that could account for the creation of this image. As Reiser walks out of the gate of Hanover, and along the river romantic ideas overwhelm him and he sees the town, with its four towers and surrounding ramparts, in the distance, 'wie ein Bild in einem optischen Kasten' (AR, 332). A little later, as night descends, he walks to a mountain near Hanover in the company of two friends. They sleep at an inn, and on awakening 'so waren alle die schönen Bilderchen aus der Zauberlaterne verschwunden; die kahle Wirklichkeit mit allen ihren unvermeidlichen Unannehmlichkeiten stand wieder vor ihrer Seele da' (AR, 408).

It is worth recalling here that in Leipzig, in 1774, Schröpfer used a magic lantern for the first time in order to create for a group of people, as part of a necromantic Masonic ritual, the optical illusion of the ghosts of the dead. Shortly afterwards, as Terry Castle has shown, the use of magic lanterns extended to the production of public shows that 'pedagogically' revealed the technical mechanisms of their own illusions, thus supposedly serving as a mode of enlightenment against ghostly superstition and conjuring. The paradoxical effect of these exhibitions, however, was to bring into being apparitions convincing enough to terrify the spectators. A number of monographs, essays and pamphlets were published criticising or

defending the thaumaturgical powers of the magic lantern. Stefan Andriopoulos has linked this phenomenon with the 'epidemic' of reading. In the exploding print market, ghost stories proliferated, and women, adolescents and children were viewed as their potential addressees. Pedagogical warnings were attached concerning the deceptive powers of the optical media and the fearful consequences of an unmanageable imagination. Kant and Schiller offered contradictory conceptual accounts of the role of the appearances produced by the magic lantern, and their subsequent repercussions in ghost literature.¹⁸ All of this cannot fail to remind us of the contradictory roles accorded to reading and the imagination in *Anton Reiser*. On the one hand, they need to be governed by pedagogical and rational means, or by the encounter with the reality principle. On the other, they are constantly being released from these constraints by the overpowering phantasmagorical effects of the small on Reiser's subjectivity. In a different context (referring to the fetishistic character of Wagner's music), but in a way that supports this reading of the small as phantasmagoria, Adorno wrote that aesthetic diminution precisely creates the phantasmagorical effects of delusion and the exaltation of dreams.¹⁹

What fundamentally interests us, however, and here we delve more into the novel's truth content, is one very diminutive detail. Goethe too resorted to the image of the magic lantern in *Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers*, a book that for some time serves as Reiser's indispensable companion. In one of his letters to Wilhelm (18 July), Werther exclaims:

Wilhelm, was ist unserem Herzen die Welt ohne Liebe! Was eine Zauberlaterne ist, ohne Licht! Kaum bringst du das Lämpchen hinein, so scheinen dir die buntesten Bilder an deine weiße Wand! Und wenn's nichts wäre als das, als vorübergehende Phantome, so machts doch immer unser Glück, wenn wir wie frische Jungen davor stehen und uns über die Wundererscheinungen entzücken.²⁰

At another point, Werther writes to Lotte and says that in comparison with her the world around him seems like nothing more than an optical illusion (20 January) (*LJW*, 65). Finally, in another letter to Wilhelm, he declares that his mental image of Lotte is a mere apparition (6 December) (*LJW*, 92). Isabel A. White has listed all the different ways in which Reiser identifies with Werther.²¹ Goethe's book resonates with his ideas and feelings concerning solitude, dreams, the enjoyment of nature etc. Ironically, however (and here my argument departs from White) it appears as totally foreign to him in one, and clearly the most crucial, aspect:

¹⁸ Laurent Mannoni, 'The Phantasmagoria', *Film History*, 8 (1996), 390–415 (p. 392); Terry Castle, 'Phantasmagoria: Spectral Technology and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie', *Critical Inquiry*, 15 (1988), 26–61 (p. 30); Stephan Andriopoulos, *Ghostly Apparitions: German Idealism, the Gothic Novel, and Optical Media* (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 2013), pp. 73–103.

¹⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Versuch über Wagner', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, XIII, pp. 7–148 (pp. 82–91).

²⁰ Goethe, 'Die Leiden des jungen Werther', in *Werke Hamburger Ausgabe* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998), VI, 7–124 (p. 39). Further references will be given in the text as *LJW* and page number.

²¹ Isabel A. White, 'Die zu oft wiederholte Lektüre des Werthers': Responses to Sentimentality in Moritz's *Anton Reiser*', *Lessing Yearbook*, 26 (1994), 93–112.

'Kurz, Reiser glaubte sich mit allen seinen Gedanken und Empfindungen, bis auf den Punkt der Liebe, im Werther wider zu finden' (AR, 336). The most striking thing about Reiser, as the narrator explicitly states in a number of places, is that he completely excludes from his life, as if it were absolutely unthinkable, the figure of a beloved and loving woman. Reiser understands nothing about sexual pleasures, anatomical sexual differences, or the potentials (and the potential sufferings) of loving and being loved. Is it not amazing that his most radical alter ego (somebody who shares his own name and that of Moritz, his friend Philipp Reiser) lives his life as a series of romantic encounters with women? For Anton, the details of Philipp's amorous accounts are tedious, and Werther's sufferings incomprehensible. His sorrows are of an entirely different kind. His imagination is extremely powerful, but it reaches its limit precisely here: in the failure to imagine a woman's love. If we return to Werther's assertion that there has to be love in the world in the same way that there has to be light in a magic lantern, then could we not say that in Reiser's own magic lantern, with all its forceful and phantasmagorical effects created by the image of the small, the only thing that is certain is that love has no place? A very beautiful image, which resembles that of an apparition within a magic lantern, conveys this thought very vividly. Reiser is in church (an old Gothic building whose windowpanes are so thickly painted that only a faint light shines through them (AR, 145)) attending Pastor Paulmann's service. A very young woman, dressed in black with pale cheeks, steps up to the altar to receive her communion. Reiser never sees her again, but 'ihr Bild ist nie in seiner Seele verloschen' (AR, 151). With this image in mind, we can briefly return to the quotation from Benjamin's *Einbahnstraße* that I earlier used to elucidate the connection between the imagination and the small. It continues thus: 'kurz, jedes Bild zu nehmen, als sei es das des zusammengelegten Fächers, das erst in der Entfaltung Atem holt und mit der neuen Breite die Züge des geliebten Menschen in seinem Innern aufführt'.²² Both Goethe's magic lantern, in its inner light, and Benjamin's fan, in its infinitesimal folds, contain the tiny image of the beloved woman. This image appears a single time in *Anton Reiser* (the woman's pale face is the light in the dark of her dress and the church's magic lantern) only to then disappear forever.

Inside the home that Reiser longs for and the magic lantern that produces all his life's phantasmagorical effects, there is never a woman to love and from whom to receive love. And might we not say that this is profoundly connected to his proclivity to conceive his life, aspirations, and the world around him as a vertiginous and infinite succession of always vanishing little homes? With this very peculiar image of the small, Reiser translates into his own existence the ideas of self-annihilation and death that he learnt from Madame Guion's pietistic doctrine. Reiser is always on the verge of falling into the abyss of his own tormented subjectivity. The image also represents the possibility of 'großen Veränderungen, Auswanderungen und Revolutionen' (AR, 105), as when we read in part one, for instance, that he enjoys burning little paper houses and contemplating the ashes. What actually saves Reiser, then, from self-annihilation, or from complete self-loss in his creation of delirious phantasmagorias? Contrary to what the narrator construes, this 'salvation' occurs through the series of real and physical, small and sometimes bizarre 'obstacles' (as Reiser himself calls them) that he

²² 'Einbahnstraße', p. 117.

repeatedly encounters. These are small and contingent accidents and objects that occasionally interrupt Reiser's fantastic phantasmagorical journeys, reminding him of something real, in his body or the world, that cannot be absorbed by the propulsions of his imagination. The list is as infinite as that emanation of worlds triggered by the image of the small: his wounded foot, a rash on his face, varnish on the wall, a single page turned over too quickly, his coat, an old blue apron, his headache, a cut on his face, his hair, a cockade on Philipp Reiser's hat, his shoes, linen, etc. These objects or *Kleinigkeiten* (AR, 160–61) (in contrast to what Andreas Gailus has argued)²³ do not merely introduce a meaningless event into the narrative of Reiser's wanderings, testifying to his life's precariousness. For if they are to some degree senseless (they have, as Boulby has remarked, a tragicomic element),²⁴ their proper function is to substitute with their inescapable materiality for something much more meaningless and essentially unfathomable: the radical exclusion of a woman's love.

4

A detail of the novel's denouement allows us to penetrate further into its truth content. What is at stake here is not only an understanding of Reiser's destiny as something open to the retrospective lightning flash of transformation, but also, and very importantly, the universalization of his fragile status. Rather than simply defining his own peculiar being in the world, this status, I want to argue, becomes an account of the modern condition per se. This last point especially, I should emphasize once again, can only be surmised from our contemporary perspective, with historical distance, once we have witnessed the failures of revolutions and the subsequent reestablishment of the logic of mastery they sought to depose.

In the cold night, Reiser is walking empty-handed from Erfurt to Leipzig in order to meet the theatre director Spreich and his troupe. His friend Neries accompanies him for a while on horseback, but afterwards he is left alone. His figure is pathetic and desolate, and appears in the darkness as that of someone entirely forsaken. Reiser, enjoying himself, imagines what Leipzig will look like. He utters aloud the name of Neries, whom he likes very much, and sheds tears. At an inn in Leipzig, he meets some of the members of the troupe, ready to greet them as his future colleagues. It is precisely here that the rapid twist occurs: two contradictory emotions are comically contrasted. Reiser notices their 'Niedergeschlagenheit', explained by the 'tröstliche Nachricht' that the director has stolen all their property and run away. The narrator has nudged us towards an anticipation of Reiser's destiny, but he also immediately withdraws the possibility of this anticipation. The final sentence reads: 'Die Spreichsche Truppe war also nun eine zerstreute Herde' (AR, 518). The news, good, bad or indifferent, is that everyone is as forsaken and miserable as Reiser himself, that he is no exception. Reiser has until now suffered innumerable humiliations trying to serve and please different masters. The last sentence shows that in the face of the radical absence of masters and fixed social loyalties, every human being is as lost as he is. The condition of Reiser's final hope, we might say, is the absolute universalization of his hopelessness.

²³ Andreas Gailus, 'A case of Individuality: Karl Philipp Moritz and the Magazine for Empirical Psychology', *New German Critique*, 79 (2000), 67–105 (pp. 96–97).

²⁴ Boulby, 'Anton Reiser and the Concept of the Novel', p. 191.

In conclusion, if we return to the phantasmagorical image of the small as *Anton Reiser's* 'Symbolik', we can see that it structures both the dialectic of Enlightenment and Romanticism and the many contradictions inherent in Reiser's precarious insertion into the society of his time. It anticipates what Moretti identifies as the central traits of the *Bildungsroman*: youth, mobility and interiority; with the two other characteristics of this type of novel, normality and compromise, being in no way appropriate, however, to Reiser, who never achieves stability, and constantly fails to integrate himself into society. The novel's central enigma, its truth content, crystallized out of its material content, thoroughly undermines any consistent notion of *Bildung*. This can be shown in three different ways. Firstly, Moretti also demonstrates that social compromise is typically symbolized in the *Bildungsroman* affirmatively (marriage) or negatively (adultery). Reiser's lack of compromise is radical since he cannot even conceive of either of these two options. Secondly, despite the fact that the narrator traces Reiser's present malaise back to his poor education, he never interrogates himself about this issue. It remains as a void in the novel, in the middle of its phantasmagoria. Thirdly, the novel's denouement (which casts Reiser's fellow actors as a 'zerstreute Herde', as lonely and dejected as himself) could be conceived as an exact universalization of his enigma. Is Reiser really so marginal and abnormal? Is not everyone on an equally scattered footing as regards the elliptical movement around an enigma that neither *Bildung* nor enlightenment can finally resolve?

The classic *Bildungsroman* proposed a view of the world that disavowed the effects of the French revolution and its proclamation of the abolition of all masters. In it *Bildung* and enlightenment articulated an overarching meaning in which the small part fits the whole and the individual feels at home in the world. *Anton Reiser's* 'Symbolik' proposes a view of modernity that not only anticipatorily criticizes that of the *Bildungsroman*, but also goes beyond the revolution's appeal to the nation and the people. Moritz states that countries, towns and homes are deceptive, and *Anton Reiser* ends with an invocation of a human herd stripped of authority and incapable of being assembled as a people. This is a radical form of collective existence far removed from Napoleon's defence and mastery of the revolution by means of the military conquest of peoples. Perhaps this explains why Reiser can only conceive of revolutions in the very singular terms of the dissolution and disintegration of his own body (AR, 105).

Anton Reiser's enigma manifests itself at another level. The narrator wishes to explain that Reiser's destiny is determined by his belonging to a miserable family and a hierarchical society. However, the conception of destiny at stake here is not, like Werther's, tragic. There are no signs in the course of Reiser's wanderings that function as anticipations of what is to come, and that can, after the occurrence of a crucial event, be read backwards. Reiser breaks no forbidden law, assumes no resultant guilt. Nor does he become conscious of his attempt to escape something that always returns. What he fears so much (the void within the phantasmagorical image of the small) is the condensation of his destiny; but this destiny is not mediated by guilty self-knowledge. Instead, it manifests itself in nothing more than the torments of the body and a shattering anguish. Gershom Scholem said that *Anton Reiser* is infinitely sad,²⁵ and the infinity of its sadness, like that of its image of the small, certainly stems from this.

²⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Briefe 1914-1947*, ed. by Itta Shedletzky (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1994), p. 159.

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