Preface

> The greatness . . . of true art . . . was to regain, to recover, to make us recognize that reality at a distance from which we live, from which we separate ourselves more and more as the conventional knowledge which we substitute for it grows thicker and more impermeable, that reality which we would run the risk of dying without having known, and which is quite simply our life. True life, life finally discovered and illuminated, the only life therefore really lived, is literature; that life which, in a sense, at every moment inhabits all men as well as the artist.
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> —Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*

In one interpretation, Proust's reflections, taken from the last volume of his *In Search of Lost Time*,[1] participate in a deeply romantic

1. Marcel Proust, *À La Recherche Du Temps Perdu* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1999), 2284. I was reminded of this passage by Didier Fassin, who also uses it as the starting point for a critique of contemporary academic analyses of life. See

conception of art and aesthetic life. Since our ordinary life is enveloped in clichés and repetitions, "true life, life finally discovered and illuminated" can only be found in its aesthetic elaboration, which is therefore universal and transcendent. Art redeems life, creating beauty out of the inane chatter of daily existence. But the passage may also be read in a more expansive and less elitist way. On this second reading, literature shows us the infinite particularity and richness of the life that we already live and that inhabits all men at every moment. The task of literature, so understood, is not to move away from ordinary life but deeper into it, and in doing so, help us see that our seemingly banal lives contain all the splendor and richness of the simultaneously immanent and transcendent in art. In short, "life . . . really lived, is literature," just as literature, properly written, is life.

Proust's novel corroborates the more expansive reading. On the one hand, given its autobiographical frame, Proust's *Recherche* is still linked to the older conception of life as individually bounded and narratively ordered, as bio-graphy. On the other hand, the novel's infinitesimal detail systematically overruns the autobiographical frame and the limits it imposes on narrative and subjective revelation. Literature thus discloses a life that is simultaneously singular and universal, a life that, while inhabiting all men at every moment, nonetheless does so uniquely in each. Thus, even where it challenges traditional conceptions of auto-bio-graphy, Proust's *Recherche* is still committed to what we may call "subjective" life: a life that is, at least in part, irreducibly perspectival and singular, bound up with and experienced through a particular body and mind.

This is precisely *not* the kind of life that we encounter in contemporary discussions of political life. When Michel Foucault introduced his concepts of biopower and biopolitics in the late 1970s, he explicitly set aside notions of lived experience, subjectivity, and existence in order to bring into focus a new conception of "life" that

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his "True Life, Real Lives: Revisiting the Boundaries between Ethnography and Fiction," *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 1 (2014): 7. While my reading of this quote initially echoes Fassin's, I ultimately take it in a different direction. As should become clear in what follows, Fassin's work as a whole has similarly influenced my approach to several aspects of the modern discourse of life.

cuts across individual bodies and biographies. The subject of biopolitical life is a "new body, a multiple body, a body with so many heads that, while they might not be infinite in number, cannot necessarily be counted. Biopolitics deals with the population,"[2] and it focuses "on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity."[3] To produce this "species body," biopolitics draws on forms of knowledge that systematically bracket the experiential dimension of life: biology, which conceives of life as organic matter, and statistics, which subordinates individuals to the numerically distributed classes they comprise. This impersonal conception of life also informs post-Foucaultian work on biopolitics. Whether it examines nineteenth- or early twentieth-century notions of race and eugenics or analyzes recent developments in biotechnology and genetic engineering, biopolitical research moves in a direction that is diametrically opposed to the approach to life that we find in Proust's novel, for whom the singularity of sensory, mnemonic, and intellectual reception grounds the infinite totality of the world we all share.

Foucault's style, which may be said to turn Proust's exquisite attentiveness to detail against itself, adds a unique twist to this more general turn away from experience. In certain particularly beautiful and arresting passages of his work, Foucault gives us a kind of Proustian microanalysis—an analysis, however, not of human life and experience as such, but of its biopolitical organization. Foucault, too, writes a kind of literature, but one whose subject matter is the life of the disciplinary technologies and biopolitical mechanisms that permeate our bodies and shape our presumed subjectivity from the inside out. Thus, despite his denial that power issues from above, "life," for Foucault, is just the amorphous, passive material upon which the implements of power impose their form. Put

2. Michel Foucault, "*Society Must Be Defended.*" *Lectures at the College de France, 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 245.

3. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 139.

differently, biopolitics examines the imposition—from without—of discursive and disciplinary regimens of life and subjectivity upon the subject. In doing so, it leaves the subject itself unthought and ignores much modern writing on the structure of subjective experience, or the "lived experience" that a broadly conceived vitalist tradition from Herder to Bergson and beyond has theorized philosophically and explored aesthetically. This reductivist animus is present in virtually all biopolitical writings on "life," whether conceived of in terms of populations, "bare life," or "life itself."

The following pages aim to show that something essential is lost in this elimination of the aesthetic and experiential dimension of life. To be clear, my goal is not to oppose art to politics or existence to power but to examine their dialectical entanglement in order to develop a richer model of the relationship between life and its biopolitical manipulation. For the reductionism of biopolitical research cuts both ways: in marginalizing subjective life, biopolitics fails to capture the profound violence of biopolitical determination; and in focusing on the external technologies of power that shape life, biopolitics denies life its intrinsic value and force, undertheorizing it in ways that carry serious political and ethical implications. My claim is that in order to address these shortcomings we need a more comprehensive and complex understanding of life, one that I try to capture under the roughly Wittgensteinian rubric of *forms of life*. Such an understanding, moreover, requires foregrounding the role of aesthetics in general, and literature in particular. As I will argue throughout the book, it is the literary archive, mostly ignored in biopolitical research, that gives us the richest account of "lived experience" and its interaction with changing technologies of power and knowledge. In this sense, my book makes an explicit case for the importance of the arts and humanities in coming to terms with our biopolitical modernity.

A few words about the governing rubric and title of my book. While Wittgenstein uses the phrase "form of life" (singular) primarily to highlight the tacit background of practices that supports and limits meaning-making and rational justification, I employ the phrase (in its plural form) to emphasize the variegated and multitudinous morphology of human life. Human life is *essentially* het-

erogeneous. Rather than cohering in a unifying, determinate form, it unfolds in the active and open-ended interweaving of a multiplicity of modalities and forms: biological and ethical, political and psychical, aesthetic and biographical, sensory and legal, etc. In this sense, a form of life is always a composite, made up of many forms, each of which is shaped by its own logic and dynamic, imposing itself upon its adjacent forms which in turn impose themselves upon it. What we experience as inner restlessness is always in part the result of these competing forms of life or vitalities within us.

It should be clear then that the following pages are not, and indeed cannot be, directed towards establishing a definition of "life." This is not because life is irrational but because stipulating definitions is itself part of a narrow region of rationality—a particular language game—characteristic of scientific practice. As Wittgenstein and Nietzsche have shown, the call for definitions is bound up with the presumed sovereignty of abstract, invariable rules and laws—a presumption at odds with the fluidity and complexity of living forms.[4] Instead of seeking to define the timeless essence of "life," each of my chapters analyzes, through the close reading of a text or body of texts, a specific historical alignment of forms of life that in their multiplicity defy the demands of definition. To give just one example, Goethe's writings in the 1790s are shaped by the effort to combine a metamorphic theory of biological form, an understanding of liberal governmentality, a theory of novelistic form, and a new conception of socialization and individual biography. While Goethe's model of vitalism comes under attack by later authors, all the texts I consider foreground the dynamic heterogeneity of human life, whose extravagant morphology they seek to capture in conceptual or aesthetic form. It is for this reason that I treat these texts not merely as historical objects but as expressions of theoretical moments of reflection on "this complicated form of life" (Wittgenstein

4. For example, see Nietzsche, "Only that which has no history can be defined" (GM II, §13; KSA 5:317); Wittgenstein, "For in the flux of life, where all our concepts are elastic, we couldn't reconcile ourselves to a rigid concept" (LWPP I, §246).

PPF §1) that we *are*. The main concern of my book is not historiographic but philosophical and systematic, even existential.

Talk of "existential" here will strike some readers as ahistorical, but this may be the result of too narrow a conception of both existence and history. If the concept of "life" cannot be defined, this is ultimately because it designates that which we are already entangled in. To speak about life is to speak from within it. Rather than constituting a limitation of knowledge about life, however, this self-referentiality is the condition of its possibility. As Kant was the first to emphasize, we can understand life around us only because we are ourselves living creatures. While Kant frames his inquiry in quasi-transcendental terms, his literary and philosophical successors increasingly draw attention both to the cultural and political determinants of life, including their own, and to the necessary historicity and perspectivism of their own discourse and lived experience. Each of the authors I examine interprets "life" from within a specific historical constellation—a specific configuration of life—that conditions what can, at that moment, be lived and thought. There is no exclusive, preeminently "objective" perspective to occupy in this regard, no "view from nowhere."[5]

This is of course true of my own discourse as well. Although I provide no definition of life, my use of the term is nonetheless circumscribed by what, informed by my historical and contemporary sources, I take as "characteristic" features of both life and its concept. First, living things are both subject and object of processes of formation, formed and formative. Neither exclusively imposed from without nor determined from within, the form of living things is shaped by the interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic forces. Second, vital forms are not static entities but dynamic processes; life is mobile and plastic, or as Goethe says, *metamorphic*. Third, following Thomas Khurana, I will suggest that we conceive of the protean character of the living in terms of the dialectic of force and form. From this perspective, a form is a precarious structural balance that is subject to constant pressures exerted on it from internal and ex-

5. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

ternal forms and forces. Fourth, forms of life are essentially composite, that is, they are made up of other forms of life. As Nietzsche argues, this is already true of biological organisms, which are composed of countless smaller organisms, each of which asserts its own existence and will to power. This heterogeneity becomes particularly complex and unstable in *human* life, which, due to its embeddedness in symbolic life, unfolds through the representation and internalization of myriad cultural forms of subjectivity, sociality, and civility. Trees may be subject to political and economic processes, but not because they represent or recognize themselves in them. Only human life is traversed by the symbolic.

The following pages will seek to flesh out these rather abstract claims. The introduction situates my book within the context of contemporary debates about life, spells out the relevance of Wittgenstein's later thought to my argument, and explains how literature provides access to the political interiority of human life unavailable to contemporary theories of biopolitics. It also motivates the geographical and temporal specificity of my book, arguing that German culture from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century developed an expanded conception of life as the dynamic drive toward form. I suggest that this dynamic process of formation was seen by many in the German tradition as fundamental not merely to metabolic and bodily life, but equally to the vital processes of aesthetic, psychic, and sociopolitical phenomena.

The three sections of my book outline three structural moments in the German discourse on form and its relation to life. Part I—"Life as Formation"—examines the conceptualization of life as formative form around 1800. Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* is the first book in the German tradition to articulate the new dynamic notion of life as a convergence of mind and nature (chapter 1). For Kant, aesthetic experience is important because it (a) involves an intensification of the life of the mind (including the social dimension of mind as *sensus communis*) and (b) enables us to develop a regulative notion of organic life. Kant's claim is that to understand the peculiar organization of natural beings, we must view them as products of an intrinsic formative activity, and hence as in some way analogous to the mind's power of cognitive and perceptual

synthesis, which we experience most vividly in our encounter with beauty. Aesthetic experience allows us to grasp the nature of human, or symbolic, life and its place within the natural world. Goethe's biological and literary writings of the 1790s radicalize Kant's insights (chapter 2). On the one hand, he emphasizes the "metamorphic" fluidity of both natural forms and human cognition; on the other, he stresses the erotic and social dimension of subjectivity. For Goethe, human life is singularly precarious because it is subject to libidinal investments and the unruliness of the imagination. To develop properly, human life must therefore be regularized by social forms that (re)direct its innate vitality—it must assume a second-order, socialized naturalness. Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* associates the creation of this second nature with liberal forms of governing, depicting liberalism's normative force as a necessary, if at times violent, supplement to human life. With Goethe, vitalism opens itself to biopower.

Part II—"The Conflict of Forms"—examines the radicalization of this violent dimension in Kleist and Nietzsche. While Kant and Goethe model life as a self-organizing form, Kleist and Nietzsche highlight its divided and conflictual nature, depicting it as driving beyond form into the territory of deformation and disarticulation. In Kleist, this anti-organicism manifests in a poetic practice that emphasizes both the self-interrupting power of language and the prosthetic character of human life (chapter 3). Whereas Kant's and Goethe's autopoetic models seek to reconcile art and life, Kleist's heteropoietics frames art as an artificially intensified mode of life: art exceeds ordinary life, not by providing it with a beautiful form, but by extracting and magnifying its capacity to exceed itself, to break its own form, to become hybrid. In contrast to the Idealist notion of the human imposition of value upon life, Nietzsche makes life not only the highest value but understands it as a process of valuation (chapter 4). Moreover, since valuation is conceived as the assertion of self against the assertion of countless other selves, Nietzsche's vitalism is intrinsically antagonistic and heterogeneous. For Nietzsche, life is a struggle down to the smallest cell, and formation (*Bildung*) is always also deformation and overcoming, including the overcoming of previous forms of self. Under the rubric of

the will-to-power, Nietzsche thus thinks of life as a force that both produces and exceeds all conceptual distinctions and oppositions; life becomes a problem and task that is at once biological and political, aesthetic and ethical, theoretical and practical.

Part III—"Deformation"—explores modernist figurations of life in Gottfried Benn and Robert Musil, both of whom develop their poetics through an engagement with and rejection of earlier models of vitalism. Benn's avant-garde Rönne novellas, written during World War I, deconstruct the Kantian belief in the mind's capacity to unify sensory data, replacing the latter's emphasis on formal unity with an emphasis on linguistic and bodily disarticulation (chapter 5). Himself a medical doctor, Benn writes literature in part as a pathology report, finding in the focus on disintegrating bodies and subjectivities an opening toward a new prose and therefore a new way of conceptualizing the human *bios*. Robert Musil's unfinished magnum opus, *The Man Without Qualities*, analyzes the petrification of the classical model of *Bildung* under conditions of a heightened biopolitical modernity (chapter 6). Where Goethe presented social forms as stabilizing human life, Musil depicts a world in which calculative reason has absorbed all singularity into statistical patterns of norm and deviation, splitting language and culture into impersonal scientific knowledge on the one hand and vacuous, dilettante chatter on the other. Musil's unfinished novel examines the violent fallout of the resulting inexpressibility of life (nationalism, madness, hypermasculinity) and explores, in its second part, new forms of speaking, thinking, and desiring capable of restoring life to experience and existence. The epilogue articulates in compressed and axiomatic form my major theoretical positions and claims.

A book that claims to outline the discourse of life in German culture from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century is by necessity highly selective. While omissions are therefore inevitable, the lack of a sustained discussion of two thinkers—Hegel and Freud—requires some explanation. Hegel's attempt to overcome the Kantian opposition between (natural) necessity and (human) freedom builds on the understanding of life developed in Kant's third *Critique* and Goethe's biological writings. Insofar as Hegel's

philosophy may be said to conceive "of a freedom that realizes itself in and through life: a freedom of life,"[6] his work systematizes conceptual impulses discussed in the first two chapters of my book. But this systematization also smooths over tensions within the new discourse of life that are more clearly visible in the earlier writings. Rather than considering these tensions as theoretical failures, I read them as marks of the essential heterogeneity of life itself. From this perspective, Kant's and Goethe's reflections are more revealing than Hegel's more encompassing philosophical discourse. The situation concerning Freud is different. While influenced by Nietzsche's philosophy and certain trends within nineteenth-century biology, Freud's thinking about the interweaving of psyche and soma is not only highly original but historically complex, undergoing constant revisions, from the early neurological model of the mind in the "Project for a Scientific Psychology" (1895) to his protean work on sexuality and his later more speculative reflections on the role of the destructive forces in human life. Engaging with this enormous body of work in anything but a superficial manner would have exceeded the limits of a manageable chapter and transformed the architecture of the book. In the end, the number of chapters is only the pragmatic aspect of a more fundamental limit that has inevitably shaped this book—the limitations of my own life and thought.

Like all forms of life, my book has taken shape through the constant interaction and exchange with other people and institutions. A significant portion of it was written during a fellowship year at the University of Michigan's Institute for the Humanities. I wish to thank the director of the institute, Sid Smith, and my fellow fellows—especially Christiane Gruber, Jean Hébrard, Yanay Israel, Farina Mir, Mireille Roddier, Marjorie Rubright, Megan Sweeney, and Shana Melnysyn—for their encouragement and feedback, and the

6. Thomas Khurana, abstract for *The Freedom of Life: Hegelian Perspectives*, ed. Thomas Khurana (Berlin: August Verlag, 2013); and more recently and comprehensively, Khurana's outstanding *Das Leben der Freiheit. Form und Wirklichkeit der Autonomie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2017). As will become obvious, I am much indebted to Khurana's work on the concept of life in German Idealism.

institute and its staff for creating a marvelous working environment. The gift of time during my fellowship is but one of the many ways in which the University of Michigan has supported my work. I count myself lucky to be part of an institution that values research, and to be surrounded by so many incredibly smart and generous colleagues and friends. I could not have written this book without the unflagging support and kindness of Kerstin Barndt, Julia Hell, Marjorie Levinson, Johannes von Moltke, Yopie Prins, Helmut Puff, Scott Spector, and Silke-Maria Weineck. Silke, Marjorie, and Scott read the entire manuscript at a later stage and offered me a perceptive account of what I had been trying to argue; Danielle Lavaque-Manty, Christopher Skeaff, and Johannes gave much-needed feedback early on. Didier Fassin generously shared unpublished material with me. Elizabeth McNeill's outstanding work as a research assistant saved me from many goofs. I also benefited greatly from comments I received in the course of presenting parts of this project at various universities. My biggest thanks go to: Leslie Adelson, Michel Chaouli, Paul Fleming, Peter Gilgen, Arne Hoecker, Niklaus Largier, Christine Lehleiter, Helmut Müller-Sievers, John Noyes, Annette Schwarz, Erica Weitzman, and John Zilkosky. It is through the words of others that I found my own.

Monthly culinary feasts with Danielle Lavaque-Manty, Mika Lavaque-Manty, and Sue Juster offered welcome breaks from the asceticism of writing. David Halperin, Gayle Rubin, and Rostom Mesli convinced me that champagne is an essential feature of human life. And when I was in danger of getting lost in my head, Giangi, Sadie, and Arya reminded me of the other side of things, the life of instincts and the pleasures of unthinking movement.

Working with Cornell University Press was a true delight. I am grateful to Peter Uwe Hohendahl for his early interest in my project; to the members of the *Signale* board for their speedy (and favorable!) evaluation of the manuscript; to Kizer Walker, Mahinder Kingra, and Bethany Wasik for shepherding the book through the various stages of publication; and to Erin Davis for her attentive copyediting of my manuscript. The two reviewers for the press, Michel Chaouli and Jeffrey Librett, gave me valuable feedback on the manuscript; I trust they recognize their suggestions in the final product.

Finally, there are two people whose importance to this project goes well beyond what I can adequately thank them for here—my friend Russell Newstadt, and my partner and wife Lisa Disch. I cannot imagine what this book would have looked like without Russell's friendship and support; all I know is that it would have been infinitely poorer. Whenever I felt stuck and tempted to take shortcuts or gloss over inconsistencies and inaccuracies, Russell's insistence on conceptual precision and argumentative clarity forced me to dig deeper and find better formulations. There is no idea in this book that has not been shaped by our conversations. As for Lisa, I still cannot believe my luck in being able to share my life with her. Her boundless enthusiasm for the world has been a constant source of optimism and strength for me, and while I will never be able to fully match it, I am profoundly grateful for being able to live in its forcefield. Without her faith in me, my doubts would have gotten the better of me. This book is for her.

Earlier versions of chapters 2 and 5 appeared in *Germanic Review* (2012) and *New German Critique* (2018). I am grateful to publishers Taylor & Francis and Duke University Press for permission to reuse the material.