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What Is an Event for Goethe?

THIS SPECIAL SECTION is devoted to the peculiarity of the narrative events in Goethe's texts, including his novels, novellas, and ballads. In general, narrative events can be described as irreversible, unpredictable, and meaningful in the larger plot, and as marking a transition from a state A to a state B.¹ Narrative events—and that also means real events that can be described by means of narratives—are powerful and leave their marks. There probably would be no narrative without an event. The papers in this section focus on Goethe's remarkable avoidance of such events and his careful rendering of events. The goal of this section is to develop a theory of narrative events according to Goethe's literary texts. This Goethean theory of the event focuses on the "event-that-should-not-be" (or the event-that-should-not-have-been), meaning it focuses on strategies for avoiding events, or on strategies for understanding the many subtle consequences of such events—including how they initiate chains of repetition and trauma, and the possibilities of healing affected people and undoing the long-term damage such events can inflict. In particular, the papers examine the hermeneutic, therapeutic, and aesthetic dimensions of events-that-should-not-be and events-that-should-not-have-been.

The Event-that-Should-Not-Be

When one considers the narratives and storylines in Goethe's plays, prose texts, and ballads, we first notice the absence of a clear, powerful, and paradigmatic event. In fact, there are not that many events at all. Yes, there is Werther's suicide, there is Iphigenie's refusal to go along with the sneaky plan by Pylades, there is Wilhelm's act of joining a (broke) theater company instead of fulfilling his father's wish to become a merchant, and there is Faust's wager. However, these events reveal more a negative structure of a refusal or nonaction, rather than some clear action or event. Unlike Friedrich Schiller, Goethe mostly does not write tragedies in which someone risks everything and heroically loses, with *Götz von Berlichingen* and *Egmont* being only partly exceptions. Unlike Theodor E. Lessing, Goethe does not usually build meaningful dilemmas that ask for solutions, as he does in *Der Mann von fünfzig Jahren* (*The Man of Fifty*). And unlike Heinrich von Kleist, Goethe does not resort to "unheard-of" events, unless one wishes to count the little oddities of the *Unterhaltungen deutscher Ausgewanderten* (*Conversations of German Refugees*). In fact, Goethe himself coined the

very notion of the unheard-of event when characterizing what he saw as problematic in the works of Kleist and the new novella. And while his scientific work features fulfilled moments of *kairos*,² such moments are largely absent from his narratives. The first point to consider is this relative absence of events in Goethe's narratives, as Christopher Chiasson does in his essay in this volume.³

Still, there are things that can be called events in Goethe's text. Many of these events are precisely the happenings that the reader (and narrator) hopes will not take place, and they range from actions, the unintended side-effects of actions, and moral transgressions to accidents and social or natural catastrophes. Some of these events thus only exist in the mind of the reader as counterfactual events. In fact, my first proposal will be, as indicated, to describe the event in Goethe's texts as the *event-that-should-not-be*. An event-that-should-not-be includes natural catastrophic occurrences and social upheavals, but also accidents and individual actions; the event can be real or imaginary.

We can list some of these events-that-should-not-be (or events-that-should-not-have-been once the narratives progresses) that define the plot, or at least some large segment of their texts, in a radically abbreviated fashion:

- Götz is not a heroic knight who falls victim to the corrupt modern empire, but rather he himself is a villain who continues to plunder and is an obstacle to peace.⁴ The events that should not take place are both his defiant acts and the intrigues surrounding his demise.
- Werther should have avoided falling in love with a married woman and should not have committed suicide.
- *Egmont* is a tragedy about an escape that did not take place but should have taken place, and thus leads to an end of Egmont that should have been different; Egmont fails to prevent the disaster, but also fails to engage in an act of rebellion, through which he could have dialectically "won" in the eyes of the spectators even as he failed—as would have been the case in a Schiller tragedy.⁵
- The Greeks shouldn't have stolen the Diana statue (*Iphigenie auf Tauris* / *Iphigenia in Tauris*), act 4 and 5).
- *Alexis und Dora* (*Alexis and Dora*) presents the imagined scene of jealousy—that should not be.
- The hero of *Wilhelm Meisters Lebrjahre* (*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*) constantly harms women.⁶ While it is certainly not clear what qualifies as an event in the different books of the novel, I would suggest that one should consider: (1) Wilhelm's constant refusal to accept paternal, fraternal, or ghostly guidance to instead engage in self-deluded and half-blind decision-making, and; (2) that this very self-deluded decision-making and his acts of running away end up harming virtually every female character in the novel. Hence, his search for independence leads to the acts that should not have taken place—namely, the unintended side-effects of Wilhelm's harming others.
- *Unterhaltungen deutscher Ausgewanderten* with its novellas reacts to the major political event of Goethe's life time—namely, the French Revolution. Goethe certainly saw the Revolution as an event that should not have happened and that should have been prevented.

- Regardless of whether *Der Zauberlehrling* (*The Sorcerer's Apprentice*) should also be seen as a reaction to the French Revolution, it presents an obvious case of unfolding disaster in the absence of the master.
- Faust, if my reading is accurate, agrees to a wager that he will not become deaf to the concerns of others; he will not remain fixated on a single moment, but instead consider other realities than those of the moment and will also consider the realities of others, including Gretchen's. The event that should not have happened, his losing the wager, constitutes his (complete) moral blindness. Only at the end of *Faust II*, in the erasure of Philemon and Baucis, does he seem to truly cross the line.⁷ Faust's wager expresses the program of that which should not happen.
- *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*) offers a dilemma without a solution; the events of the text, if we can even count them as events, all fall into the category of events that should not have happened—including the imaginary adultery, the drowning of the child, Eduard's breaking the bonds of his marriage, and Ottilie's starvation (we will return to the novella embedded in this novel below).
- In *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre, oder die Entsagenden* (*Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years, or the Renunciants*), there is considerable effort to prevent children from drowning⁸—which is, of course, the major catastrophic event of *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*.
- The (tame) lion in *Novelle* (*Novella*), like the (friendly) tiger, should not be killed—unlike the tiger that ends up being shot.

To be sure, there are some exceptions, including *Hermann und Dorothea* and some, but not all of the novellas from *Unterhaltungen deutscher Ausgewandeter*, but, overall, events, for Goethe, are precisely things that should not happen (or should not have happened), both in terms of the overall plots and in the more minute short narrations and subplots—such as the Harfner's incest in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. One could question whether Goethe's lyrical poetry is also shaped by structures of avoidance or imagined transgressions, as David E. Wellbery and Christian Weber each suggest with different emphases.⁹ Some of the events-that-should-not-be do actually happen, and the texts deal with the consequences, others are prevented or only imaginary, but still define their texts.

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We certainly could extend this list; however, this bird's eye perspective of the large plots of many narrative works already illustrates a remarkable pattern of hesitation and avoidance of events. Rarely is an event offered as a solution; rather, it usually presents the problem. It is also remarkable that the general pattern of the event-that-should-not-be appears among various different categories of events—such as human actions, accidents, interruptions, and social movements. In all of these cases, the event-that-should-not-be becomes clear when one considers the reaction by affected observers to whatever happens, regardless of whether it was an accident or caused by deliberate action. These affected observers are not simply the texts' characters and bystanders,

but rather include the readers who have built empathetic relationships with the characters (and also imagined characters with emotions to fit a situation, even when the actual characters do not show these emotions). In short, the event-that-should-not-be is constituted by readers as that which they wish had not happened (or which they hope does not happen). These events include moral transgressions, as well as mere mistakes and accidents. One could say that the event-that-should-not-be describes the side-effects of an action or occurrence.

In a narratological sense, the event-that-should-not-be meets the standard understanding of an event as an irreversible and unpredictable caesura¹⁰ that serves as a transition from state A to state B, involving a radical change of context and perspectives.¹¹ The event-that-should-not-be adds a particular emphasis to the emotional state of the reader, ranging from fright to grief, from bewilderment to utter moral disapproval, and from the hope that something will not happen to irony, as in *Reineke Fuchs* where the wrong character triumphs. These emotional and moral attitudes toward the event shape the narratives and create a sense of distance for readers. Distance and detachment prepare readers for what is to come and perhaps console them—one might think of the endings of *Egmont* and *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*. In fact, one could describe a range of Goethe's texts as therapeutic in the sense that they seem to prepare readers to live with the consequences of the event, whether they are small or large. Lisa Anderson's paper in this volume elegantly makes this case.¹² In general, the structure of the event-that-should-not-be draws attention to the distancing strategies that Goethe's narratives employ.

Before we move on to examine one particular distancing strategy that Goethe often employs, we should expand our preliminary definition of Goethe's narrative event. Goethe's narratives present *events-that-should-not-be that evoke emotional and/or moral excitement in the reader with the effect that the event, even if it has not yet occurred, has a continued presence in the mind of the reader, which mentally prepares the reader for its impact and for an evaluation of its side-effects.*

Repetition as Distancing

Repetition plays a key role in Goethe's narratives. On the one hand, repetition can serve as a means of prolonging a past event, perhaps traumatically, into the present. On the other hand, repetition also introduces a certain distance and facilitates breaking away from the shadows of the initial event. Repetition is a common way of preparing for and distancing from the event-that-should-not-be in Goethe's texts. More particularly, one of Goethe's peculiarities is that he builds his texts by means of progressive repetitions of similar patterns, constellations, and occurrences. In probably every text by Goethe, readers are privy to echoes or foreshadowing effects of what has happened or what will happen. Events are duplicated or revisited, like the scene of the wager in *Faust II*.

My sense is that such repetitions are not necessarily motivated by a pro-psychological interest in something like trauma—even though trauma

was discovered/invented by writers close to Goethe, including Karl Philipp Moritz, in particular.¹³ Goethe presents relatively few characters who suffer from flashbacks or involuntary repetitions of especially shocking events (though we could reasonably examine patterns of trauma-like behavior in characters like Mignon or Ottilie). Instead, the repetition of events directly strikes the reader by intensifying the initial event, perhaps to shock and surprise the reader, or perhaps to offer repetition as an organizing motif of a story, to prepare readers for what is to come, and to help them contextualize it. In this sense, rather than focusing on character trauma, Goethe employs what one might call “metanarrative” trauma.

Metanarrative trauma combines all the repetitions of events into a narrative that occurs in the perception *of a reader*, regardless whether characters in a plot recognize or experience them. Such a pattern of a metanarrative trauma can be seen in the embedded novella in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, as already Walter Benjamin indicated when he suggested that the novella offers a solution to the dilemma of the overall novel,¹⁴ a solution that may or may not work: namely the desperate jump into fate by the female neighbor, a jump into the water where she wants to drown, not without scolding her male neighbor. With this jump and the consequent chance for a new beginning, a fantastic solution emerges. The point I wish to make here is simply that: by repeating some basic elements of the novel (though by no means all of them), the novella could either merely repeat the models of the novel or break out of the novel. Repetition draws attention to difference and novelty, and thus to new events that rewrite the past. In that sense, repetition creates distance from the event they repeat: by pointing out that things could be different, thus relativizing the main event.

Now we can add a further element to our emerging definition of Goethe’s narrative event. Goethe creates narratives that are shaped by the events, events-that-should-not-be, while maintaining the possibility that the event might not occur or could have occurred differently. The event-that-should-not-be is essentially an event that creates alternative visions in the mind of the readers of a narrative even if the event does not or has not yet happened. In this sense, such events have an oracular dimension since they are rarely understood when they occur (or are announced).¹⁵ In short, Goethe’s narratives present *events-that-should-not-be that evoke an emotional and/or moral irritation and excitement in the reader, that provoke readers to imagine alternative versions of the narrative, helped by repetitions of the constellation of the event in the plot, thereby mentally preparing readers for its impact and for an evaluation of its side-effects.*

We will add one more element to this definition below. The irritation or excitement connected with the event-that-should-not-be plays out in different domains: It has an ethical dimension of avoiding wrongdoing or of being mindful of one’s missteps of the past. It also has a hermeneutic dimension, since events always pose problems of understanding and framing. It feeds a therapeutic urgency to heal and undo trauma, and it stimulates several aesthetic emotions, including the uncanny, curiosity, and suspense.

Narrative Events in Goethe: A Brief Overview

Now we should ask in which domain this excitement or irritation primarily plays out. Goethe offers more than one perspective in this regard and records effects on various levels. As indicated, the excitement in the reader caused by an event can be described as a moral emotion that emerges when something that violates moral sensibility emerges as possibility. It also poses a hermeneutic puzzle. However, one might also want to consider this irritation as an aesthetic emotion that excites readers. Furthermore, it could be conceived as a therapeutic energy concerned with one's well-being, employed as a means of avoiding turmoil. This is where we come to the three papers of the section. While the papers each consider and weigh all three dimensions, they each offer a focus on one of them: Chiasson considers the hermeneutic concerns of interpreting events, Anderson discusses the therapeutic efforts Goethe puts in place to heal from events and trauma, and Weber weighs the aesthetic sense of the uncanny in regard to events.

The essays in this section all contribute significantly to an overall understanding of the narrative event in Goethe, though the authors may not fully agree with the definition offered above. These essays need not be summarized here since they speak best for themselves and provide a rich contour of the understanding of the narratological event in Goethe. Instead, it should briefly be pointed out how these essays contribute to the overall discussion of the narrative event in Goethe.

Christopher Chiasson illuminates the exceptionality of events in Goethe and their distinct absence in many texts—especially *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*. According to Chiasson, Goethe's texts devote a significant amount of time to preparing the readers for the coming of events, even if these expectations may be misleading. In particular, Chiasson observes how specific characters, but also scholars in their sweeping interpretations of Goethe's texts, tend to connect events with meaning and significance where there is none. By revealing this pattern of misreading, Goethe illuminates how events are often deeply ambivalent, and evokes the ideal of a narrative without event in his texts.

Lisa Anderson's discussion of the relation between Goethe and Kleist focuses on the therapeutic aspect of Goethe's prose that seeks to "heal" the reader from the impacts of the shocking events typical in Kleist's texts that do take place or that might occur. In particular, her paper shows how Goethe's *Novelle* rewrites Kleist's texts (*Erdbeben in Chili / Earthquake in Chili*, in particular) with its dramatic and traumatic event, by juxtaposing the misunderstanding that leads to the killing of the tiger, and later the rescue of the lion. In that sense the positive ending soothes the drama caused by the (multitude of) first event(s), including the reported fires, catastrophes, and evoked desires.

The aftershocks of events can include morally bad actions that come to haunt the wrongdoers. Christian Weber shows in his reading how morally bad actions of the past can return as repressed events and express themselves as uncanny effects. In Goethe's poem "Ballade" ("Ballad"), an old singer

turns out to be an expelled former monarch who confronts the new lord, and his usurper, with his mere presence and song. The past event of the expulsion-that-should-not-have-been presents the horizon for the moment of song and the uncanny return of the repressed that leads to a self-encounter between the ruling usurper and his violent past.

Together, all three texts reveal the heightened awareness Goethe has of the negative effects of events and their aftershocks. It seems that he as an author viewed his duty as helping readers reestablish a state of stability after the occurrence of an event-that-should-not-have-been. Narrative fiction, in this sense, operates as a training ground for teaching readers to recognize the many changes caused by sudden events and preparing them to deal with ripple effects. The hardest task, according to these readings of Goethe, is to truly get beyond an event.

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NOTES

1. See below for a more precise discussion and references.
2. See Nicholas Rennie, "Ut Pictura Historia: Goethe's Historical Imagination and the Augenblick," *Goethe Yearbook* 8, no. 1 (1996): 120-41.
3. See, in this volume, Christopher Chiasson, "Much Ado about Nothing? The Absence of Events in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*," *Goethe Yearbook* 26 (2019).
4. See Horst Lange, "Wolves, Sheep, and the Shepherd: Legality, Legitimacy, and Hobbesian Political Theory in Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen*," *Goethe Yearbook* 10, no. 1 (2001): 1-30.
5. See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "The Caesura of the Speculative," in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford UP, 1998) 208-35.
6. Jane K. Brown, *Goethe's Allegories of Identity* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2014).
7. See Fritz Breithaupt, "Goethe's Conscience," *MLN* 129, no. 3 (2014): 549-62.
8. See Michael Auer, "'Originalnatur' in Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre," *German Studies Review* 32, no. 3 (2009): 637-51.
9. David E. Wellbery, *The Specular Moment: Goethe's Early Lyric and the Beginnings of Romanticism* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford UP, 1996); and Christian Weber, *Die Logik der Lyrik: Goethes Phänomenologie des Geistes in Gedichten* (Freiburg: Rombach, 2013). See also Andrew H. Weaver, "Towards a Narratological Analysis of the Romantic Lied: Events, Voice, and Focalization in Nineteenth-Century German Poetry and Music," *Music and Letters* 95, no. 3 (2014): 374-403.
10. Wolf Schmid argues for five criteria of what constitutes a narrative event; namely, relevance, unpredictability, effect, irreversibility, and noniterativity. The strongest kind of event, then, in Schmid's terms, is significant in the world of the story, is capable of surprising the reader, has meaningful ramifications, and cannot be undone or repeated. Wolf Schmid, "Narrativity and Eventfulness," in Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller, eds., *What is Narratology? Questions and Answers Regarding the Status of a Theory* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003) 17-35. See also Nikolaus Müller-Schöll, ed. *Ereignis: Eine fundamentale Kategorie der Zeiterfabrung. Anspruch und Aporien* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2003).

11. See Andrew Hamilton and Fritz Breithaupt, "These Things Called Event: Toward a Unified Narrative Theory of Events," *Sprache und Datenverarbeitung* 37 (2013): 65-87.
12. See, in this volume, Lisa Anderson, "Countering Catastrophe: Goethe's *Novelle* in the Aftershock of Heinrich von Kleist," *Goethe Yearbook* 26 (2019).
13. Elliott Schreiber, "Pressing Matters: Karl Philipp Moritz's Models of the Self in the *Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde*," *Goethe Yearbook* 11, no. 1 (2002): 133-58. Fritz Breithaupt, "The Invention of Trauma in German Romanticism," *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 1 (2005): 77-101. See also Nicole Sütterlin, *Poetik der Wunde: Zur Entdeckung des Traumas in der Literatur der Romantik* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2019).
14. Walter Benjamin, "Goethes Wahlverwandschaften," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974) 123-201.
15. I thank Birgit Tautz for making this powerful connection between the multidimensionality of events and the oracle.