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Hegel and the Task of Biographical Narrative

Abstract:

This paper explores some of Hegel's key philosophical commitments concerning biographical narrative, drawing on the narrative aspects of his philosophy of agency in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Philosophy of Right*. The important philosophical claim that lies behind both works is that the self *is* precisely what it *does* – or, in other words, a biographical subject is a series of actions that is open to construal. On Hegel's analysis, this openness of an agent's actions to construal involves two sorts of conflict for the project of interpretive biography: the first between differing assessments of the motives behind an action (whether possibly universal or only personal and self-interested), and the second between what can be isolated as distinctive about an agent's own action and the larger elements of world-historical action at work around them. Hegel's philosophy of agency offers resources both to explore and possibly resolve these two conflicts.

Keywords:

Hegel, biography, narrativity, narrative self, *Phenomenology of Spirit*

Much has been written about the importance of narrative in Hegel's philosophy, especially concerning the role of narrative in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (hereafter also as *PhG*). Although many discussions of the *Phenomenology*'s narrative structure begin (and – for that matter – end) with reference to Josiah Royce's famous claim that the work as a whole might be considered as a sort of *Bildungsroman*, there are reasons to look more broadly at the role of narrative both in the *PhG* and in Hegel.[1] As has been noticed in recent years, there is a much more complicated literary structure in the *PhG* (both in terms of Hegel's employment of differing forms of literary narrative – tragedy, comedy, and the romantic novel among them – and in terms of the voicing and structure of the forms of consciousness).[2]

I have previously argued that Hegel's philosophy of agency could in general be characterized by three large commitments – to the *retrospectivity* of action, its *social* inflection, and the implicit *holism* of the narrative stance – and that taking these three aspects into consideration could illuminate a number of vexing features of Hegel's practical philosophy as well as providing a distinctive view of narrativity in comparison with contemporary positions.[3] But one issue that has received less attention in the context of discussions of Hegelian narrativity is Hegel's treatment of *biographical* narrative as such.

It is interesting that this area of biographical narrative has been less explored, especially since much discussion in Anglo-American philosophy about narrative has indeed centered on the question of so-called "*life* narratives," with competing claims that range between Charles Taylor's assertion that it is a "basic condition of making sense of ourselves… that we grasp our lives in a narrative" and Galen Strawson's argument that the boldest claims for a connection between narrative and selfhood simply failed to take into account a distinction between the perspectives of narrativists and episodists – the former tending to construe a temporal integrity through numerous life events and the latter inevitably unable to see life as more than a series of disconnected episodes.[4]

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1) Royce, *Lectures on Modern Idealism,* 147–56.

2) The question of the *PhG*'s appropriation of literary genres was a topic of Speight, *Hegel, Literature and the Problem of Agency*; see more recently, among others, Barba-Kay, "What Is Novel in Hegel's Phenomenology," on the distinctive voicing characteristic of the *PhG*; Pahl, *Tropes of Transport*, and Gołaszewski, "Narrative Complexity of Hegel's Concept of Truth."

3) Speight, "Hegel, Narrativity and Action," 232–43.

4) Strawson, "Against Narrativity" and "Episodic Ethics."

In what follows, this paper will first explore (Part I) some of what I take to be Hegel's key philosophical commitments concerning biographical narrative, drawing on the narrative aspects of his philosophy of agency in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Philosophy of Right*. The important philosophical claim that lies behind both works is that the self is precisely what it *does* – or, in other words, a biographical subject is a *series of actions* that is open to construal. On Hegel's analysis, this openness of an agent's actions to construal involves two sorts of conflict for the project of interpretive biography: the first between differing assessments of the *motives* behind an action (whether possibly universal or only personal and self-interested), and the second between what can be isolated as distinctive about an agent's *own action* and the larger elements of world-historical action at work around them. Hegel's philosophy of agency offers resources both to explore and possibly resolve these two conflicts. Part II will examine the first conflict: the differing perspectives on agents and their actions as they emerge in the famous *PhG* encounter between the "hero" and the "moral valet" or *Kammerdiener* in the "Beautiful Soul" section at the end of the Spirit chapter. Part III examines the second conflictual issue relevant for Hegel's take on biography: the need to isolate an *individual* figure against a larger background of historical action. The final section thus turns both to Hegel's treatment of biographical narrative as a mode of *art* – and its relation to the broader modes of historiographical writing and the visual and literary arts, as well as Hegel's own practice when it comes to biographical writing in the treatment he gives individual figures in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* and the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.

I. Skulls, Deeds and the Narrativity of Life

The debate over the philosophical importance – or non-importance – of narrative in the last couple of decades has often focused on the specific character of *biographical* narrative.[5] Should we think of our selves as *narratively constituted*? And, if so, should we view the narratives which constitute our selves as in some way already visible in the mere life events of a particular subject (as in Alasdair MacIntyre's famous claim

5) See among others Schechtman, "Stories, Lives and Basic Survival," 155–78; and Goldie, "One's Remembered Past" and "Narrative and Perspective," 201–20.

that "stories are *lived* before they are told")? Or are they ones that have to emerge from the separate – and of course fallible (not to say fabulistic) – task of story-telling?[6]

The *Phenomenology of Spirit* gives us a number of important windows onto the question of narrativity and life. The emergence of Spirit itself within the *Phenomenology* occurs at precisely the moment when the importance of narrative structures to grasp life come on the scene. Within the Reason chapter, as Hegel rejects the spurious claims of the "sciences" of phrenology and physiognomy to get at the character of individual human subjects,[7] the attempt of these sciences to reduce human individuality to bone structure is framed with a reflection on Hamlet's famous speech about Yorick's skull:

> A variety of ideas may well occur to us in connection with a skull, like those of Hamlet over Yorick's skull; but the skull-bone just by itself is such an indifferent, natural thing that nothing else is to be directly seen in it, or fancied about it, than simply the bone itself. It does indeed remind us of the brain and its specific nature, and of skulls of a different formation, but not of a conscious movement, since there is impressed on it neither a look nor a gesture, nor anything that proclaims itself to have come from a conscious action.[8]

In the context of the overall argument of the *Phenomenology of Spirit,* the skull bone as an "indifferent natural thing" in comparison with the life of a biographical subject characterizes the concern of an "Observing Reason" that (like the early phases of Consciousness within the *PhG*) is still focused on an object that is external to the subject. What emerges directly from the failure of physiognomy and phrenology is a new shape of Reason that pushes forward the arrival of Spirit: "The Actualization of Rational Self-Consciousness through Itself," which make the liveliest appeals to literary narratives (Faust, Schiller's *Robbers, Don Quixote*) up to this point within the *Phenomenology of Spirit.* All of the narrative treatments that frame these sections –

6) MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 212.

7) This crucial shift in the *PhG* was of course also a topic that much interested MacIntyre, whose "Hegel on Faces and Skulls" (MacIntyre, *Hegel: A Collection of Critical Essays*) remains one of the most trenchant discussions of the failure of physiognomy and phrenology.

8) Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶333.

and the further appeals to literary narrative within the Spirit chapter itself (Antigone, Rameau, the Beautiful Soul) – are structured to open up the central Hegelian question of the relation between a subject and his *actions*.

Any discussion of Hegel on biographical narrative needs to be framed in terms of his essential commitment about selfhood and agency: that, as he puts it in the *Philosophy of Right*, "what the subject is, is the series of his actions."[9] Yet in both the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Philosophy of Right* this commitment is hardly expressed before Hegel immediately brings up the key interpretive question of how such deeds are to be construed – and by whom. In both discussions, competing interpretations emerge of an agent's actions, oscillating between an "heroic" view and the view of a *valet de chambre* or *Kammerdiener* – the "moral valet," who sees only the self-interested motives of an agent (for fame, ambition or vanity), what Robert Brandom has characterized as naturalistic perspectives on action and judgment. The next section will explore these competing interpretations of the actions that compose a subject's biography and Hegel's strategy for potentially moving beyond such a conflict.

II. Biography and Judgment: The Agent and his *Kammerdiener*

The final section of the Spirit chapter ("Conscience; the Beautiful Soul, Evil and its Forgiveness," §§ 632–71) in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* concerns itself with a conflict between an *acting subject* and a *judging consciousness*. The action of the first is judged by the latter, who focuses on what Hegel calls the "*self-interested ends* of action": He

> explains the action according to an *intention* and a self-serving *motive* which is different from the action itself. As every action is capable of being considered from the point of view of dutifulness, equally so can every action be considered from the point of view of *particularity*, for as an action it is the actuality of an individual. – This assessment thus puts the action outside of its existence and reflects it into the inner, or into the form of particularity. If the action is accompanied by fame, then it knows this inwardness to be a *craving* for fame. – If the action is wholly in conformity with the

9) Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §124.

> social estate of the individual, if it does not go beyond that status, and if this individuality's social estate is not an external determination tacked onto him but is the very conduit by which this universality fills itself out, and if as a result the individuality shows himself to be fitting for an even higher social estate, then the judgment knows his inwardness as ambition for honor, and so forth. While in the action itself, the agent achieves an intuition of *himself* in [the realm of] objectivity, or he arrives at a feeling for his own self in his existence and thus obtains gratification, the judgment knows his inwardness to be a drive towards his own happiness, even if this happiness were to consist only in inner moral vanity, in the enjoyment of a consciousness of his own excellence, and in the foretaste of a hope for a future happiness. – No action can escape being judged in such a way, for duty for duty's sake, this pure purpose, is the non-actual. It has its actuality in what individuality does, and as a result, the action has the aspect of particularity in itself. – No man is a hero to his valet, but not because that man is not a hero, but rather because the latter is – a valet, a person with whom the hero deals not as a hero but as someone who eats, drinks, gets dressed, in general in the singularity of the hero's needs and ideas.[10]

It is important to Hegel's analysis of the acting subject's action that both sides of interpretation are available (as Brandom puts it, Hegel makes clear that the reductive naturalism toward normativity expressed by the *Kammerdiener* does not represent a wrong assessment, but one that is only limited in the perspective which he takes).[11] It is of course not difficult to find biographies which take one or the other side of these approaches – there are numerous instances of both hagiographical and deflationary biographical treatments of historical subjects, as well as ones that (not unlike the conflicting moments of the judgment of the beautiful soul) incorporate both stances within their purview. The *valet de chambre* perspective can seem so sufficiently widespread in biographical work at times that (as my acquaintance with several well-known first-rate biographers has led me to think) a corollary of Hegel's point here might well

10) Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶665.

11) Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust*, c. 15.

be: *and no man is a hero to his biographer.* The question is how one might view the task of biographical narrative in general if the judgment of any subject by his actions is inherently open to such conflicting interpretations.

The *Philosophy of Right* passage makes the challenge of these conflicting perspectives on action even clearer:

> [There is a] psychological view of history which contrives to belittle and debase all great deeds and individuals by transforming into the main intention and effective spring of actions those inclinations and passions which were simultaneously satisfied by substantial activity, along with fame and honor and other consequences – indeed that the whole particular aspect which it had declared in advance to be inherently inferior. The same attitude assures us that, since great actions and the activity associated with a series of these have accomplished great things in the world and have consequently brought power, honor and fame to the *individual agent*, it is not the greatness itself which belongs to the individual, but only those particular and external consequences which accrued to him from it; and since this particular aspect is a consequence [of the individual's action], it is also supposed *for this reason* to have been the end, and indeed even the sole end in view. – Such reflection as this fixes upon the subjective side of great individuals – for its own basis is likewise subjective – and *overlooks* the substantial element in this edifice of vanity which it has itself constructed.[12]

But Hegel of course does not leave the conflict opened up by the differing perspectives on the acting subject's action unresolved. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit,* the conflict at the end of the Spirit chapter concludes instead with a recognitive form of resolution between the two sides – in this case, one involving both confession and forgiveness. These two biographical lines of interpretation (servant's and hero's) that open up in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* interpretation of the beautiful soul are always present in biographical work, but Hegel's approach seems to offer the possibility of not only seeing

12) Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §124 Remark.

their contention from a perspective (the "dueling versions" of the beautiful soul that seems to have been his rubric for the last section of the Spirit chapter) but also for placing these biographical tensions in the context of the larger project of historical narrative. In the context of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, this means the possibility of reconciliation or forgiveness between two beautiful souls – and in their acknowledgment, the (continually created) notion of community, in which (and only in which) lives may be "read." The community of "readers" is the community of all of us within Spirit.

The importance of these conflictual stances underlying the constitution of a community of readers may be obvious in times when there is a large consensus within communities, but it suddenly (and often without warning, as Hegel makes clear) emerges as an issue of great moment during contentious periods such as the French Revolution (or, one might argue, within the current political landscape of the United States).

III. Individual Biography in History and the Arts

In the previous section, the conflict between competing interpretations of an agent's motives was shown to be central to the interpretive task of an agent's biography. This section will explore a second kind of conflict – one between the actions that can be said to be distinctive for an individual and the connections between their actions and the wider set of historical events within the world. A consideration of this conflict will also allow for an exploration of biographical narrative and its specific relation to *art* – since the arts for Hegel often offer the opportunity to provide a distillation or crystallization of human individuality – as well as its relation to the broader modes of historiographical writing and Hegel's own practice when it comes to biographical writing.

Hegel's specific comments about biography in the context of his *Lectures on Aesthetics* and *Philosophy of Spirit* are not especially numerous, but it is clear it was a topic about which he had developed thoughts during the period in which he was writing on aesthetics and the philosophy of history while giving lectures on these themes at the University of Berlin in the 1820's.

In a number of these passages, Hegel notes a certain differentiation between the task of biography and the wider task of history. While history has a wide and *universal* scope, biography takes as its focus an *individual* and must therefore require a different sort of treatment. The frame of reference is exactly that with which we began in the

discussion of phrenology and physiognomy: as Hegel puts it there, "the true being of [the individual] is its deed; therein individuality is actual, … the character of the deed" (¶322). At the same time, the broader relation between the biography of individuals and the historical world in which they play a role is something which inescapably is present for any biographer:

> The point of interest of *Biography* … appears to run directly counter to any universal scope and aim. But biography too has for its background the historical world, with which the individual is intimately bound up: even purely personal originality, the freak of humor, etc. suggests by allusion that central reality and has its interest heightened by the suggestion. The mere play of sentiment, on the contrary, has another ground and interest than history.[13]

The *individuality* that biography must keep in mind makes it similar to some fine arts – not a surprising comparison, since many of the artistic genres discussed by Hegel in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* are especially concerned with the rendering of human individuality, whether the "beautiful individuality" captured by the ancient Greeks or the distinctly modern modes of individuality pursued by the Romantic poets in Hegel's own generation. Hegel compares biography to *poetry* (as opposed to prose), more specifically to the unity achievable in *epic poetry* (as opposed to episodic writing) and also to *sculpture* (as opposed to visual arts genres like landscape painting where the rendering of individual human beings is less at issue).

At the start of the *Aesthetics*' discussion of poetry, Hegel turns in his comparison of prose and poetry to what he clearly takes to be the correlate issue of the differences between historian and biographer:

> The historian has no right to expunge … prosaic characteristics in his material or to transform them into poetical ones; he must relate what confronts him and as it confronts him without reinterpreting it or giving it a poetic form. Therefore no matter how much he may struggle

13) Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, §549.

> to make the center and single concatenating bond of his narrative the inner sense and spirit of the epoch … he still has no freedom to subordinate to this purpose the circumstances, characters and events confronting him… .
>
> In a biography an *individual vitality and independent unity* does seem possible, because here what remains the center of the work is the individual, together with what he effects and what reacts on this single figure, but an historical character is only a unity of two different extremes… . Alexander, for example, is of course a single individual who stands on the summit of his age, and by his own individual decision, which harmonizes with external circumstances, embarks on his expedition against the Persian monarchy; but Asia, which he conquers, is only an accidental whole owing to the varied caprices of its individual populations and what happens there occurs simply in accordance with the direct superficial appearance of things.[14]

Hegel's suggestion that biographers – as opposed to historians more broadly – may have an eye for their subjects that goes beyond the *Prosa der Welt* is intriguing. The "law of prose," after all, is determined in Hegel's view by qualities such as "literal accuracy, unmistakable definiteness, and clear intelligibility" [*Richtigkeit, deutliche Bestimmtheit and klare Verständlichkeit*],[15] whereas poetry, while still "portraying the subject-matter," yet has a freedom to express a "living shape" that is "made the essential object of the contemplative interest."[16]

Hegel's emphasis on the *vitality and unity* of a subject is characteristic of his treatments of individuality and character.[17] The points he makes in this context about biography link interestingly also to his points about the task of portraiture in the visual arts, where the painter must renounce "what belongs to the mere chance of nature"

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14) Hegel, *Aesthetics* II.988-89; emphasis mine.

15) Ibid., II.1005.

16) Ibid., II.1005. For more on the importance of the poetry/prose distinction in Hegel, see Speight, "Hegel on Poetry."

17) Donougho, *Hegel's 'Individuality'*.

and accept "only what makes a contribution to characterizing the individual himself in his most personal inmost being": "if the portrait is to be a genuine work of art, it must … have stamped on it the unity of the spiritual personality."[18]

What narrative biography must concentrate on, if the capturing of individuality in this sense is possible for it, is the qualities and passions of the individual in a way that the reader can recognize the essential *character* of the biographical subject – the passions and qualities to which Hegel gives the term *pathos*, in a connection to the motivating grounds of action in ancient Greek tragedy.[19]

Within the *Aesthetics*, Hegel's accounts of biography thus involve him in comparisons even with seemingly more distant artistic genres such as sculpture:

> In a biography … which relates the various fortunes, adventures, and acts of an individual, this history of diverse complications and arbitrariness usually ends with a character-sketch which summarizes this extensive detail in some such general quality as "goodness, honesty, bravery, intellectual excellence" etc. Descriptions like these report what is permanent in an individual whereas the additional particular details belong only to the accidents of his career. This permanent element is what sculpture has to portray as the one and only being and existence of individuality."[20]

Hegel's view of characterological *unity* in fact is reminiscent of Aristotle's discussion of the unified *mythos* or plot structure required of successful epic and tragic poetry, as opposed to a looser narrative episodicity.[21] This background contrast seems to remain a part of Hegel's mentions of biography in the *Aesthetics* even when he is noticing the differences between epic and biographical unity:

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18) Hegel, *Aesthetics*, II.867, II.866.

19) On this notion of Hegel and the biographical task of expressing the characteristic *pathos* of an individual, see Klaus Vieweg's discussion in his biography of Hegel, which emphasizes these points in connection with Hegel's affection for the portrayal of lives in literary works like Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* as well (Vieweg, *Hegel: The Philosopher of Freedom*, 9).

20) Hegel, *Aesthetics*, II.712.

21) Aristotle, *Poetics*, c. vi.

> In a biography the individual does remain one and the same, but the events in which he is involved may fall apart from one another independently, and their point of connection with him may be purely external and accidental. But if the epic is to be a unity in itself, the event in the form of which its subject-matter is presented must also have unity in itself.[22]

If, as suggested above, the conflict between the "heroic" interpretation of actions within a biography and the perspective of the *Kammerdiener* is one which Hegel ultimately centers in a consideration of the grounds for a community of readers, the conflict between individual biography and the contingencies of larger external and accidental forces is one which likewise remains part of an ongoing challenge for narrative biography in its relation to the global historian's task as well. One way to see Hegel's approach to this question of biography's relation to history more broadly is to remember that Hegel's interest in this topic was not merely theoretical. Both in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* and the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* Hegel himself wrote distinctive and unified treatments of prominent philosophical and historical figures, from Thales and Alexander in ancient Greece to Napoleon and the figures of Hegel's own contemporary philosophical world. It was not enough for him in lectures simply to move, say, directly from the presentation of one philosophical system to another, but he framed the overall narrative of the historical place of differing philosophies with biographical perspectives of individual philosophers themselves.

Hegel's take on the question of the motivations and actions of so-called "world-historical individuals" has, of course, been much discussed, especially his claim that the actions of such individuals are determined by a ruling passion – one that Hegel says was typically not understood by those individuals themselves. While these world-historical figures have both a "consciousness of this actuality," they are "at the same time the unconscious instruments and organs of that inner activity in which the shapes which they themselves assume pass away" and "they cannot perceive it and it is not their object and end."[23] Beyond these very general remarks, however, it is worth noticing in light of what has been said about biography and art that Hegel's descrip-

22) Hegel, *Aesthetics*, II.1066.

23) Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §344, §348.

tions of great figures in history are often framed with poetic points of comparison that seem to gesture toward the "vitality and unity" that we have seen he took to be central to biographical characterization: Pericles is "the Zeus of the human Pantheon of Athens"[24]; Alexander "had the good fortune to die at the proper time; i.e., it may be called good fortune, but it is rather a necessity that he may stand before the eyes of posterity as a youth, an early death must hurry him away."[25]

Although an exhaustive study of Hegel's biographical practice is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth emphasizing the level of skill Hegel evidently brought to many of these biographical sketches. In the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy,* for example, his sources are typically wide-ranging and chosen with critical care, and they involve both a keen eye for telling detail and sharp portraiture: Hegel sifts through the various sources for Thales' background, for example, and chooses Diogenes' version of his receiving a golden tripod. And although it is Hegel's friend Hölderlin who offered a genuinely poetic reading of the tragic end of Empedocles, Hegel's more sober account is one that still conveys the distinctive but possibly legendary nature of the life of the sage of Acragas ("after a feast he is said either to have suddenly disappeared or else to have been on Etna with his friends, and suddenly to have been seen of them no more."[26]

Hegel's treatment of Socrates is perhaps the most fully-developed biographical portrait of all the figures in the *History of Philosophy* lectures – not only in the range of historical details offered but also in Hegel's structuring of it around the essential relation between *universal* and *individual* in Socrates' thought: "His philosophy, which asserts that real existence is in consciousness as a universal, is still not a properly speculative philosophy, but remained individual; yet the aim of his philosophy was that it should have a universal significance."[27]

After discussing the details of Socrates' upbringing in Athens, including his military service and role as a citizen, Hegel asks his Berlin listeners to consider Socrates as one among many famous individuals who are almost self-forming characters within

24) Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 261.

25) Ibid., 273.

26) Hegel, *History of Philosophy*, 312.

27) Ibid., 392.

a larger historical drama that can itself be viewed in artistic terms – with the key aesthetic elements of *plasticity, beauty and vitality*:

> [Socrates] lived amongst his fellow-citizens, and stands before us as one of those great plastic natures consistent through and through, such as we often see in those times – resembling a perfect classical work of art which has brought itself to this height of perfection. Such individuals are not made, but have formed themselves into what they are; they have become that which they have wished to be, and are true to this. In a real work of art the distinguishing point is that some idea is brought forth, a character is presented in which every trait is determined by the idea, and because this is so, the work of art is, on the one hand, living, and on the other, beautiful, for the highest beauty is just the most perfect carrying out of all sides of the individuality in accordance with one inward principle.[28]

The notion of plasticity to which Hegel appeals here is a distinctive feature in many of his treatments of classical biographical figures – like ancient Greek sculpture itself, Greek individuality is for him characterized precisely for the way in which it is shaped and formed. For Socrates, this shaping is an *internal* one, in such a way that Socratic philosophy must always be seen as "[of] a piece with his life" – it "appears to imply a withdrawal from actual affairs as it did to Plato, yet in that very way gives itself this inward connection with ordinary life."[29] Hegel shows how this intimate connection of philosophy and life in Socrates is one that can be seen in the virtues that were characteristic of him, as well as in his appeals to the principle of inward conviction that in Hegel's view was only starting to emerge within Greek culture at the time of Socrates. Hegel's treatment of the figure of Socrates thus brings together a number of the features we have seen in his philosophical engagement with biographical narrative: in biography, broader universal themes are related to an essentially individual portrait, one that is held together above all by the self-forming individual himself in his action and thought.

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28) Ibid., 393.

29) Ibid., 396.

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