„…and the listeners became great through them“: On the Ambivalence of Cultural Narratives

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Abstract
This paper addresses the question what role cultural narratives play in the context of orientation crises, as the European Union has been experiencing for some years. With reference to Albrecht Koschorke's "general narrative theory", such narratives are described as reducing complexity. This is also the reason for their fundamental ambivalence. In political or cultural crises, collective narratives can have a meaning-giving effect and offer orientation to an unsettled public, but this often happens at the price of neglecting or even ignoring certain social groups. Precisely because narratives ultimately prove to be indispensable for a culture's self-assurance, they require permanent critical reflection. The paper illustrates these connections first with the example of texts from the crisis-ridden 1930s and then goes into cultural-critical positions of Romanticism, in which the call for a return to the myth was first heard.

Key-Words
collective myths, cultural memory, cultural narratives, Great Depression, homo narrans, invented traditions, retrotopia, Romanticism

To state that narratives can have a charming effect on people may seem a truism. There are probably many contemporaries who would prefer being carried away by a novel's thrilling plot before critically reflecting on the elements which constitute it. Although narratives are often associated with the realm of fiction, it is important to keep in mind that they are not restricted to this sphere. In his book *Wahrheit und Erfindung: Grundzüge einer allgemeinen Erzähltheorie* (2012), Albrecht Koschorke propagates the term *homo narrans* in order to demonstrate the importance of narratives for our everyday lives (Koschorke 2012: 9ff.). In his analysis, narratives gain their appeal by reducing the complex realities in which we find ourselves to specific explanatory patterns (Koschorke 2012: 29ff.). In 1980, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson had already assumed that such patterns could represent a kind of survival tool. “Myths”, the authors pointed out, “provide ways of comprehending experience; they give order to our lives. Like metaphors, myths are necessary for making sense of what goes on around us. All cultures have myths, and people cannot function without myth any more than they can function without metaphor” (Lakoff/Johnson 1980: 185f.).

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It is obvious that Lakoff and Johnson had in mind not only mythical tales from ancient times but narrative patterns in a more general sense. Such patterns, it may be assumed, are not only essential for handling everyday life situations, but to a large extent they are also responsible for the ways in which human communities perceive themselves. The modern nation state, for instance, which Benedict Anderson has characterised as an "imagined community" (Anderson 2006), may officially rest on a constitution and a set of laws but owes its cohesion and strength also to commonly shared narratives about a collective past. As Hayden White has shown, these narratives were often provided by historiographers eager to reduce a vast amount of available historical data to a specific plot structure in order to achieve an explanatory effect (White 1973, 1982).

That narratives are capable of creating a sense of order by reducing the complexities of reality to a seemingly logical sequence of events may explain their importance particularly in times of political or cultural crisis. Under such circumstances, traditional narratives which have worked successfully for a long time may suddenly lose their public appeal, and a search for new interpretations, or alternative narratives of the past, may set in. This situation can currently be observed within the EU, which has faced several political crises over the last two decades (Kirschner/Nate 2020). Accordingly, commentators such as Werner Weidenfeld have diagnosed the lack of a common European narrative and have called for a suitable one in order to furnish an increasingly discontented populace with a new sense of direction (Weidenfeld 2017).

While cultural narratives may certainly prove beneficial and consoling on account of their coherent quality, it should not be forgotten that such an effect is always achieved at a certain cost. What Lakoff and Johnson observe with respect to the process of linguistic categorisation – namely that certain aspects of reality always tend to be highlighted while others are neglected, or even concealed (Lakoff/Johnson 1980: 163) – holds true for cultural narratives as well. What seems to be their greatest advantage, namely to give order to our lives, also seems to be their greatest problem. As debates over the last few decades have shown, the reductive quality of cultural narratives can equally lead to harmful results. The "master narratives", which for a long time have served to justify European nationalism and colonialism, are a case in point. While much scholarly energy has effectively been devoted to reveal their reductive – in this case Eurocentric – quality, it may prove much more difficult to decide which narratives should be told in their stead.

To illustrate the ambivalent character of cultural narratives, it seems useful to concentrate on those historical periods which were shaped by

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a general mood of crisis. In what follows, I will first refer to some more recent examples from the 1930s which saw the Great Depression and a rise of totalitarian regimes, and then look at the romantic period in which calls for a mythic revival were first expressed.

1. The Use of Cultural Narratives

When American writer John Steinbeck responded to the political and cultural crisis of the Great Depression with his novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), he did so by having recourse to a repository of myths that had for a long time helped define his country's collective identity. One of these was the Puritan narrative in which the North American continent was conceived of as a New Israel (Paul 2014: 137ff.). At surface level, Steinbeck's novel describes the fate of a family called the Joads who are forced to leave their home in the Midwest because of dust storms and crop failures and who try to make a living in California by becoming fruit pickers. A number of references, however, make it clear that the story of the Joads is also built on another narrative, namely the book of Exodus. Like the Israelites of old, the Joads are destined to cross a desert in order to arrive in what they perceive as a promised land – the state of California. The fact that there are twelve family members clearly alludes to the twelve tribes of Israel. By inserting such references, Steinbeck obviously intended to ennoble a group of people whom many Californians at that time regarded as unwelcome immigrants, often disparagingly referred to as "Okies" or "Arkies".

What makes the novel interesting is the fact that Steinbeck did not rest content with telling the exodus of the Joads but also included some documentary "interchapters" in which a narrative voice comments on the overall political situation, often in a prophetic tone. In one of these chapters, an unnamed group of dust bowl migrants is portrayed who gather in a provisional camp by the roadside and spend the evening with singing and the telling of stories. The passage is dominated by an anaphoric style, obviously modelled on biblical narratives. Taking up the pose of an Old Testament prophet, Steinbeck's narrator explains that to the migrants the telling of stories means much more than just a pastime activity:

> And it came about in the camps along the roads […] that the story teller grew into being, so that the people gathered in the low firelight to hear the gifted ones. And they listened while the tales were told, and their participation made the stories great. […] And the people

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> listened, and their faces were quiet with listening. The story tellers, gathering attention into their tales, spoke in great rhythms, spoke in great words because the tales were great, and the listeners became great through them (Steinbeck 1992: 444f.).

While it is possible that to those readers who are accustomed to the subtle ironies of postmodern fiction such a passage may seem slightly overblown, it still illustrates the therapeutic role that narratives can play in a situation of crisis. As Steinbeck's narrator holds, listening to the "story tellers" does not only have a consoling effect on the homeless but an empowering one as well. It is mostly through the telling of stories that a sense of collective identity is achieved.

It is also true, however, that in order to make his point Steinbeck relied on a heroic view of American history inherited from the nineteenth century. By presenting his dust bowl migrants as the true heirs of nineteenth-century frontiersmen, he made sure that they fitted into the "manifest destiny" pattern which journalist John O'Sullivan had introduced in the early nineteenth century. In using this pattern, Steinbeck may have been instrumental in raising the status of an underprivileged group, but he achieved this only at the cost of neglecting, if not ignoring, other ethnic groups whose members were affected by the depression even more severely. While Steinbeck's readers probably felt ashamed at the exploitation of white migrant workers in California, seasonal workers from Mexico hardly entered the picture. Obviously, their inclusion would have undermined the coherence of the author's narrative.

Steinbeck's novel can be taken as an example to illustrate how literary and cultural narratives can overlap and reinforce each other. Accompanied by the biblical rhetoric of the interchapters, the story of the Joad family assumes a symbolic quality in perfect accordance with contemporary attempts at "reinventing America" (Nate 2003: 34ff.). One of the writers who presented a highly poeticised account of U.S. American history at a time when the national self-image had been severely damaged by the economic crisis was James Truslow Adams. His book, which was significantly entitled *The Epic of America* (1931), was meant to celebrate, among other things, the heroic deeds of the American "common man". In the context of the depression, Adams obviously felt justified to transcend the boundaries of ordinary historiography by offering his readers a narrative with which they could identify. As he stated in his preface, his aim as a writer had been "[…] to paint a picture, with broad strokes of the brush, of the variegated past which has made our national story, and at the same time to discover for himself and others how the ordinary American […]

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has become what he is to-day in outlook, character, and opinion" (Adams 1941: vii).

Adams' characterisation of seventeenth-century colonial life illustrates how he attempted to achieve this goal. In the colonial period, he stated, "[t]he common man had taken a vast step forward. In the forests of America he had become perhaps a freer individual than he had been at any time in the thousand years since his Anglo-Saxon ancestors had dwelt in the forests of Germany" (Adams 1941: 41). A passage like this illustrates the reductive quality of historical story-telling. Not only are various individuals from a certain historical period metonymically reduced to a masculine third person singular (the "common man"), but they are also collectively declared to be the descendants of an ethnic tribe whose roots are located in some fantasy place called "the forests of Germany". Despite, or rather because of, such rhetorical manoeuvring, Adams' book enjoyed a long-term success – not only in the depression years but also in subsequent decades. Significantly, one of the metaphors Adams introduced in his book was that of the "American Dream" which since then has assumed the nature of a seemingly timeless qualifier.

It would be a simplification, however to state that political commentators from the 1930s would generally have resorted to story-telling as a means of coping with the crisis of the depression. In contrast to Adams, British writer H. G. Wells betrayed a more critical attitude to historiography when he looked back on the history lessons he had received as a student. In his book *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), he complained about the nationalist orientation of his teachers who had staged British history for him as a kind of heroic enterprise: "It was made a matter of general congratulation about me that I was English", Wells noted and described how he had been offered a clean-cut master narrative geared to justify British imperial politics. Mimicking the diction of his school teachers, Wells wrote:

> We English by sheer native superiority, practically without trying, had possessed ourselves of an Empire on which the sun never set, and through the errors and infirmities of other races were being forced slowly but steadily – and quite modestly – towards world dominion (Wells 1934: 99).

It should be added that by 1934 Wells had already gained the reputation of being a cosmopolitan. As early as 1905, he had propagated the World State as a future model for humanity, and in publications such as *A Short History of the World* (1922), he had presented himself as a proponent of transnational historiography. Accordingly, in his autobiography of 1934

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he mocked the limited perspective of his school teachers who, in spite of offering a critical analysis, had presented him with a dubious success story in which England "after some centuries of royal criminality, civil wars and wars in France, achieved the Reformation and blossomed out into the Empire" (Wells 1934: 99f.).

It is no mere coincidence that this critique of nationalist historiography was formulated shortly after the Nazis' seizure of power. Instead of simply blaming his German neighbours for relapsing into an aggressive jingoism, Wells reminded his readers of the fact that nationalism had long since been a European phenomenon. Even more disturbing, he remembered that the historical narrative of his school teachers had been based on racial prejudices strikingly similar to those of the Nazis. As Wells explained:

> [M]y mind had leapt all too readily to the idea that I was a blond and blue-eyed Nordic, quite the best make of human being known. England was consciously Teutonic in those days […] we talked of our "Keltic fringe" and ignored our Keltic infiltration; and the defeat of France in 1870-71 seemed to be the final defeat of the decadent Latin peoples (Wells 1934: 99f.).

Critical reflections such as these, however, should not distract us from recognising that Wells was a great story-teller himself. This holds true not only for his fiction but also for some of his sociological and political essays. One of the reasons why Wells preferred universal history before national accounts was his devotion to evolutionary theory. As a true Darwinian, he did not believe in any fixed categories, such as "the British character" or "the Nordic race" but would regard humanity as an integral part of an overall evolutionary process. When in his essay *First and Last Things* (1908), Wells stated that one principal driving force in history was "race", he did not have in mind the fixed typologies which contemporary racial anthropologists would offer but defined the term as follows:

> The race flows through us, the race is the drama and we are the incidents. This is not any sort of poetical statement; it is a statement of fact. In so far as we are individuals, in so far as we seek to follow merely individual ends, we are accidental, disconnected, without significance, the sport of chance. In so far as we realize ourselves as experiments of the species for the species, just in so far do we escape from the accidental and from the chaotic. We are episodes in an experience greater than ourselves (Wells 1929: 65).

It is not difficult to detect the pitfall in this passage. Although *First and Last Things* was meant to be read as a philosophical essay, what Wells

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characterises as a "statement of fact" here is nothing but a poetical allegory in which "race" is presented as the hero of a cosmic stage-play. Whatever the author's motive may have been on this particular occasion, it is not hard to see that he did not hesitate to resort to mythical patterns as long as they seemed to serve his own agenda.

2. Re-Enchantments

In European history, romanticism stands out as an artistic and intellectual movement which celebrated myth as a panacea for the problems of the modern world. In reaction to the gestures of soberness which had defined earlier rationalism and empiricism, romantic writers were eager to reclaim myth as the true fountain of knowledge. While the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century had caused a disenchantment of the world, to use Max Weber's term, writers from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries called for a re-enchantment. One of these was Novalis, a young poet from Thuringia, whose real name was Friedrich von Hardenberg. In his philosophical aphorisms, he suggested poetry as a new religion and demanded a "Romantisierung der Welt" (Novalis 1996: 313). In a well-known poem attached to his unfinished historical novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, he expressed his complaints about the age of reason whose proponents had explained the cosmos in mere quantitative terms. Disillusioned by what Immanuel Kant had previously characterised as a process of "enlightenment" (*Aufklärung*), Novalis envisioned an age in which reality would no longer be explained with the help of "numbers and figures" ("Zahlen und Figuren"). As he proclaimed, the ills of modernity could only be healed if tales and poems were acknowledged as the true sources of knowledge – in Novalis' words: "when one in tales and poems sees / the world's eternal histories" (1842: 217).

The highly idealised vision of the medieval world which Novalis presented in his essay *Die Christenheit oder Europa* (1799) shows that his approach to history writing was also "romantic". In describing the Middle Ages, he cared little about historical accuracy. Not accidentally, the first word of his essay – an indefinite "once" – is reminiscent of the way in which his contemporary Wilhelm Grimm would begin his fairy-tales. Novalis began his essay as follows:

> Once there were fine, resplendent times when Europe was a Christian land, when one Christendom occupied this humanly constituted continent. One great common interest united the remotest provinces of

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> this broad spiritual realm. Without great worldly possessions, one Head guided and unified the great political forces (Novalis 1960: 45).

Novalis' primary aim was to present the image of an ideal reality situated somewhere in the past. In doing so he adopted a perspective that American philosopher Zygmunt Bauman has recently described as "retrotopian" (Bauman 2017). The narrative underlying Novalis' essay is one of cultural decline to which is added the promise of a regeneration in the near future. According to Novalis, the original harmony of a Catholic theocracy was corrupted by a continual fragmentation comprising the realms of religion, politics and science. Not surprisingly, the author's account of the European past ends with an appeal to providential history. Once the project of re-enchanting the world is realised, we are told, Europe will emerge as a New Jerusalem (Novalis 1996: 43).

In the nineteenth century, this kind of romantic mythmaking found many imitators. One of them was Thomas Carlyle, a Scottish writer who, while travelling through Germany, had come into contact with several representatives of the romantic movement. Today, Carlyle is mostly known for having coined the term "hero-worship", which is based on the assumption that human history can best be defined through the extraordinary deeds of gifted leaders. In *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841), Carlyle stated: „[A]s I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones […]" (Carlyle 1908: 239).

Disillusioned by modern developments such as rationalist philosophy or democracy, Carlyle predicted the return of an age of true heroism. How much he was inspired by Novalis' call for romanticising reality becomes obvious in his characterisation of the historical process as a heroic enterprise. Referring to those contemporaries who shared his discontent with the modern world, Carlyle promised: „Their acted history will then again be a Heroism; their written history, what it once was, an Epic" (Carlyle 1965: 240).

Carlyle's epic history was meant to be an antidote against what he perceived as the "dead spirit" of the Age of Reason. What the author despised in particular was a mechanistic view of the universe established during the Scientific Revolution. Carlyle's statement that the "Almighty Maker" was "not a Clockmaker" (Carlyle 1965: 149) was directed against deist philosophers but it also bore political implications. In Carlyle's view, democracy represented the social corollary of a mechanistic view of the universe. "Democracy", he declared, "means despair of finding any Heroes

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to govern you" (Carlyle 1965: 215). What Carlyle deemed necessary in order to fight the perceived cultural crisis of his age was to replace the inherited scientific view of the cosmos by a romantic one in which poetic inspiration counted more than empirical data and to dispense with the complex processes of democratic decision-making in favour of "a mighty Series of Heroic Deeds – a mighty Conquest over Chaos" in which "Deeds [were] greater than Words" (Carlyle 1965: 162).

Carlyle's critique of the scientific heritage – a critique which romantic writers such as William Blake had uttered before him – started from the assumption that the proponents of the Scientific Revolution had indeed dispensed with all kinds of story-telling for the sake of a sober investigation of nature. If one takes at face value the declarations of early modern scientists to "separate the knowledge of *Nature*, from the colours of *Rhetorick*, the devices of *Fancy*, or the delightful deceit of *Fables*" (Sprat 1667: 62), this assumption may seem justified. A closer look at the ways in which early modern scientists presented their programme, however, reveals that such statements have to be taken with a pinch of salt (Nate 2015: 77f.). Thus, it is true that Francis Bacon, who in many respects may be seen as the harbinger of modern science, demanded that scientific knowledge should be based on observation and experiment rather than written sources. In *De Augmentis Scientiarum* (1623), he reminded his readers of the fact that human beings were prone to believe in pleasant tales all too easily. Commenting on what he called the "idols of the mind", Bacon ascribed this tendency to a general desire "to suppose the existence of more order and regularity in the world" than one could actually find (Bacon 1858-1874: IV, 55). Accordingly, Bacon would sharply demarcate natural philosophy from any poetic enterprise, characterising misleading philosophical views as "idols of the theatre", as "stories invented for the stage" which were always "more compact and elegant, and more as one would wish them to be, than true stories out of history" (Bacon 1858-1874: IV, 63).

Such insights, however, did not prevent Bacon from acting as one of the greatest mythologisers in the history of natural philosophy. Not shying away from any grand gestures, Bacon would stage his experimental philosophy as a „Great Instauration" – not only of scientific knowledge but of the world in general. It is interesting to note that in promoting his plan he resorted to providential history just like Novalis would do two centuries after him. Thus, Bacon interpreted the contemporary voyages of discovery as well as the advancement of learning as integral parts of a divine plan for which he cited the prophet Daniel as witness. In his *Novum Organum* (1620), Bacon wrote:

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> Nor should the prophecy of Daniel be forgotten, touching the last ages of the world: – „Many shall go to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased;“ clearly intimating that the thorough passage of the world (which now by so many distant voyages seems to be accomplished, or in course of accomplishment), and the advancement of the sciences, are destined by fate, that is, by Divine Providence, to meet in the same age (Bacon 1858-1874: IV, 92).

Bacon's warnings against interpreting reality in the light of received tales as well as his demand for taking observation and experiment as the principal sources of knowledge obviously did not prevent him from presenting his own programme of a "Great Instauration" within a traditional narrative framework – namely that of providential history.

3. European Implications

Although narratives have never disappeared from the political sphere, it was in the context of nineteenth-century nation building that they assumed a particular significance. While it would certainly be wrong to state that all writers from the romantic period were prone to nationalism, their poetic approach to historiography proved quite compatible with the nationalist rhetoric which would soon dominate the nineteenth century. Nationalist movements particularly welcomed those stories about the past which corroborated their political aims. In order to create the impression that a nation's course was not contingent but followed a higher destination, poetic imagination proved to be much more convenient than minute historical analysis. As Eric Hobsbawm has shown, for the sake of creating a sense of national identity, national traditions were often invented rather than detected (Hobsbawm 1992). While in England, feelings of national pride were fuelled by heroic tales about mythical figures such as King Arthur or Robin Hood (Barczewski 2000), German authors were eager to reinvent the ancient commander Arminius as a German patriot they posthumously called "Hermann der Cherusker" (Münkler 2009). It is obvious that such undertakings almost always served a political agenda. Two volumes published in Germany in 1905, entitled *Deutschlands Ruhmeshalle* (Germany's Hall of Fame), illustrate how Thomas Carlyle's idea of heroic historiography could be put into practice. In a preface written by emperor William II. we read:

> I believe that it is through history that the national population can be introduced into the elements which have constituted their experience

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> and their power. The more diligent and deeper history is imprinted upon the people, the more they will be able to understand their condition and the more they will be ready to be trained for magnificent deeds and thoughts.[1]

In these remarks the pragmatic aspect of nineteenth-century invented traditions becomes obvious. Like other European countries, Imperial Germany disposed of a whole range of narratives suited to make listeners feel "great". That these tales were not as innocent as it seemed but could have a terrible political impact became clear in the summer of 1914 when European soldiers were suddenly forced to prove the heroic spirit they had so often been presented with in their well-formulated history books.

Given the experience of two world wars, triggered and fostered to a large extent by national myths, it stands to reason that late twentieth-century commentators would regularly stress the dangers inherent in any attempt at reducing the complexities of history to a single narrative pattern. The fact that the European Union does presently not dispose of any narrative which could heighten its popularity among the electorate must be seen as a result of this. The process of European integration, which slowly gained momentum in Western Europe in the afterwar decades and since 1990 has also included the former Warsaw Pact states, has often been described not as an extension but as a counterpart to the nineteenth century nation building process. Heroic narratives which could make listeners "feel great" were generally avoided. When historian Ute Frevert reflected on the task of European Studies in 2005, she called for a critical reflection of the past rather than the creation of an easily digestible narrative. The aim of such a reflection, she hoped, would invite European citizens to develop a sense not of pride but of humility. In a newspaper article, she wrote:

> While pride borders on arrogance and restricts our understanding of the world around us, a view of history which admits one's own failures invites for humility. [...] The destructive force of a national politics of identity must be realised and the atrocities of European colonisation must be brought to light. In the search for their own history and

1 „Ich glaube, daß gerade durch das Studium der Geschichte das Volk eingeführt werden kann in die Elemente, aus denen seine Erfahrung und seine Kraft sich aufgebaut haben. Je mehr und eifriger und eingehender die Geschichte dem Volke eingeprägt wird, desto sicherer wird es Verständnis für seine Lage gewinnen und dadurch in einheitlicher Weise zu großartigem Handeln und Denken erzogen werden" (Wilhelm II. 1905, trans. R.N.).

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> cultural identity the citizens of Europe must be guided not by a sense of pride but by critical self-inspection.[2]

One year later, sociologist Ulrich Beck expressed a similar view. Rather than outlining a straightforward programme towards European identity formation, he demanded a process of continual self-reflection. What he had in mind was a "selbstkritisches Experimentaleuropa" (Beck 2004: 256). If a sense of European identity was to emerge at all, Beck argued, it could only be realised through an awareness of its own contradictions and ruptures. Simplified concepts of "Europeanness" were not regarded as helpful in this respect (Beck 2004: 252).

While there can be little doubt that the positions held by Frevert and Beck are crucial when it comes to the question of how to deal with Europe's complex past, their impact beyond the sphere of academic discussions is less clear. The reason for this is the gap which often exists between academic debates among scholars on the one hand and public discourse on the other (Koschorke 2012: 42). The Brexit campaign of 2016 provides a good example in this respect. While there may have been many experts able to prove its insincerity, it still demonstrated the effectiveness of a rhetoric which avoided critical self-reflection for the sake of a nostalgic narrative of national pride. To what extent Ulrich Beck's ambitious project of a "selbstkritisches Experimentaleuropa" proves feasible in view of current populist campaigns appears to be an open question.

Still, it would be misleading to assume that narratives are necessarily geared to create uncritical images of the past. "Hero worship" at the expense of critical self-reflection is certainly not an indispensable ingredient of cultural memory. As Albrecht Koschorke has argued, in public debates the deconstruction of master narratives is as common as myth-making (Koschorke 2004: 24). Narratives are often called into question once their reductive quality becomes obvious. Again, James Truslow Adams' *The Epic of America* may serve as an illustration. Although the book glorifies the deeds of the "common man", it was not the author's sole intention to make readers "feel great". Some passages actually read more like a collec-

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2 "Während Stolz an Hochmut grenzt und den Blick nach außen verengt, lädt ein Geschichtsbild, das die eigenen Brüche und Fehlleistungen offen benennt, zur Demut ein. […] Die destruktive Kraft nationaler Identitätspolitik muss […] ebenso Teil eines europäischen Geschichtsbewusstseins sein wie die Auseinandersetzung mit den Gewaltexzessen des europäischen Kolonialismus. Nicht selbstgerechter Stolz, sondern kritische Inspektion sei das Leitmotiv, unter dem Europas Bürger sich auf die Suche nach ihrer Geschichte und Identität begeben" (Frevert 2005, trans. R.N.).

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tive confession of guilt, drawing the readers' attention to public failures. On the final pages of his book, Adams bewailed "the ugly scars which have […] been left to us by our three centuries of exploitation and conquest of the continent", and he complained about the consumerism of the roaring Twenties, when U.S. Americans "came to insist upon business and money-making and material improvement as good in themselves" (Adams 1941: 405f.). When Adams stated: "We cannot become a great democracy by giving ourselves up as individuals to selfishness, physical comfort, and cheap amusements" (Adams 1941: 411), he took up the pose of a prophet similar to Steinbeck's narrator. It is very likely that such rhetoric was ultimately inspired by the Bible in which heroic tales, such as the conquest of Jericho, are often juxtaposed with accounts of collective transgressions, such as the adoration of the golden calf.

Like all tales, cultural narratives can serve many different purposes. As regards Europe, the last two centuries have presented us with a whole range of narratives – optimistic as well as pessimistic, democratic as well as authoritarian, if not totalitarian. If the project of "narrating Europe anew" is meant to be more than just a short-lived campaign, the risks as well as the chances of cultural narratives must be considered carefully. While there is certainly no point in creating any new complacent "master narrative", there is also the danger of scaring off a wider public with highly sophisticated academic debates. A critical awareness of the ambivalence inherent in cultural narratives may prove helpful in any case – the more so, since the recent success of conspiracy theories has demonstrated a continuing desire to overcome the complexities of reality with intriguing little stories designed to explain just about anything. Two hundred years after Novalis, the temptation to "romanticise" reality seems as vital as ever.

In 1983, British writer Graham Swift published a novel whose protagonist, a frustrated history teacher, defines man as a "story-telling animal". "[C]an I deny", the teacher confesses, "that what I wanted all along was not some golden nugget that history would at last yield up, but History itself: the Grand Narrative, the filler of vacuums, the dispeller of fears of the dark?" (Swift 2002: 62). Interestingly, the teacher's words illustrate two things at once. Not only do they admit the fact that human beings share an unquenchable desire for narratives, but they also give testimony to our capability of critically reflecting on this desire.

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