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Striving for Perfection

The Concepts of *Bildung* and *Bestimmung* in Sophie Mereau's Early Works

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ABSTRACT

Sophie Mereau is a fascinating figure in Early German Romanticism: active in Jena during its peak cultural ferment, she was prominent in its literary and philosophical circles and became one of the most successful women writers of her time. This paper examines her earliest prose works – *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung* (1794) and the fragment *Briefe von Amanda und Eduard* (1797). It aims to highlight Mereau's extensive engagement with the contemporary philosophical discourse, especially Kant, by tracing the presence (and original reworking) of two themes in particular: the issue of individual development (*Bildung*) and the definition of the authentic human vocation. Mereau's approach combines ideas and motifs from German Classicism and Early Romanticism, as well as from the philosophy of the Late German Enlightenment. This unique combination allows her to address some of the most significant philosophical issues of her time from a unique point of view.

Keywords: individual development, human vocation, Sophie Mereau, early Romanticism, Enlightenment

ABSTRACT

Sophie Mereau costituisce una figura particolarmente interessante nel primo Romanticismo tedesco: presente a Jena durante il suo massimo fermento culturale, prende parte ai suoi circoli letterari e filosofici, diventando una delle autrici femminili di maggior successo del suo tempo. Il presente contributo s'incentra sulle sue prime opere in prosa – *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung* (1794) e il frammento *Briefe von Amanda und Eduard* (1797). Il suo scopo è quello di evidenziare il pieno coinvolgimento di Mereau nel discorso filosofico contemporaneo, tracciando la presenza (e la rielaborazione originale) di due temi in particolare: la questione dello sviluppo individuale (*Bildung*) e la definizione dell'autentica destinazione dell'uomo. Mereau si approccia a queste questioni unendo idee e motivi del Classicismo e del primo Romanticismo, nonché della filosofia del tardo Illuminismo tedesco. Questa originale combinazione le consente di affrontare alcune delle questioni filosofiche più significative del suo tempo da un punto di vista originale.

Parole chiave: sviluppo individuale, destinazione dell'uomo, Sophie Mereau, Romanticismo, Illuminismo

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In a volume published over two decades ago, Sophie Mereau was presented "as one of the most fascinating figures of German Classicism and Romanticism."[1] Born in Altenburg in 1770 into the family of a civil servant of the Duchy of Sachsen-Gotha-Altenburg, she received, along with her sister Henriette, an extremely refined education. Having moved to Jena in 1793 following her marriage to the librarian and future law professor Karl Mereau, Sophie soon began to attend the most important intellectual circles of the city, forming an important personal and professional relationship with Friedrich Schiller, who became her mentor and aided her in the publication of her works. In fact, as early as 1790, a short poetic composition by Mereau entitled *Bey Frankreichs Feier* had already appeared in Schiller's *Thalia*, in which the author explicitly praised the *Genius of Freedom* and the French Revolution. Her poetic activity continued even during her marriage to Karl Mereau and, afterwards, during her tumultuous relationship with the poet Clemens Brentano, and was soon accompanied by the production of novels, short stories, and translations. Her works found great success among her contemporaries, to the point where Mereau became one of the first German women to support herself through her intellectual work, particularly after her divorce from her first marriage, obtained in 1801. During her career, not only did Mereau participate in the most important and vibrant intellectual circles of Jena, but she became one of the focal points around which the cultural life of the city revolved.[2] She hosted weekly gatherings in her own home, in which many members of the Jena intelligentsia took part, and in 1794 she attended Fichte's lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre* and the *Vocation of the Scholar*; insights from Fichtean philosophy thus joined her ongoing engagement with Kant and Enlightenment philosophy.[3]

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1 Todd Kontje, *Women, the Novel, and the German Nation. 1771–1881* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 74. Parts of this paper were presented at the 6th FINO Graduate Conference in the History of Philosophy on September 12th, 2023.

2 In the afterword to her edition of Mereau's writings, K. von Hammerstein reports an observation by a student of the University of Jena: "A delightful presence in those gatherings was the Professor Mrs. Mereau [...]. At that time, she was highly celebrated by all who possessed intellect and taste; wherever she appeared, people crowded around her, seeking her attention, and forming a dense swarm of admirers who eagerly awaited a word or a smile from her. Even onlookers formed an impenetrable circle around her." Katharina von Hammerstein, "Nachwort", in Sophie Mereau-Brentano, *Wie sehn' ich mich hinaus in die freie Welt. Tagebuch, Betrachtungen und vermischte Prosa* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 257. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

3 Mereau was the only woman to attend Fichte's lectures and, for this reason, her presence was mentioned in the *Intelligenzblatt* of the *Allgemeine Literaturzeitung* in 1796 (Adrian Daub, *Uncivil Unions. The Metaphysics of Marriage in German Idealism and Romanticism* (London / Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 210. Mereau's engagement with

The following contribution focuses on Mereau's first published prose work – *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung* (1794) – and the fragment *Briefe von Amanda und Eduard*, which appeared in Schiller's *Die Horen* in 1797, in order to show how Mereau uses the narrative aspects of her novels to tackle some of the most pressing questions that were at the center of the late Enlightenment and early Romantic philosophical debates, such as the issue of individual development (*Bildung*) and of human determination[4], or the problem of the relationship between human beings and nature. The way Mereau approaches these issues reveals a combination of ideas and leitmotifs drawn from German Classicism and Early Romanticism, but also from the philosophy of Late German Enlightenment. It is precisely this original combination that enables the author to engage with some of the most significant philosophical issues of her time from a unique point of view.

1. *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung* and its Context

In the spring of 1794, a short novel with the title *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung*, was published in Gotha by Justus Perthes.[5] The author was not specified, but the introduction was signed by an anonymous *Verfasserin* (authoress). At first glance, the novel appears to be a love story with a seemingly simple and unoriginal plot: Albert, a young Swiss Calvinist, intends to complete his education and embarks on a journey to Italy. There, he encounters the beautiful Nanette, with whom he falls deeply in love. A series of mysterious circumstances separate the two lovers, and the rest of the novel unfolds as Albert attempts to find Nanette. His journey leads him to

Kantian philosophy is documented by a letter in which she asked Kant for a contribution to her philosophical and literary journal *Kalathiskos* (1801-1802), and by several mentions of the Kantian doctrine in the collection of fragmentary and undated observations that Mereau wrote throughout her life.

4 "Human determination" or "vocation" are among the standard English translations of the German expression *Bestimmung des Menschen*, which denotes a complex set of themes and debates that were central to German philosophy in the second half of the eighteenth century. The term *Bestimmung* is inherently polysemic, encompassing the act of determining (*bestimmen*) something, the properties or predicates – i.e. the *determinations* – of that thing, as well as its purpose or goal (Laura A. Macor, "Destinazione, missione, vocazione: un'espressione pura per la pura idea filosofica di *Bestimmung des Menschen*", *Rivista di Storia della Filosofia*, LXX, 1 (2015): 166). In the sense in which it was understood at the end of the eighteenth century, the *Bestimmung des Menschen* integrated these meanings, referring to the ultimate purpose that inherently defines human nature and toward which human beings must actively strive, thereby determining their actions in alignment with this goal.

5 In the following, reference will be made to K. von Hammerstein's edition of the text, published in Sophie Mereau-Brentano, *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung, Amanda und Eduard. Romane* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997).

travel across Europe, particularly in France and Switzerland, until he is finally reunited with his love. Despite its apparent simplicity, however, the narrative progression is often laborious and the events appear to be set in motion by implausible devices. A closer analysis of the text reveals that Mereau's concern with narrative coherence is secondary and subordinated to the reflections that the author delivers through the protagonist's internal monologue, the interaction between characters, or the lyrical description of wide, natural landscapes. This peculiar feature of Mereau's work did not escape the attention of her contemporaries: the novel, as stated in an anonymous review attributed to Nicolai, "entertains […] not so much through the action, which, apart from some improbable things, is interrupted and delayed by too frequent and long reflections, but rather through the fine reasoning and the pure, noble, and richly illustrated style."[6]

What the reviewers, however, seem not to notice, or at least to choose to overlook, are elements that contemporary scholarship has instead highlighted as particularly interesting and innovative.[7] In several parts of the novel, Mereau intersperses the narration of Albert's story with moments that reveal her deep commitment to the ideals of French Revolution[8], and where she expresses a harsh critique of oppressive social and statal institutions in European countries, that "leave the path open for so much injustice."[9] This aspect becomes particularly evident in Nanette's story, which constitutes the second narrative line within the novel. It runs parallel to Albert's journey but is only revealed in the second half of the novel, after the two protagonists are reunited. Orphaned at a young age and entrusted, along with her brother Lorenzo, to the care of an aunt, Nanette must face the machinations of their cunning older brother, who seeks to seize their inheritance. Unlike Lorenzo, who was persuaded to take monastic vows only to later flee from the monastery, Nanette was able to recognize their brother's true intentions and

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6 Friedrich Nicolai, *Neue allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* 20 (1795): 75-76. A second review, published in the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* underlines that "the entire narrative is presented to us more through descriptions than through action" and the whole book has more in common with the genre of pastoral idyll than with the novel. However, "the most profound philosophical thoughts and reflections are not lacking." Friedrich J. Bertuch, Christian G. Schütz, Christoph M. Wieland, eds., *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* 3, no. 180 (July 1795): 2-3.

7 Katharina von Hammerstein, "*Au bonheur de tous*. Sophie Mereau on Human Rights", in *Colloquia Germanica* 42 (2009): 97.

8 It is in revolutionary Paris, during the celebrations for the anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, that Albert and Nanette meet again after their initial separation. Both protagonists appear transformed by their enthusiasm for freedom and celebrate "the divine image of a liberated and happy people." Mereau-Brentano, *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung*, 22.

9 *Ibid*., 57.

run from him. However, she has not completely escaped his threat, as he remains her legal guardian and thus holds almost unlimited – and legally sanctioned – authority over her.

Every attempt made by Nanette to free herself from his control is only temporary, and she must live constantly on the run, as the laws offer no protection:

> Where do women have the right to enjoy direct legal protection? Rather, are they not almost everywhere subjugated to the whims of the man? How little consideration is taken even now for their natural rights, for the undisturbed enjoyment of their freedom and their strengths! Are they not more frequently merely *tolerated* rather than protected?[10]

Even the prospect of marrying Albert cannot offer such protection because the lovers are separated by their different religions, which makes the institutionalization of their union impossible in a society dominated by religious intolerance. There is no other solution, therefore, than to emigrate to the United States of America, depicted at the end of the novel as a vague and utopian place where "the genius of humanity rejoices in its rights again."[11]

This aspect has long been highlighted by contemporary scholarship as one of the most significant in the novel, given the subversive force of Mereau's criticism of social and civic institutions, which has often led scholars to consider her a predecessor of modern feminist critique on the issue of women's rights.[12] What this contribution intends to underline, however, is the presence of other themes, of a more theoretical nature, whose philosophical significance has yet to be fully appreciated.

The fact that Mereau's novel also has a strong theoretical interest emerges from its very introduction. Here, the anonymous *Verfasserin* immediately establishes a lexical and theoretical opposition between two different phases of life: "There is a time in our life", our youth, "when our feelings are

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10 *Ibid*., 43. trans. in Kontje, *Women, the Novel, and the German Nation*, 78.

11 *Ibid*., 58. At the end of the Eighteenth-century the United States became the epitome of freedom and equality for German intellectuals, and women especially, as they witnessed the failure of their hope for emancipation in the wake of the French Revolution and its exclusions of women from political activity; emblematic was the case of Olympe de Gouges, who in 1791 wrote the *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* but was later condemned and executed by the revolutionary government. Many learned women of the time began to feel the inconsistency between the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and equality and theorizations of the subordinate role of women. On the topic, see von Hammerstein, "*Au bonheur de tous*. Sophie Mereau on Human Rights."

12 See, for example, Katharina von Hammerstein, *Sophie Mereau-Brentano. Freiheit, Liebe, Weiblichkeit: Trikolore sozialer und individueller Selbstbestimmung um 1800* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 1993).

in their first full bloom, when the intoxicated heart […] chases every shadowy and fantastic image."[13] It is a state characterized by the rule of sensibility and imagination, but it is destined to end as soon as "the bright glow of reason", having developed its strength through the errors that the other faculties led us to commit, reaches maturity and "awakens us from a sweet slumber."[14] By employing the famous metaphor in which the sleep of imagination is interrupted by the light of reason that shows us that our judgments and actions require a higher law, Mereau explicitly draws from an enduring philosophical tradition.

Mereau goes on to state that the novel will focus on the representation of the pure sentiment that is distinctive of youth, but as the plot progresses, she also establishes a constant dialogue between the demands of reason and the needs of feeling, leading us to the conclusion that only in the harmonious coexistence of both can human nature reach its fulfillment.[15] It is a goal that the characters of the novel will only reach after a long and challenging process of personal development and through the fulfillment they find in their love; by implicitly raising the question of what it means to be human and how an individual can fully develop their humanity, this theme also implies the reference to the contemporary debates revolving around the authentic meaning of human existence, or – to use an expression that became paradigmatic during the second half of the 18th century – its true *Bestimmung* (determination, vocation, destination).

The *Bestimmung des Menschen* constitutes one of the key concepts in the theological, philosophical, and literary reflections of the Enlightenment concerning the problem of human nature and its purpose. This concept gained significant prominence with the publication of the theologian Johann Joachim Spalding's influential work *Betrachtung über die Bestimmung des Menschen* in 1748. The expression refers to a complex set of themes related to the determination of the ultimate purpose of human life – a purpose to which individuals are called both by their own nature and by God, but that must also be determined by individuals themselves through their moral choices.

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[13] Mereau-Brentano, *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung*, 9, trans. by D. W. Wood, in *Symphilosophie: International Journal of Philosophical Romanticism* 2 (2020): 191.

[14] *Ibid*., 191-192.

[15] The call for a complete and harmonious development of human faculties became very frequent in the philosophical debates of the end of the 18th century; in particular, given their closeness, it is especially interesting to note an affinity between the idea that emerges in the *Blütenalter der Empfindung* and a similar concept expressed by Schiller in *Ueber Anmut und Würde* (1793). A comparison between these two works will be attempted in the following section.

Acquiring awareness of one's *Bestimmung*, with its semantic complexity and the dialectic between heteronomy and self-determination, becomes the responsibility of every individual, since everyone tends towards the realization, fulfillment, and perfection of their own nature and dignity. Spalding, drawing inspiration from the philosophy of Shaftesbury, Stoicism, and his theological background[16], describes a journey of inner reflection that leads the subject to investigate the meaning of their existence using only natural means, ultimately discovering "why they exist and what they must be according to reason."[17] Following the guidance of reason and inner feeling, the path outlined by Spalding leads the narrating self to progress through a series of stages, allowing for a gradual ascent from the realm of the senses to virtue, and ultimately to the immortality of the soul and the otherworldly destination of the individual.

In the following decades, Spalding's treatise enjoyed an enormous editorial success, and the question of human destiny was placed at the center of Enlightenment philosophical reflection, to the extent that it became one of its foundational ideas.[18] Around this concept, intense debates ignited, and they involved thinkers of the caliber of Mendelssohn, Kant, Schiller, and Herder. These discussions gradually shifted the focus from the theological interest that still underlay Spalding's work (which aimed at laying the foundations for a moral reform of religion) to a more strictly moral concern, centered around the various possible meanings of the term *Bestimmung*. They

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16 Spalding is one of the prominent figures in the movement to reform Lutheran theology, known as Neology, that emerged in Germany in the second half of the 18th century. This movement aimed to highlight Christianity's practical value, placing greater emphasis on its moral teachings than on doctrinal content. For a more in-depth analysis of the Neological conception of religion, see Eric Carlsson, "Eighteenth-Century Neology", in Ulrich L. Lehner, Richard A. Muller, Anthony G. Roeber, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theology, 1600-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 642-650. On the influence of Shaftesbury and ancient philosophy on Spalding see, among others, Laura A. Macor, "The Place of the Human Being in the World: Johann Joachim Spalding, Religion, and Philosophy as a Way of Life", in Anne Pollock, Courtney D. Fugate, eds., *The Human Vocation in German Philosophy. Critical Essays and 18th Century Sources* (London/New York/Dublin: Bloomsbury, 2023), 107-123.

17 Johann J. Spalding, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* (Gießen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1908), 15.

18 Norbert Hinske, Stefano Fabbri Bertoletti, "Le idee portanti dell'Illuminismo tedesco. Tentativo di una tipologia", in *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. Classe di Lettere Filosofia* 3, 15, no. 3 (1985): 997-1034. Since it will not be possible, within the limited space of this contribution, to delve into the details of Spalding's work or the subsequent developments of the concept in later years, only some general notions will be provided to clarify how Sophie Mereau engages with this theme. For a more in-depth analysis, see Pollok, Fugate, eds., *The Human Vocation in German Philosophy*, or Laura A. Macor, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen (1748-1800). Eine Begriffsgeschichte* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2013).

also addressed the possibility of conceiving an otherworldly destination for humankind, as well as the question of whether achieving one's own destiny is something attainable for individuals or only for humanity as a whole.[19] The concept was soon related to the ideas of perfection and perfectibility of human nature. Spalding had already emphasized that humans possess "capacities susceptible of infinite growth"[20], and took this idea as evidence of the soul's survival after the death of the body. Thinkers such as Mendelssohn and Kant subsequently considered this striving for development to be the true *Bestimmung* of humanity, calling individuals to improve their faculties and approach perfection. While Mendelssohn's notion remained tied to the idea that the survival of the soul represents the ultimate guarantee of the realization of this determination[21], Kant shared Thomas Abbt's skepticism regarding the possibility of knowing what happens after death. However, this unknowability is valuable because it preserves human autonomy: if we had certain knowledge of God's will and our fate in the afterlife, we would be bound by an external obligation to act in accordance with the divine plan. But since we lack such perfect knowledge, Kant argued, we have the freedom to determine ourselves and our actions towards morality and virtue.[22] With

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19 The heated dispute between Mendelssohn and Thomas Abbt revolved precisely around the possibility for humans to know their destiny after death. This controversy became widely known after the publication of Abbt's *Zweifel über die Bestimmung des Menschen* (Doubts about the Determination of Man) and Mendelssohn's *Orakel, die Bestimmung des Menschen betreffend* (Oracle concerning the Determination of Man) in 1764. For a more detailed overview of the conceptual alternatives associated with the concept of *Bestimmung*, see Anne Pollok, "Introduction", in Pollok, Fugate, eds., *The Human Vocation in German Philosophy*, 2-8.

20 Spalding, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, 28.

21 Thus speaks Socrates in the third dialogue of the *Phaedon, oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele* (1767): "From the most unknowing creations, up to the most perfect among the created spirits, all have their own determination, befitting of the wisdom of God, and appropriate to their own powers and capabilities, to make themselves and others more perfect." Finite beings are thus called by this determination to become more similar to divine nature; it is an infinite and asymptotic effort that "exists, like the nature of time, in continuous progress. Through the imitation of God one can gradually approach His perfections, and the felicity of spirits exists in this approach; but the path to divine perfection is infinite, and cannot be completely traversed in all eternity. Therefore, the striving in human life knows no boundaries. […] We can, therefore, continued Socrates, accept with good reason, that this striving toward perfection, this increase, this growth in inner excellence, is the determination of rational beings, and consequently also the highest final goal of creation." The death of the soul would imply an interruption of this infinite striving and is therefore utterly incompatible with the wisdom and goodness of the divine plan. Moses Mendelssohn, *Phädon, or on the Immortality of the Soul*, trans. Patricia Noble (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 134-135.

22 Macor, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, 208-212. Furthermore, Macor points out the parallel development of a historical interpretation of the concept of determination, found, for example, in the works of Kant and Herder. According to this perspective, the

all these nuances, the concept of *Bestimmung* eventually reached the threshold of Romanticism and was taken up by Mereau. It will be argued in the following that, in her treatment of the concept, Mereau echoes the late-Enlightenment and Classical positions, particularly those of Kant and Schiller, which identified humanity's true vocation as an eternal striving toward perfection. However, while asserting the necessity of a harmonious development of all human faculties, both rational and non-rational, she also argues that individual self-perfection is insufficient unless it translates into concrete actions within the world – thus calling for the consideration of the specific social and cultural contexts in which individuals live and strive to fulfill their vocation. At the same time, by emphasizing the crucial role of humanity's relationship with the natural world and by identifying in love – rather than in the soul's otherworldly destiny – the *locus* where human vocation finds its fullest realization, Mereau appears to develop the concept of *Bestimmung* in a direction that anticipates central themes of *Frühromantik*.

2. *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung* as a Philosophical Novel: The Concepts of *Bildung* and *Bestimmung*

The connection between *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung* and the issue of individual formation and self-formation is evident from the very first pages of the novel. After the brief introduction, Mereau makes a surprising shift in perspective and leaves it to her male protagonist, Albert, to narrate the story.[23] He briefly sketches his childhood and early youth, which he spent in a state of quiet enjoyment of the modest pleasures offered by his homeland, until he was called by his father to a higher mission.

> My father wanted to ensure that I was protected from one-sidedness, he wanted to multiply my knowledge, correct my concepts, and give my

human *Bestimmung* cannot be fulfilled by the individual alone, but only by the human species as a whole, and therefore it must be sought in history. This notion will play a fundamental role in Fichte's reappropriation of the concept.

[23] This narrative device, combined with the fact that the narrator's name is not disclosed until several pages later, subverts the reader's expectations that the story would be told from a female perspective. The ambiguity, undoubtedly an intentional choice, was already noted by her contemporaries. For example, Friedrich Schlegel comments on it in a letter to his brother August Wilhelm dated May 27, 1796: "I recently leafed through Sophie M.'s *Blütenalter*. It is quite whimsical […]. At first a young creature appears who is flooded with every possible purple passion. It sits there completely placidly in the grass. I say *it* because I was certain it was a girl; but it is supposed to be a boy" (quoted in Katharina von Hammerstein, "Nachwort", in Mereau-Brentano, *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung*, 270-271, trans., modified, in Kontje, *Women, the Novel, and the German Nation*, 84).

> judgment a freer and more solid direction. Therefore, he allowed me to travel, and I gladly followed his will.[24]

In a narrative transposition of the metaphor of the awakening of reason that was central to the novel's introduction, Albert must step out of the narrow confines of his home (representing the realm of unreflective feeling and imagination) to gain experience of the external world and improve his faculties, particularly his reason.[25] Much like Spalding's first-person narrator at the start of his journey, Albert immediately discovers within himself a moral sense or feeling that serves as both guide and judge in his discovery of the external world, leading him toward what is right and good.[26] By following its call, Albert opens himself to nature for the first time, discovering a deep, intimate connection with it:

> All of nature seemed to be woven into my destiny. The joyful rise of its strength, the lively play of its products, the youthful charm of its forms, everything so visibly bore the color of my inner appearances. In the happy frenzy I gave myself to everything and found myself in everything again.[27]

It is a spontaneous union of the subject and nature, in which the rational and reflective faculties of man play no role, and nature itself appears as a "cheerful commotion of striving mental and physical powers", a lively and harmonious whole where each element is essentially and intimately connected to others as if by kinship.[28] This union – which seems to anticipate one of the leitmotifs of the *Frühromantik*'s philosophical reflection and its conception of the relationship between man and nature – ceases when the subject, who until now has experienced the world in solitude, enters human society. Mereau describes this transition as a natural consequence of the experience of harmony with nature: feeling an intimate connection with other creatures, Albert feels the desire to achieve a similar unity with other human beings.

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[24] Mereau-Brentano, *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung*, 11.

[25] It has also been noted that the transitions of the novel's narrator from a state of immediacy and inner isolation to the outer experience of the world could be interpreted as a fictionalized transposition of the early formulations of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*. In this interpretation, the beginning of Albert's journey serves as a metaphor for the departure of the I from its solipsistic isolation and its initial opening to the not-I. See Daub, *Uncivil Unions*, 207-239.

[26] A significant difference between the inner journey depicted by Spalding and Albert's *Bildungsreise* lies in the role Mereau attributes to nature and Albert's relationship with it – a dimension that is not present in Spalding's text.

[27] Mereau-Brentano, *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung*, 11.

[28] *Ibid*., 12.

> Engulfed in the immensity of the universe, merged into the universal harmony of beings, I felt myself drown in this greatness. I knew no more enchanting thought than to form a whole with all spirits, and, through this unity, I felt irresistibly drawn to all humanity.[29]

What awaits him once he encounters human society, however, is something drastically different. Obligations, superficial relationships, and external demands overwhelm the individual, who risks being swallowed by these constraints and losing their individuality (*Eigenthümlichkeit*). Albert finds himself in a state of restlessness and exertion that, as Mereau states echoing Rousseau's arguments, creates artificial needs that conflict with the laws of nature. Yet, as Albert observes, "Nature formed its humans for a social life", endowing them with organs (such as language and facial expressions) to communicate with each other.[30] This reveals the inadequacy of the immediate yet solitary union with nature that Albert has experienced so far. While he has indeed been free, this freedom stemmed from a lack of connection to other human beings and cannot satisfy the inner drive towards sociability. It is thus necessary to seek a new and superior harmony that allows the subject to feel unity with nature while also being connected in an organic relationship to other human beings. The fulfillment of such harmony – which coincides with the culmination of the *Bildung*-process – will be possible only through Albert's love for Nanette.

In order to arrive at this point, every aspect that pertains to human nature must be developed and brought to maturity, because "we belong to the world of senses as well as to the realm of spirits"[31]: only a process of *Bildung* that allows humans to develop all their different capacities can enable them to fully express the potential of their nature and to fulfill the purpose assigned to them by nature itself.

> Only he can hope to have fulfilled the purpose of nature and educated himself for a better condition, who fulfills everything that the current

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29 *Ibid*.

30 *Ibid*., 13.

31 *Ibid*., 19. This passage serves as an example of the influence of Kant's philosophy on Sophie Mereau, who on several occasions reflects on the dual nature of humans as both sensible and intelligible beings. Kant's theory of knowledge also emerges from the novel. "Our concepts draw their material from the world of the senses, which our mind processes, and which we must not forget to take into account in our life plan", Albert observes in a passage following the one mentioned in the text (*Ibid*., 19-20). There are numerous references to Kantian doctrines also in Mereau's *Betrachtungen*, particularly regarding the issue of the unknowability of the thing-in-itself and its implications. For example, see no. 3 in Mereau-Brentano, *Wie sehn' ich mich hinaus in die freie Welt*, 102.

> one imposes on him, exercises all his strength, and is completely what he can be.[32]

The description of a journey that leads the subject from an initial state of immediacy to the ultimate reconstruction of a higher harmony through a state of separation and the mediating power of love is further evidence of Mereau's conceptual affinity with romantic thought.[33] This anthropological model seems to replace the stages described by the narrating self in Spalding's text – i.e. sensual pleasures, intellectual pleasures, virtue, religion, and immortality – and guides Albert from an immediate union with nature to the realm of human society, and ultimately, to love.[34] At the same time, however, the emphasis on the individual's need to embark on a path that, through several stages, allows for the complete development of one's faculties and the full expression of one's nature, can be interpreted as a reference to the *Bestimmung* debates. Although Mereau did not use the expression *Bestimmung*

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[32] Mereau-Brentano, *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung*, 20. The concept of *Bildung* that Mereau develops through Albert's journey closely resembles the one later articulated by the Romantic thinkers. Both perspectives, deeply influenced by Schiller, regard *Bildung* as the development not only of the capacities and powers inherent to humanity as a whole but also of the unique aptitudes and talents of each individual. Moreover, both emphasize the need to cultivate sensibility as much as reason, recognizing that the senses, like reason, are an integral part of human nature. This process of *Bildung* is essential to the self-realization of the individual, which, in turn, constitutes the ultimate purpose and goal of human existence – see Frederick C. Beiser, "The Concept of *Bildung* in Early German Romanticism", in id., *The Romantic Imperative. The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 88-105.

[33] Consider, for example, the *exzentrische Bahn* depicted by Hölderlin in *Hyperion*, a two-volume novel published respectively in 1797 and 1799, where the protagonist's story serves as a device to illustrate the "eccentric trajectory" that every human being traverses "between childhood and perfection." These two moments represent, on one hand, the pinnacle of simplicity and spontaneous harmony with nature, and on the other hand, the peak of development and organization, where a new, mediated accord with nature is achieved. Situated between these two extremes, each individual's existential journey takes shape as the infinite effort to restore the original state of immediate harmony with the world, lost through reflection – see the preface to the penultimate version of *Hyperion* in Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke, Stuttgarter Hölderlin-Ausgabe*, III, ed. Friedrich Beissner (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1957), 236. Although Hölderlin's classification as an early Romantic remains controversial and subject to debate, his thought reveals certain affinities with the doctrines of the Jena Romantics. A comparable desire to reunify subject and object, and thus return to unity with the Whole and nature through love, can also be found in Novalis – see, for example, Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802) in Novalis, *Gesammelte Werke*, I, ed. Carl Seelig (Herrliberg-Zürich: Buhl-Verlag, 1945), 121-354.

[34] Another significant difference between Mereau's novel and Spalding's *Bestimmung des Menschen* lies in the fact that, in Spalding's work, the journey of the self is an inner reflection, conducted in solitude as the subject turns inward to understand their own nature. By contrast, Albert's journey unfolds through the narration of his own life and is shaped by concrete, lived experiences.

des Menschen but referred to the *Zweck* assigned to humans by Nature, the way she addresses the issue hints at her knowledge of and engagement with this conceptual problem.[35]

Albert's journey is set in motion by a "striving for perfection"[36] which drives him to improve his intellectual faculties as well as his feeling and sensation. Only the balance between all the different human capacities will allow him to truly become what he ought to be. The unchecked dominion of feeling can lead to melancholy and the conflict between the subject and the world, as exemplified by Lorenzo, Nanette's brother, who tragically takes his own life when overwhelmed by a feeling that he cannot freely express. On the other hand, exclusive focus on rationality can transform *Bildung* in a one-sided process that transforms the vitality of the human spirit into "artificial dead knowledge."[37] It is only in the harmonious interplay between rational thought and feeling that human nature can find its full expression.

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[35] It is also worth noting that as early as 1792 Mereau discussed the issue, at least partially, in her correspondence. In the *Varnhagen Sammlung* at the *Biblioteka Jagiellonska* in Krakow there are several letters sent to Mereau by friends and acquaintances and preserved by the writer. In one of these, sent by Henriette Wilhelmine Greißler on December 14, 1792, the author of the letter confides her doubts and fear about marriage to Mereau; specifically, she addresses the idea that the fulfillment of women's nature can be found only in the domestic sphere of marriage and motherhood: "What is often asserted about our inevitable vocation to marriage – I could never believe it with my whole heart: […] we are all created to work for a common good." Quoted in Lorely French, "Briefform und Lebensstoff, Lebensform und Briefstoff: Die Ästhetik des Briefes bei Sophie Mereau und zeitgenössischen Schriftstellerinnen", in Katharina von Hammerstein, Katrin Horn, eds., *Sophie Mereau, Verbindungslinien in Zeit und Raum* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2008), 255. Although Mereau's response to Greißler has not been preserved and we cannot, therefore, be certain of her position on this matter, the appearance of the expression *Bestimmung zur Ehe* in relation to the question of what may allow for the full realization of one's inherent nature suggests at least a cursory knowledge of the debates on human destination, since Greißler's use of the term in this letter appears to be consistent with the one in the philosophical discourse on the topic. Furthermore, in the late 18th century, a specific reflection developed on the particular *Bestimmung des Weibes*, related to the role that women play in society and to what is, or should be, the ultimate goal of a woman's life. Examples of this reflection can be found in Joachim H. Campe's *Väterlicher Rath für meine Tochter* (1789) or the treatise *Über die Bestimmung des Weibes zur höheren Geistesbildung* by Amalia Holst (1802).

[36] Mereau-Brentano, *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung*, 22.

[37] *Ibid*., 12. Throughout the novel, there is a recurring criticism of the *kalte Buchgelehrsamkeit* (cold bookish learning) that fails to provide individuals with the means to develop their own faculties – either those belonging to them as human beings in general or those specific to them as unique individuals – but instead seeks to "stifle humans in themselves through cold ponderings" (*Ibid*.). Mereau proposes an alternative model of *Selbsterziehung* that allows individuals to develop freely and is clearly influenced by Rousseau, as becomes evident when Albert describes the education that Nanette and Lorenzo received from their aunt: "She did not manipulate them. She believed that nature was always good. […] She taught them concepts, not just words, developed their sense of

The focus on the harmonization of the different components of a person who is, in a Kantian way, suspended between *mundus sensibilis* and *mundus intelligibilis*, brings Mereau very close to the conception expressed by Schiller in his treatise *Ueber Anmut und Würde* (*On Grace and Dignity*) published in 1793 in the journal *Neue Thalia*, edited by Schiller himself. While there is no certain textual evidence that Mereau read Schiller's work, the intellectual and biographical proximity between the two thinkers makes such an influence plausible.

Schiller had been interested in the question of human vocation since his early formative years. Initially, he adhered to the views of Spalding and Mendelssohn, but he gradually developed doubts about the possibility of conceiving an otherworldly human destination. As a result, he adopted a predominantly moral perspective, believing that each individual comes into the world to develop themselves as human beings and is driven by a tendency towards perfection.[38] In *Ueber Anmut und Würde*, Schiller engaged extensively with Kant's philosophy and considered the dual nature of human beings, who belong both to the empirical and intelligible world; he then drew a connection between this doctrine and the concepts of grace and beauty. While humans are beings of nature in every respect, a specific difference sets them apart from other animals, since "in animals and plants, nature not only determines the purpose; *she alone carries it out.* In humans, however, she only determines the purpose, and leaves them to fulfill it *themselves.* It is this alone that makes them humans."[39] Humans are free and from this freedom arises the moral responsibility to fulfill their nature. This does not mean that humans should prioritize the demand of reason at the expense of their empirical faculties. On the contrary, "in that it made him a rational, sensitive being, that is, a human, nature gave the human being notice of his obligation not to separate what it had bound together and, even in the purest expressions of his divine part, not to neglect the sensuous, and not to base the triumph of the one on the subjugation of the other."[40] Only in the true harmony of these principles can human nature be fulfilled, and the realization of the *schöne Seele* (beautiful soul) become possible. Here, the authentic human vocation is revealed, as "human beings do have the task of establishing an intimate agreement

right and wrong, and sought only to cultivate what she found within them; she did not want to mold them." *Ibid.*, 39.

38 Macor, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, 269.

39 Friedrich Schiller, "On Grace and Dignity", in *Schiller's "On Grace and Dignity" in its Cultural Context. Essays and a New Translation*, ed. Jane V. Curran, Christopher Fricker (Rochester: Camden House, 2005), 141.

40 *Ibid*., 149-150.

between their two natures, of always being a harmonious whole, and of acting with their full human capacity."[41]

A similar harmony is the goal that emerges at the end of Albert's *Bildungsreise*: only by fulfilling his love for Nanette does he achieve the full realization of his humanity. When the two lovers reunite amidst the peaks of the Swiss Alps, their love opens the possibility of aesthetic union with nature. However, this ecstatic moment does not lead to the capitulation of rational demands. "Nature *and* reason were our gods", Albert observes emphasizing how the pinnacle of feeling corresponds to an equal development of reason.[42] Only in this way can the subject reach that "beautiful, invigorating harmony of all the demands of reason and the heart, which […] alone contains the true happiness of life."[43]

The fulfillment of this goal is exemplified by Nanette, who is characterized by an "intimate harmony between […] the way of thinking and feeling."[44] It is precisely from this balance that her beauty stems, in a reference to Schiller's concept of the beautiful soul. Nanette embodies the harmonious unification of all the claims of reason and feeling, becoming the ideal towards which the male protagonist strives. He recognizes in Nanette the fulfillment of his own existential journey: "in her company I felt better every day. The indescribable magic of her being seemed to change my whole being and to make me more like her."[45]

Her role is fundamentally different from that of female characters in most contemporaneous novels, as she is not merely a medium for the male protagonist's self-development or long-awaited reunion with nature. Instead, she is portrayed as an individual in her own right, engaged in her own journey of *Bildung* and, in fact, at a more advanced level of personal development.

> Her spirit had a maturity which mine was still struggling to achieve, and she had taken many steps ahead of me in her self-education. Here I learned to feel and understand what true greatness and independence is.[46]

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41 *Ibid*., 154.

42 Mereau-Brentano, *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung*, 35. The emphasis is mine.

43 *Ibid*., 37.

44 *Ibid*., 42.

45 *Ibid*., 36.

46 *Ibid*., 56. Nanette embodies an ideal of femininity in which both feeling and reason are equally strong and developed, thus standing in direct opposition to the traditional ideal of a virtuous woman with a delicate soul, whose realm is exclusively that of *Gefühl* and grace, while rationality remains the exclusive domain of men. Such a conception emerges in Rousseau, but also in Schiller's *Ueber Anmut und Wurde*.

It is now necessary, however, to highlight an additional element of tension: the process of human improvement cannot remain purely internal but must be translated into concrete actions in the world. Even at the peak of their love, the moral and intellectual perfection Albert and Nanette experience does not remain isolated. Instead, it immediately fosters a sincere interest and active commitment in "everything that is important for humanity in general", namely, to "combat prejudices, bring errors to light, and reveal truths."[47] One's inner developmental journey – this is what emerges throughout the novel – must find expression through action in the world. It is in the exploration of this theme that we come to understand how even Nanette, despite having achieved moral and intellectual perfection, has not yet fully realized her human vocation. As mentioned above, she is constantly threatened by her brother, who, by forcing her to live on the run, severely limits her ability to act and assert her will.

Five years after the publication of *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung*, Mereau wrote a review of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795 / 96), summarizing the central core of the text as follows:

> The great truth, which can never be felt enough, which is expressed throughout the book in all the main characters, is for me this: every human being should learn to understand himself and act accordingly. He should follow his nature and seek to satisfy his inclinations and demands in life with reason and coherence.[48]

The task to which man is called is thus composed of two essential elements: the process of inner perfection through self-formation on one hand, and the ability to express one's aspirations in the world through free action on the other. However, it is often impossible to achieve this ideal – Mereau emphasizes, revealing particular attention to the real conditions that impact an individual's pursuit of their destination: laws and social institutions, by imposing unjust restrictions on individual action, undermine the second fundamental condition for the individual to fully realize their vocation as a human being – that is, freedom of self-determination.

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47 *Ibid*., 36.

48 Sophie Mereau-Brentano, *Fragment eines Briefs über Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, in Id. *Wie sehn' ich mich hinaus in die freie Welt*, 185.

3. From the Contemplation of Nature to the Limits of our Knowledge: *Briefe von Amanda und Eduard* and the "Kantian turn" of the Human Vocation

In the previous section *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung* emerged as characterized by the interweaving of narrative elements and philosophical concerns. A similar combination also defines Mereau's second novel, *Amanda und Eduard. Ein Roman in Briefen*, which was published in two volumes in 1803. It consists of 47 letters through which – thanks to the alternation of the two titular characters as narrators – their love story unfolds.

Amanda finds herself trapped in a loveless marriage with Albret; during a concert, she meets the young Eduard and the two fall passionately in love. In Eduard, Amanda finds a kindred spirit with whom to achieve that *Seelenharmonie*, that unity of spirit and feeling, which she desperately longs for. Their relationship, however, is hindered both by Amanda's husband and by the duties thrust on Eduard by his father. The lovers thus drift apart and face various challenges, until they eventually reunite and marry. Their newfound happiness is short-lived, as Amanda falls severely ill and passes away shortly after their wedding.

The following section will focus on a fragmentary version of the novel, entitled *Briefe von Amanda und Eduard* and published in Schiller's *Die Horen* as early as 1797. It contains the first eight letters of the novel (arranged in a slightly different order from the final version[49]) and is particularly interesting because it allows us to observe, just a few years after *Das Blütenalter*, the evolution of Mereau's thought. In addition to her enduring interest in the question concerning human nature in its place in the world, there is evidence of the growing influence of Early Romanticism.

An example of Mereau's sustained theoretical interests can be found in the extensive digression that opens the first letter of the *Horen*-fragment, in which Eduard addresses Barton, his mentor and friend. Eduard starts his letter by reminiscing about a conversation they shared during a walk atop a hill. There, the contemplation of the natural landscape sparked a reflection on the order that underlies it. Visible nature, Barton explained, is defined by "eternal transformation, process, change", but underneath this incessant becoming there is "a force that always remains: for only what remains can

[49] The most significant change concerns the opening letter. In the 1797 version, Mereau begins the novel with two letters from Eduard and introduces Amanda only in the third. In the 1803 edition, however, it is Amanda's voice that begins the narration, placing the female perspective in a prominent position.

change"[50]; this force permeates every element of the universe, giving it life and form, and intimately uniting it with the other parts and with itself.[51] However, we are not allowed to have a direct knowledge of this force, because "we can only perceive what changes, and that which always remains, we must search for it […] in its effects."[52] It is an iteration of Kant's warning regarding the limits of knowledge. In the fourth letter of the fragment, Eduard describes a new ascent, both physical and ideal. As he climbs a hill, the expansion of the physical gaze upon the landscape corresponds to a parallel intellectual rise towards the contemplation of the laws governing the physical manifestations of nature and, beyond that, towards the eternal secrets of the universe. Here, however, the ascending path is abruptly interrupted:

> Oh! That there exists a point where everything is shrouded in mist, where the gaze of the human eye, like that of the human spirit, sadly clings to the boundary set by an incomprehensible force to its insatiable curiosity![53]

We cannot surpass the limits of our knowledge, yet we feel, deep within our nature, a "free, inextinguishable thirst that departs from the path of necessity"[54], a yearning to understand what is infinite. It is precisely here that the specific difference between humans and all other beings becomes clear: whereas the latter are capable of fulfilling the purposes to which their nature has destined them, for humans this fulfillment is merely a regulative ideal.

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50 Sophie Mereau-Brentano, *Briefe von Amanda und Eduard*, in Id. *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung, Amanda und Eduard. Romane*, 227.

51 The use of the term *Kraft* to describe the foundation from which all the beings in nature originate immediately links Mereau to the contemporary metaphysical debates and to the vitalist frameworks that had emerged in the 18th century as a critique of the mechanistic worldview. Considering the world as a meticulously constructed mechanism governed by mathematical proportions fails to account for the complexity, organization, and purposefulness observed in living organisms and systems, not to mention the materialistic implications that such a position entails. For this reason, German thinkers such as Hoffman, Haller or later Herder and Goethe followed Leibniz in asserting that matter, unlike what Descartes proposed, cannot be reduced to mere extension governed by mechanical laws; rather, it is permeated by immanent principles and active vital forces such as elective affinities, forces of attraction and repulsion, and formative impulses that demonstrate directional movement and move towards a certain purpose. Mereau's engagement with these discussions also emerges from a fragment that can be found within her *Nachlass*, some parts of which were later reworked in *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung* (Mereau-Brentano, *Wie sehn' ich mich hinaus in die freie Welt*, 189-191). A detailed account of the development of vitalism in eighteenth-century Europe can be found in Peter H. Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

52 Mereau-Brentano, *Briefe von Amanda und Eduard*, 227.

53 *Ibid*., 239.

54 *Ibid*.

Their nature relentlessly compels them to seek the mysterious ultimate source of life, only to inevitably fall short of fully reaching it. This destiny is painful, yet it holds a deeply positive value: the endless search for absolute knowledge is the source of all human activity. If we were to be successful in our endeavors, "if […] the mysterious veil of nature was to be torn asunder, there would be a cessation of all activity, all striving within us. Eternally must we seek."[55]

As seen above, the conception that emerges at the end of *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung* is that the meaning of human existence, its authentic destination, lies in continuous self-development on the one hand and in free self-determination to act in the world on the other; in these passages of her second novel, Mereau appears to further develop this notion by asserting that the condition for the fulfillment of this vocation lies precisely in the impossibility of reaching what exceeds the limits of our knowledge. The author does not explicitly use the term *Bestimmung*[56], but her argument can be situated within the framework of the debates on the human vocation. More specifically, Mereau appears to refer to Kant's conception, wherein the impossibility to know our otherworldly destination is the guarantee of our autonomy. Kant argued that if we were privy to God's plan concerning our fate after death, we would obey his law solely out of external obligation: "most actions conforming to the law would be done from fear, only a few from hope, and none at all from duty, and the moral worth of actions […] would not exist at all."[57] In other words, we would be mere puppets hanging from strings, and there would be no room for genuine moral action. However, given that "with all the effort of our reason we have only a very obscure and ambiguous view into the future", we can adhere to the demands of the moral law in a disinterested manner; in this way "there can be a truly moral disposition, devoted immediately to the moral law, and a rational

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55 *Ibid*., 240.

56 In another part of the novel, however, Mereau describes Eduard's confidence – strengthened by the development of his capacities – in his ability to fulfill his *Beruf zum Glück*: "I trust myself to be strong enough to force the world to fulfill my wishes, no matter how high they may fly, and to argue with fate about my vocation to happiness" (*Ibid*., 230). The term *Beruf* constitutes one of the lexical options that the German language offers to express the concept of 'vocation', 'destination', or 'destiny', and was extensively employed within the Lutheran tradition and in the philosophical reflections predating Spalding's *Betrachtung über die Bestimmung des Menschen* – on this topic see Laura A. Macor, "*Bestimmung* e *Beruf* in Friedrich Hölderlin e nel suo tempo: un'analisi linguistico-semantica", *Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica* 106, no. 3 (July-September 2014): 591-600. The appearance of the term in Mereau's novel thus serves as an additional hint that Mereau was aware of the cultural debates surrounding this concept.

57 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* 5, 147, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 118.

creature can become worthy of the highest good."[58] It is here, therefore, that we can find what satisfies the authentic purpose of our existence, which is first and foremost a *praktischen Bestimmung*, a practical vocation: not the ultimate destination that our soul will reach after death, but the act of free self-determination to moral action.

Similarly, Mereau establishes the limitation of human knowledge as a guarantee for moral action and, more broadly, for all human activity. At the same time, however, she strongly asserts the impossibility of disregarding the call to exceed this limitation; it represents a constant and infinite attempt to asymptotically reach the absolute, and it serves as the origin of all our actions. Mereau thus places at the center of human nature the concept of *Streben* or striving.

Mereau's use of this notion seems to fall midway between Fichte's philosophy and its reinterpretation in German Romanticism. Whereas in the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*, the term denotes the infinite striving of the finite I to determine the not-I and to make it conform to the demands of reason, thereby asserting itself as an autonomous agent, the German Romantics reject the irreconcilability inherent in Fichte's dichotomy between the subject and the world. They too acknowledge that the conflict between the subject and nature is both inevitable and necessary for the progress of reason and freedom; however, they view the *Streben* not as the assertion of one's will over the not-I or the compliance with ethical imperatives, but rather as the spontaneous desire to return to a state of harmonious unity between subject and object, between spirit and nature. In Mereau's work, both these concepts are present. In accordance with Fichte, human striving is understood primarily in moral and active terms. It entails a process of *Bildung* aimed, as its regulative ideal, at the acquisition of the knowledge of the eternal law of the universe; furthermore, it calls for the ability to freely act upon the world, giving form to its matter and make it conform to reason: when an individual has attained this goal, "with a creative hand, he impresses upon lifeless nature the marks of a thinking being, and the eternal purposes of life pass before his soul in moments of sacred inspiration, comprehensible and pure."[59] However, Mereau also emphasizes that this striving also entails a desire to overcome the conflict with nature and reach the absolute. In both these meanings, the presence of this theme in the fragment indicates the increasing influence of the new philosophical approaches on Mereau's thought.

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[58] *Ibid*.

[59] Mereau-Brentano, *Briefe von Amanda und Eduard*, 239.

In Eduard's letter, the idea of striving joins Kant's reflections on human vocation, further developing the author's notion of the *Bestimmung des Menschen*. It is the infinite effort that encapsulates the meaning and destination of our existence. Indeed, it is the ultimate origin of the possibility to act without which, as we have seen, human nature cannot be fulfilled. Furthermore, our pursuit of the absolute drives us to perfect and develop ourselves in order to draw nearer to our ideal goal. This is also what propels Eduard's journey to complete his *Bildung*:

> My only wish is to have a thousand lives, to animate all forms, to wander through all relationships, to savor every possible sweet sensation, and my only concern is that some unawakened power may lie dormant in my soul.[60]

4. Love as Culmination of the *exzentrische Bahn*

Amanda, too, is engaged in the attempt to find the higher meaning of her own existence and to fulfill her true nature. In her letters, she writes to Julie, a childhood friend. Upon marrying Albret, Amanda had found herself engulfed "into a world full of glittering illusion"[62], but she is profoundly unhappy. Not only is there no love between her and her husband, but establishing any meaningful connection is impossible, given the stark contrast between Amanda's sensitivity and Albret's cold and calculating lucidity. On the other hand, Julie has been happily married for a long time and leads a secluded and tranquil life, fully content with her situation. In their correspondence, Amanda elevates her friend to the embodiment of domestic happiness – a happiness which is for her unattainable: "you were still the same. Completely true to all your previous ideas, you continued to live undisturbed in that happy land, which seemed to be fading away more and more for me."[63] Julie represents the traditional model of femininity: she is a quiet and prudent woman who finds satisfaction within the domestic sphere, beyond which she never ventures. In contrast, Amanda lives a glamorous life but finds no peace in her own marriage: being denied the chance for love, understood as the perfect and happy unification of two individuals, is a sacrifice too great for her to bear. Amanda perceives the desire for love as an

[60] *Ibid*., 233.
[62] *Ibid*., 234.
[63] *Ibid*.

integral part of her being to the point that she feels compelled by her own nature to seek it beyond the marriage bond.[64]

The contrast of Amanda and Julie can be interpreted not only as the juxtaposition of two different ideals of femininity, but also as a theoretical opposition between two anthropological models. In her own simple, almost idyllic existence, Julie embodies a state of immediate and unreflective harmony between humans and nature – a state that, as mentioned above, is associated in Early Romantic thought with childhood and early youth, as well as with a phase in human history preceding the development of civilization. "You are so harmonious with yourself and your world; your obedient imagination does not carry you beyond the bounds of reality"[65], Amanda observes. In Julie's life there is no rupture, no moment of separation that has torn her from the happy condition she enjoyed in her childhood; even her marriage appears as the natural continuation of this state.

Amanda represents the opposite pole, having lived through the experience of separation. The rupture was brought forth not only by her marriage – which compelled her to leave her parental home (and her childhood) for the world of society[66] – but, on a more fundamental level, by the *ungeduldige Streben nach Entwicklung*[67], a striving for development, whose call she could not ignore. As a human being, she was called to *Bildung*, or the cultivation of her capacities; this task, however, demands that the individual forsake the immediate union they once shared with nature. The development of discursive reason, in particular, requires separation, as judgment and understanding cannot exist without the distinction of a subject and an object.

> In the quiet contemplation of a youthfully budding branch, of a simple rural landscape, at that time, I felt undividedly everything that I was ever capable of feeling when gazing upon the most beautiful regions of the Earth, the most touching natural phenomena. […] That is why I embraced the small world around me with an intimacy and strength that

[64] Kontje observed that the association of Amanda's authentic nature with love carries an ambivalent tone; it justifies some progressive elements in the novel (such as Amanda's assertion of her right to pursue a romantic relationship outside of marriage), yet it does so on very traditional grounds, that is, by linking feminine nature with love and highlighting Amanda's inclination to surrender to nature, whereas Eduard – by contrast – strives to adopt an active role within it. See Todd Kontje, "Reassessing Sophie Mereau: The Case for *Amanda und Eduard*", *Colloquia Germanica* 24, no. 4 (1991): 316-319.

[65] Mereau-Brentano, *Briefe von Amanda und Eduard*, 244.

[66] The novel presents the same Rousseauian critique of society that emerged in *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung*. While life within society is essential for the complete development of human nature, it also generates unnatural needs and external constraints, constantly endangering the individuality (*Eigenthümlichkeit*) of the subject.

[67] *Ibid*., 243.

> could never be expressed in words [...]. The yearning for youthful emotions is eternally in vain! The material is now developed, the emotion has words – much of what I once dreamt in obscurity, I now understood. The lovely magic of inexperience [...] is no more.[68]

This process is necessary but also painful and sparks an inextinguishable yearning for that original condition. This is further evidence of Mereau's conceptual affinity with romantic thought, as Amanda's journey mirrors, once again, Hölderlin's notion of the *exzentrische Bahn*.

> I could not conceive of life as a straight, open road where one can see the end from the moment of entry; rather, I preferred to envision it as a twisted, peculiar path full of romantic spots and shifting lights.[69]

Amanda's story imparts an explicit Romantic undertone to the question of the *Bestimmung des Menschen*, which comes to be identified with the reconstruction of the lost harmony. In the novel, her actions are guided, much like Eduard's, by the attempt to reach the ultimate goal of this existential journey. However, there is a significant difference between the two characters. Eduard firmly binds the fulfillment of his nature to the Promethean effort to reach the absolute and to a path of self-formation which cannot be disjoined from action. Amanda, on the other hand, doesn't place the same emphasis on action, because she sees only one way to reach her destination: "is there not a time in life – Amanda asks in a passage that Mereau adds in the 1803 version – when this youthful enthusiasm returns with all its strength and unity, only more intimate, more beautiful, more sacred? And what time can this be other than when we love?"[70] Foreshadowing, in some respects, the ideas of Schlegel, Novalis, and Schleiermacher[71], Mereau suggests here that

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[68] *Ibid*. In the final version of the novel, Mereau will further underline the role that the development of rational capacities plays in the separation of the subject from the universal harmony, that "fades away when the matured intellect (*Verstand*), now looks around more clearly and is able to trace the gentle flow of impressions that move the strings of the heart." Mereau-Brentano, *Amanda und Eduard*, 86.

[69] Mereau-Brentano, *Briefe von Amanda und Eduard*, 245-246.

[70] Mereau-Brentano, *Amanda und Eduard*, 86.

[71] The theme of love – understood not only in spiritual but also physical and sensual terms – occupies a central role in Friedrich Schlegel's controversial novel *Lucinde* (1799) (Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Ausgabe*, V, ed. Hans Eichner (Bielefeld: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1962), 1-83). In *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, Novalis describes love as a transformative force that allows individuals to fully realize their potential while simultaneously establishing a reciprocal identification between the lovers—an identification that serves as the basis for the ultimate reconciliation of subject and object (Novalis, *Gesammelte Werke*, I, 121-354). Similarly, in his *Reden über die Religion* (1799), Schleiermacher interprets love as a reflection of humanity's deep longing for unity with the universe and as the force that allows us to grasp the whole in our intuition. See

only through love can the striving towards the reconstruction of the original harmony succeed and can Amanda fulfill her vocation.

The culmination of this journey – that in the *Horen*-fragment, which ends with the first encounter between Amanda and Eduard, can only be foreshadowed – is found at the end of the second volume of the 1803 edition. Here the lovers finally reunite and solidify their love through marriage, a symbol of their complete unification. The role of love as the mediator between man and nature is sealed in the moment in which, shortly after the wedding, Amanda passes away. The onset of death coincides with the dissolution of the last element that separates the individual from the universe, and only when she dies in the arms of her lover can Amanda fully reach the destination towards which human nature inherently strives, but which remains, in earthly existence, a purely regulative ideal.

> Completely dissolved in love and harmony, the sublime music of the stars and worlds resounds in my being. The slight barrier dissipates, and disembodied I immerse myself in the boundless sea of love, where beings are immortal![72]

At the end of this paper, both *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung* and *Briefe von Amanda und Eduard* emerge as the narrative transposition of a thought that, in the different combination of elements that stem from the late Enlightenment debates and ideas more closely linked to Classicism, *Empfindsamkeit*, and Romanticism, reveals its fully philosophical significance.

The issue of individual development in its connection to the question of human (self)determination plays a central role in *Das Blütenalter der Empfindung* and functions as the common thread that connects the two parallel narrative strands of the work – Albret's *Bildungsreise* and Nanette's quest for autonomy and independence. Through the experiences of her protagonists, Mereau asserts a position in which the fulfillment of the purpose of human existence simultaneously calls for a path of self-formation that develops one's nature toward perfection and, on the other hand, for the free expression of this nature and its capacities through action in the world. The concept of *Bildung* and *Bestimmung* were central to the late Enlightenment and early Romantic philosophical discussions of the time; therefore, they appear particularly significant and illustrative of the way in which Mereau consciously

Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion. Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (Berlin-New York: de Gruyter, 1999).

72 Mereau-Brentano, *Amanda und Eduard*, 220.

engages with some of the most important cultural debates of her era and developed her own original contribution.

The fragment *Briefe von Amanda und Eduard*, published in Schiller's *Horen* in 1797, comes only a few years after Mereau's debut novel, but it reveals a significant evolution in Mereau's thought. The ideas of personal development and human vocation still play an important role, providing a framework that situates parts of the narrative within a theoretical context that focuses on the meaning of human existence. However, the introduction of new elements in crucial parts of her doctrine (the definition of human nature as governed by incessant striving, and the characterization of love as the intermediary between humanity and nature) serves as evidence of Mereau's increasing intellectual proximity to early German Romanticism.

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