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Resisting oblivion *Konstellationsforschung* and female narratives

Abstract

The power of narrative consists in orientation of the story. Formerly, however, this frequently led to the omission of certain historical experiences that had the capacity, if properly addressed, to shed light on female empowerment, both actual and potential. Starting from the relevant epistolary material, the present paper aims to establish a comparison between two key figures within the Hegelian Constellation of the feminine, namely, Christiane Luise Hegel (1773-1832) and Fanny Mendelssohn-Bartholdy Hensel (1805-1847). The purpose of doing so is to reflect deeply on the narrative of the feminine. From this point of view, the application of the biographical and narrative method to philosophical research is closely aligned with Dieter Henrich's exploration of the genesis of German Idealism (Konstellationsforschung), allowing the interdependence and the reciprocal connections between life and thought to emerge. In the wake of studies aimed at interpreting human sciences from a female perspective, a broader reflection on the central value of narratives as the origin of every form of thought and communication will ultimately be developed.

Keywords

Hegelian constellation, Narrative aesthetics, German idealism

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1. *Philosophy and narrative: the re-evaluation of the canon*

Every narrative or story, in its most general sense, is nothing more than an artifice: an operation of selection and formalization of that fragmented and chaotic matter that constitutes life itself¹. In fact, the role of narrative is “to filter through an extensive array of raw data; consequently, the *emplotment* of the tale must adhere to the obligation of selection, corresponding to the *inventio* of classical rhetoric” (Castellana 2019: 103). In this regard, as Paolo Jedlowski and Romano Màdera argue, narrative is “always an approximation of the reality it claims to represent” (Jedlowski, Màdera 2024: 14). On the other hand, the hallmark of narrative also lies in its ability to organize a series of seemingly disordered elements according to a predetermined criterion. In this manner, it can construct precise world-images designed to orient thought and communication. One should note that the concluding unit of a story is the result of a lengthy process, the outcome of which cannot be predicted with certainty at the beginning. Just as the famous Owl of Minerva spread its wings only with the falling of dusk, when the day had reached its close, so too, “can history be narrated only from the posthumous perspective of one who does not participate in the events” (Cavarero 1997: 8).

If it is true that narrative allows us to imbue events with meaning, then philosophy – conceived as an opportunity to inhabit the complexity of reality – also appears to be steadfastly intertwined with its own storytelling. The history of philosophy, in other words, coincides with the singular narrative of the diverse perspectives of meaning that have succeeded one another, over time. If we draw on the insights of Mario Vegetti and Luca Fonnese, in particular, then the foundation of speculative thought lies, “in the constellation of diverse responses formulated throughout the history of philosophical reflection” (Vegetti, Fonnese 2008: 6). Thus, “the determination of the specificity of philosophical knowledge coincides with its own history” (Vegetti, Fonnese 2008: 6). More precisely, it is the intricate concept of the canon, construed by literary critic Harold Bloom

¹ The present study was conceived as part of the PRIN research project *Hegelian constellations of the feminine: a hyper-archive for an inclusive Bildung* (20224KFTLP, October 2023-February 2026). This was supported by the Italian Ministry of Universities and Research, and it was directed by Francesca Iannelli (University of Roma Tre) in collaboration with research units of the University of Chieti-Pescara (coordinated by Stefania Achella) and the University of Bologna (coordinated by Eleonora Caramelli).

as the corpus of texts comprising our written cultural heritage, that occupies a pivotal position in any broader reflection on the role of narrative (Bloom 1994). In the collective, public imagination, the history of philosophy is often perceived as a linear and sequential progression of male authorship, centered on a canon of prominent figures. On closer inspection, however, this framework proves incomplete. By contrast, in conjunction with scholarly efforts to provide a new, feminist perspective on the broader artistic experience, we may now address the history of Western thought by reevaluating the female writers who contributed to its development. The aim is not to produce another history of philosophy, or more specifically, of aesthetics. Rather, it is to incorporate references to female artists and intellectuals who, at the threshold of modernity, observed reality from an original perspective, while simultaneously proposing a model of life that did not strictly conform to traditional patterns². Furthermore, the very recovery of forgotten female contributions can help to illuminate the history of philosophy, laying the groundwork for the construction of an alternative canon. Hegelian philosophy provides rich opportunities for the establishment of a new narrative aesthetic. The latter, in turn, allows us to examine the unique characteristics of women who have, until now, been consigned to the periphery of German Idealism.

The purpose of this essay is to offer a specific testament to a female perspective on the world, and to do so by retracing the singular experiences of authors such as Christiane Hegel and Fanny Mendelssohn, whose names have yet to receive adequate recognition. From a methodological standpoint, meanwhile, the reflection on the narrative of the feminine as presented in these pages is based on the application of biographical and narrative methods to *Konstellationsforschung* (constellation research). This approach, pioneered by Dieter Henrich in the 1980s to explore the birth of German Idealism, posits that a deeper understanding of one of the most intricate periods in philosophical history can be achieved through a meticulous analysis of the interweaving of individuals, ideas, and intellectual problems. The intellectual constellation, unlike its celestial namesake, evinces a dynamic dimension, embodying the concept of a “field of forces”, within which relationships between diverse figures are reconstructed *a posteriori* (cf. Stamm 2005: 42). This perspective invites an engagement

² A compelling figure for study, Bettina Brentano von Arnim seamlessly integrated philosophical speculation with a steadfast commitment to political causes. See Dischner 1979.

with the complexity of the real by leveraging distinctive stylistic and literary instruments – such as correspondence, epistolary exchanges, reviews and diary fragments. By this means, it transcends established paradigms and the conventional narratives of philosophy.

At a preliminary level, one should note several contributions aimed at offering alternative readings of the traditional canon³. While the majority of monographs have focused on 20th-century women's thought, exploring the magistral work of widely recognized authors (such as Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil and María Zambrano), studies dedicated to other historical epochs are equally worthy of attention. One might consider, *inter alia*, Sandra Plastina's *Filosofo della modernità. Il pensiero delle donne dal Rinascimento all'Illuminismo* (2011), a work centered on the dissemination of female thought between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. Through a meticulous process of historical reconstruction, the author compellingly demonstrates that women's presence was highly significant within cultural discourses of the era, even if none of these figures is explicitly commemorated in mainstream sources. Drawing on the theories of Michèle Le Doeuff, who posits that the history of philosophy is not mere exegesis but, rather, a creative and dynamic activity, Plastina investigates the conceptual labor of authors such as Moderata Fonte, François Poullain de la Barre, Anna Maria van Schurman, Arcangela Tarabotti, and Gabrielle Suchon. It is precisely by examining the nexus between women and philosophical inquiry at the dawn of the Early Modern period that one may, "uncover the nascent formulations of numerous stances later deemed foundational to twentieth-century feminism" (Plastina 2011: 6).

Within this burgeoning framework one also finds the work *Filosofo, maestre, imperatrici. Per un nuovo canone della storia della filosofia antica* (2020), edited by Maddalena Bonelli. This study constitutes a pioneering systematic inquiry, aimed at reclaiming the intellectual contributions of

³ Within the framework of a re-evaluation of female identity, significant strides have been made in the field of film studies, largely thanks to the counter-narrative developed by the writer Francis Lacassin in his book *Pour une contre-histoire du cinéma* (1972). This anthology of texts aims to bring to light figures who had been unjustly obscured through the passage of time. Notable among these is Alice Guy (1873-1968), one of the first filmmakers to write, direct and produce hundreds of films, whose name - nonetheless - long remained unacknowledged. Similarly, the historical literature has begun to attend to the challenges posed by contemporary landscapes. In the collection *Per una nuova storia letteraria* (2022), Federico Sanguineti denounces the erasure of female writers from the Italian literary canon, notably restoring a voice to the works of Cristina da Pizzano (1364-1430) and Laura Cereta (1469-1499).

women such as Diotima, Hypatia, Aesara of Lucania, and Pompeia Plotina, who developed autonomous bodies of thought in the ancient world. The curator's attention is specifically devoted to fragmented and unsystematic materials that preserve invaluable information regarding female philosophers in antiquity. A primary example is the important group of Pythagorean women, notable for their extraordinary intellectual vitality, who nonetheless receive scant attention in standard textbooks. The merit of this work lies in its comprehensive examination of the reasons underlying the exclusion of women from traditional scholarly commentaries, scrutinizing the gender biases that have long compromised ancient sources. Research has frequently been undermined by misogynistic attitudes: Aristotle, for instance, considered women "eternal children", whose agency was perpetually constrained by male authority. Furthermore, the ascetism of Pythagorean women was a subject of ridicule for the poets Cratinus and Alexis, who, in the fourth Century BCE, authored two comedies ironically entitled *The women who pythagoreanize*. This underscores, once more, the primary role played by narrative discourse in the construction of the philosophical canon. On the one hand, the fragmentary nature of the documents involved complicates the reconstruction of theories, while on the other, the creation of a more exhaustive interpretation of the history of Western thought demands the re-evaluation of this very material (cf. Bonelli 2020: XVI-XXI).

Narrative, understood as "the mind's primary *habitus* and a fundamental paradigm of the human condition" (Lepri 2023: 120), thus represents an indispensable tool for contesting what Thomas Ricklin defines as the old Eurocentric and male-dominated canon. It offers decisive elements within that process of identity construction, aimed at the reclamation of a specific subjectivity (cf. Ulivieri, Biemmi 2011). Narrative inherently entails the exposition of a sequence of events unfolding across temporal and spatial dimensions, centered upon one or multiple protagonists. The perspective from which the story is told, moreover, lends a particular nuance to the events. Philosophy itself may be interpreted as the narration of a sequence of conceptual forms, which find their genesis – whether implicit or explicit – within the individual experience of their authors. Speculative thought, in other words, unfolds through diaries and epistolary exchanges; it moves through those self-narratives and accounts of others that, by virtue of their own configuration, delineate an

unequivocal trajectory for the history of thought⁴. To quote Paolo D’Angelo, “philosophy has always relied, and continues to rely, not on one but on many literary genres” (D’Angelo 2012: 11). Letters and diaries serve as extraordinary media of reflection, where writing within and about life intersects with reflection on the world. Thought and experience thus merge, giving rise to a singular intertwining: philosophy unveils a dimension that is, so to speak, private – only apparently marginal and accessory – but which nonetheless meets the logical rigor of argumentation. The universal character of speculative thought may then be sought in the contingency of experience, revealing the ultimate meaning of its intersubjective constitution.

2. Two figures of resistance: Christiane Hegel and Fanny Mendelssohn

The nineteenth century witnessed numerous intellectual achievements, from an array of remarkable women. These individuals made important contributions, *inter alia*, to the cultural, political and artistic, as well as the philosophical, arenas. In this context, the Hegelian constellation of the feminine is replete with potential. As Francesca Iannelli aptly notes, numerous figures enriched the experience of Hegel himself, exerting a profound influence on the philosopher that extended to his theoretical framework. From this perspective, the intertwining of philosophy and life offers a singular interpretive lens through which to examine one of the most fecund eras of Western thought (Iannelli 2021: 241-5). Nevertheless, the Hegelian constellation of the feminine has long been overlooked in the pertinent critical literature. Conversely, the research project “Hegelian constellations of the feminine: a hyper-archive for an inclusive *Bildung*” seeks to unveil the intricate web of exchanges sustained by Hegel with notable female figures of his time, across various biographical, aesthetic-artistic, and socio-historical dimensions (Iannelli, Achella, Caramelli 2024: 211-23).

The research pursues two primary objectives, distinct in nature, yet profoundly interconnected, with the intention of generating a fruitful synergy between past and present. On one hand, through the rigorous appli-

⁴ Echoing Paul Ricoeur’s definition, narrative may be understood as, “an art of composition which, through the articulation of concordance and discordance, regulates that mutable form designated by Aristotle as ‘mythos’” (Ricoeur 2009: 96).

cation of the *Konstellationsforschung* method, the project aims to reconstruct a constellation of female figures whose life trajectories influenced, both directly and indirectly, the development of Hegel's thought. Within this framework, the present project will reevaluate the work of women who brought their own distinctive insights and unconventional perspectives to the examination of Hegelian thought. Private correspondence, diaries, and other previously unexamined texts will be invaluable tools in this regard. In its size and heterogeneity, this constellation encompasses not only literary and poetic figures – such as Antigone, Iphigenia or Lady Macbeth – but also historical individuals from the philosopher's private life (such as his sister Christiane Louise, his mother Maria Magdalena Louisa, his wife Marie Helena Susanne von Tucher), as well as the broader artistic (Fanny Mendelssohn, Angelica Catalani, Auguste Crelinger-Stitch, Anna Milder-Hauptmann, Gentile Borgondio) and cultural milieu of the era (Karoline von Günderrode, Bettina von Armin, Caroline Michaelis-Schlegel-Schelling). Concurrently, the research seeks to offer a new interpretation of German Idealism within contemporary scholarly debate, aiming to elucidate the association between lived experience and Hegel's aesthetic-philosophical frameworks (cf. Iannelli 2023b: 76). The Hegelian legacy has been subjected to critical scrutiny by various modern feminist movements. A pertinent example is Carla Lonzi's seminal volume *Sputiamo su Hegel* (1970), regarded as a significant assault on the part of the *Rivolta Femminile* collective against patriarchal society⁵. The Hegelian system is underpinned by the dialectical tensions between spirit and nature, subject and object, and the particular and the universal, which “converge, troublingly, with traditional hierarchical oppositions between masculine and feminine and between male and female” (Stone 2004: 301). Feminist thought aims to overcome these dualisms. Nonetheless, as Kimberly Hutchings argues, any attempt to transcend dichotomies in search of an “uncontaminated elsewhere” seems destined to fail, as it remains confined within an oppositional mode of thought. According to Hutchings, the remedy requires a presence to be maintained amidst such oppositions, thereby scrutinizing the relationships between the terms, “to render them interdependent and imbricated in multiple ways” (Stone 2004: 302). Far

⁵ In her diaries *Taci, anzi parla* (1978), Lonzi notes the transformative potential inherent in the Hegelian concepts of self-consciousness, recognition and dialectics. By engaging in collective discourse and by adopting a fragmented narrative style – one that mirrors the fluidity of memory – she recovers the redemptive role of language. See Subrizi (2022).

from constituting a monolithic edifice, Hegelian philosophy continues to provide a distinctive lens through which to investigate contemporary phenomena. It is, in fact, the distinctive nature of the biographical and narrative method that facilitates a multifaceted interpretation: the reconstruction of the interweaving relationships and ties between figures acquires philosophical significance, providing a key to discerning the origins and meaning of specific conceptual forms.

In this multifaceted landscape, the present contribution will focus on two exemplary figures from the Hegelian constellation, namely, Christiane Luise Hegel (1773-1832) and Fanny Mendelssohn-Bartholdy Hensel (1805-1847), in order to reflect deeply on the “narration of the feminine”⁶. It is especially pertinent to underscore how a socially codified narrative characterizes the lives of both Christiane and Fanny. The narratives of these two women have, in fact, long been relegated to the shadows cast by their more celebrated brothers. Regarding Christiane, the sparse extant sources have focused primarily on her mental illness, occasionally positing a resonance with the figure of Antigone. In the article *O feminino na figura da irmã: Christiane Hegel e Antígona* (2022), Nina Auras proposes a biographical interpretation, questioning the plausibility of a direct link between Hegel’s reading of Sophocles’ tragedy and his relationship with Christiane. Indeed, in voicing Antigone, who acts in accordance with her own desire to bury her brother (Polynices), Hegel appears to be speaking of Christiane, an equally rebellious and tragic figure⁷.

Similarly, most monographs on the life of Fanny Mendelssohn-Bartholdy Hensel emphasize her struggle to circumvent the restrictive norms of the time. In her own biography, Françoise Tillard vehemently denounces the role of Felix, whom she identifies as the primary obstacle to his sister’s musical journey, effectively stifling her creative aspirations. Drawing on the insights of Charles Gounod – who posited that numerous *Lieder* attributed to the renowned composer were, in fact, the work of Fanny herself – Tillard characterizes this suppression as a profound injustice and an affront to the legacy of the female composer (Tillard 1996: 130). While it

⁶ The historical and intellectual figure of Fanny Cäcilie Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, together with five other forgotten female figures of the Hegelian constellation, has been meticulously reconstructed within the *FemHaB* hyper-archive (<https://hegel-femhab.org/>). The latter was developed in collaboration with Samsung Electronics Italia within the framework of *Samsung innovation campus* and the PRIN 20224KFTLP Project, *Hegelian constellations of the feminine: a hyper-archive for an Inclusive Bildung*.

⁷ An extensive analysis of the female condition within Hegelian thought, as viewed through the lens of Antigone, is provided in Rózsa 2022.

is true that Fanny inhabited a society dominated by male power, a narrative focused solely on her exclusion risks obscuring her portrait. It will therefore be more productive to reexamine the lives of Fanny and Christiane. Doing so will allow us to consider, not only the obstacles they encountered, but also the particular talents, interests and characteristics that they evinced throughout those lives. Suspended between patriarchal constraints and the pursuit of self-determination, these two figures are connected by an invisible thread. In this sense, the deployment of narrative represents a path toward reclaiming forgotten voices, while simultaneously offering the possibility of reinterpreting Hegelian thought through a different lens.

A scholar of French, an accomplished pianist, and a poetess, Christiane lived a solitary life following her mother's death, sustaining herself through private tuition in Latin. In her poems – addressed, according to various sources, to her admirer, the lawyer and poet Gotthold Stäudlin (1758-1796) – the author appears to adopt a “Schillerian tone.” Regrettably, these compositions have not survived, although they may have circulated anonymously (Kriegel 2010). The historical sources portray a woman of profound spiritual and intellectual depth who, despite predating the advent of psychoanalysis, found in writing her primary and most distinctive mode of expression. In the first half of the nineteenth century, studies concerning the abstruse aspects of the mind were still in their infancy. To describe the unconscious processes of intelligence, Hegel employs the imagery of the “nocturnal abyss”, revealing a certain affinity with preceding currents of thought – such as Neoplatonism, early German Idealism, and *Naturphilosophie* – while nonetheless distancing himself from these to propose his own, original path of inquiry. While the concept of the unconscious was already familiar, the nexus between the latter and language had not yet been examined. This relationship with language, nonetheless, defines the very essence of the human condition, transcending the purely clinical: psychoanalysis is not simply a “talking cure.” Rather, it constitutes an ongoing investigation into the inner workings of the human mind.

In the volume *The unconscious abyss. Hegel's anticipation of psychoanalysis* (2002), Jon Mills underlines the rare occurrences of the concept of the “unconscious” (*Bewußtlos*), scattered throughout the German philosopher's work – specifically within the *Phenomenology of spirit* (1807) and, most notably, the *Encyclopedia of the philosophical sciences in basic outline* (1817). Mills (2002: 3) notes that these instances correspond to differing conceptual meanings. Famously, Sigmund Freud deployed the term

Unbewusste to describe the unconscious, thus distinguishing it from the preconscious (*Vorbewusste*), whose contents, “despite sharing the characteristic of being currently absent from consciousness with the unconscious, are nevertheless akin to consciousness not only because they are accessible to it, but also because they are in solidarity [*i.e.*, consistent] with waking judgment” (Perniola 2023: 45). Here, the significance of Freud’s work lies less in his theorization of the unconscious than in his formulation, through the rigorous observation of psychic processes, of the fundamental laws governing the mechanisms of the mind. While Hegel could not yet have perceived such a connection, it is plausible to suggest that his sister’s harrowing experiences prompted him to engage with certain, hitherto unrecognized dimensions of thought, thereby inadvertently contributing to our understanding of psychodynamics.

In February 1832, at the age of fifty-eight, the poetess Christiane Luise Hegel took her own life by leaping into the Nagold River, just a few kilometers from the Black Forest town where, “Gotthold had fled from Stuttgart immediately prior to his own suicide” (Birkert 2008: 68). She exerted a profound influence on Hegel’s life, although research in this regard was long hampered by a scarcity of information⁸. Indeed, a significant portion of the correspondence between the two siblings was purportedly incinerated, following the philosopher’s death, by his children and his wife Marie, who regarded her sister-in-law as “mentally deranged”. Nevertheless, the sparse extant evidence suggests that Christiane might have benefited from therapy centered on listening and verbal expression. In this manner, she might have escaped the grim fate all too typically reserved for psychiatric patients of the era. In fact, in May 1820, Christiane was institutionalized in the Württemberg state asylum at Zwiefalten, suffering from “hypocondriac melancholy”. Although themes around madness – and, more broadly, the “shadows of reason” – occupy a definitive place within his philosophical system, Hegel was notoriously averse to public disclosures regarding his private life, even to the extent that he treated philosophy as “the tomb of the heart” (Iannelli 2023a: 12-3).

Any bond between the two siblings must, therefore, largely be traced within the interstices of Hegelian philosophy⁹. If, as Maurice Blanchot writes,

⁸ In his younger years, Hegel regarded Christiane as his “Privy Councillor” (Iannelli 2021: 243).

⁹ In the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel explicitly defends the objectivity of scientific research: “Then philosophizing will at least have to be acquitted of haughtiness. For thinking is true in terms of content only if it is immersed in the *basic matter* at hand and in terms

“philosophy finds its summation and reaches its zenith” in Hegel’s *oeuvre* (Blanchot 2015: 6), the birth of subjectivity appears, nonetheless, to be thickly veiled. The aurora of subjectivity corresponds, in fact, to “a series of perceptions, of sensation, of *Erlebnisse*, which show an originally confused state, in which the elements mix, overlap, and are far from resembling the clear and distinct ideas of Cartesian philosophy” (Achella 2021: ebook). The origin of the human being, in this sense, would coincide with a rather “dark, remote abyss”. At the dawn of subjectivity, one finds not a self-conscious individual, but rather a constellation of indistinct, chaotic, and fragmented perceptions requiring a process of unification; this operation, in turn, finds its fulfillment in the encounter with alterity – that is, through a dialectical process that may lead to forms of mutual recognition. It was precisely Hegel’s familial circumstances, moreover, that prompted his burgeoning interest in mental illness. From 1822 to 1832, Christiane remained under the medical supervision of Karl Eberhard Schelling (1783-1854), the celebrated philosopher’s younger brother, who almost certainly employed magnetic therapy in her treatment. The frequently subtle boundary distinguishing health from infirmity, as well as the intricate bond between physician and patient, was interpreted by nineteenth-century medicine via a keen attention to the broader spectrum of interpersonal relations (cf. von Engelhardt: 344). For Karl Schelling, it remained a fallacy to believe that, “our representations are directly elicited within us by the external world; rather, our soul is the absolutely productive source of all internal states of our organism, the very principle of law governing all its transformations” (Storti 1994: 80). Not until the psychoanalytic revolution, grounded in the therapeutic potential of the word, would new avenues for healing emerge. Here, the unconscious was not to be exhumed from the depths of the psyche but would rather be understood as something originating from without, constituting itself as the incomprehensible outcome of our encounter with Otherness (Laplanche 2021).

Conventional biographies have relegated Christiane to a place within her brother’s shadow, typically suggesting that she was suddenly overtaken by madness. To quote Karl Rosenkranz, “the only sister of a world-

of content only if it is not a *particular* instance of being or doing of the subject, but instead is consciousness conducting itself precisely as an abstract ‘I,’ *liberated* from *all the particularity* (*Partikularität*) that attaches to qualities and conditions otherwise, and only enacting the universal through which it is identical with all individuals” (Hegel 2015: § 23).

celebrated sage, who died in the capital of a great state, surrounded by his family, dies in mental derangement, from a broken heart, a lonely suicide!” (Rosenkranz 2026: 413). In her book *Hegels Schwester: auf den Spuren einer ungewöhnlichen Frau um 1800* (2008), Alexandra Birkert proposes a more careful and scrupulous reading of Christiane Hegel’s life, addressing a paradox inherent in biographical research. On the one hand, the author aims to present Christiane as an independent individual, without viewing her life solely in the shadow of her brother; on the other hand, she unequivocally recognizes that, “no one would dedicate a detailed biography to Christiane if she had not been the sister of the celebrated philosopher” (Kriegel 2010: 19). The research presented in this volume accounts for such a paradox: the poetess’s effigy thus emerges as a paradigm representing other female figures whose experiences have long been shrouded in silence. Drawing on previously unpublished material, Birkert delineates a relatively independent profile diverging from the feminine ideal of the period. Indeed, what emerges is the image of a cosmopolitan woman who (e.g.) spoke perfect French and was politically engaged, as evidenced by her epistolary exchanges and her encounters with prominent figures from revolutionary circles (Birkert 2008: 143).

In this context, one may discern a distinctive affinity with Fanny Mendelssohn-Bartholdy Hensel, sister of the pianist Felix, whose own contributions have been eclipsed, in standard narratives, by her brother’s more celebrated figure. Suspended between the strictures of patriarchal power and an innate quest for self-determination, her existence may be viewed as a paradigm of quiet yet tenacious rebellion. From 1823 onwards, the Mendelssohn family hosted private concerts, featuring professional musicians, within their Berlin residence. Beyond the musical performances *per se*, these *Sonntagsmusiken* – distinguished social gatherings frequented by such luminaries as the brothers Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt, Niccolò Paganini, Ludwig Tieck, Bettina von Armin, and Hegel himself – provided a forum where guests engaged in profound discourses concerning philosophy, politics, and culture (Büchter-Römer 2001: 83-93). Deeply embedded within the musical landscape of the era, the Mendelssohn family embodied the significance of art as an expression of the spirit and of human cultivation, in alignment with the theories advanced by Hegel¹⁰. On the occasion of a Sunday concert in 1826 – following a performance with her brother of the Overture to *A midsummer night’s dream*

¹⁰ The complex relationship between Hegel and the Mendelssohn family is analyzed in Olivier, Laugstien 2011.

(Op. 21) – Fanny masterfully executed several of her own *Lieder*. Among the audience was Hegel, who lauded the pianist's performance while simultaneously extolling her formidable compositional prowess. The relationship between the philosopher and the Mendelssohn family must, in fact, be situated within the broader context of Berlin's intellectual and artistic milieu, a setting defined by intense cultural vibrancy. Among the editors of the *Lectures on the philosophy of art* delivered by Hegel in 1828-29, one finds Felix Mendelssohn. The latter attended these lectures when he was engaged in staging Bach's *St. Matthew passion* at the Sing-Akademie¹¹.

Fanny's private performances garnered considerable acclaim, to the extent that certain authors attributed to her a talent equal, if not superior, to that of Felix (Werner 1947: 326-7). Although the siblings received a comparable musical education, and both emerged as gifted composers, only Felix was actively encouraged by the family to pursue a professional career. Nevertheless, the relationship between the musician son and his father was not without its own serious tensions: in a letter sent from Italy in 1830, Felix lamented his father's coolness *vis-à-vis* his artistic aspirations, finding solace instead in his sister, with whom he shared a fervent devotion to the music of Beethoven (Mendelssohn-Bartholdy 2009: 79). Following her 1829 marriage to the painter Wilhelm Hensel and the birth of her son Sebastian, meanwhile, Fanny continued to compose, contributing to the celebrated cultural salons of her parental home. Although domestic responsibilities occasionally diverted her energies away from music, sources suggest that her most profound distress stemmed from the conspicuous lack of artistic encouragement from her family (Citron 1983: 571).

In light of Fanny Mendelssohn's remarkable life, the scholar must select a methodology that captures the full range and diversity of her experiences. In her essay *The suppression of Fanny Mendelssohn: rethinking feminist biography* (2002), Mary Wilson Kimber offered a suite of theoretical instruments for navigating this formal challenge. According to the American scholar, the inherent danger in feminist biography lies in constructing a discourse centered on what women *might* have achieved in a

¹¹ Regarding performance practice, Lydia Goehr attributes primacy of place to Felix Mendelssohn in having brought the *St. Matthew passion* to the concert stage, thus severing its initial liturgical ties. In doing so, he inaugurated a transition whereby the *Passion* entered the pantheon of timeless masterworks, transcending its functional origins to become an autonomous object of aesthetic contemplation. See Goehr 2007.

given era: the narration, in other words, of unfulfilled potential. Ultimately, it does no justice to the pianist's human character or artistic genius to define her merely as a woman who did not publish, as noted in one of the early reviews of Tillard's volume (Warren O'Reilly 1996: 282). In this light, to frame the biographies of Fanny Mendelssohn and Christiane Hegel as mere emblems of "suppression" – stifled by the patriarchal structures of the 1800s – risks undermining their worth as historical figures. While these women certainly lived through an era defined by profound systemic inequalities, a narrative grounded solely in injustice and exclusion would be reductive and demeaning.

In truth, the publication of her musical works demonstrated that Fanny Mendelssohn was able tenaciously to surmount several of the cultural obstacles in her path. As Kimber astutely notes, her setting of the *Ave Maria* was published in 1832 in the renowned journal *The harmonicon*, appearing two years after an article that had already lauded her artistic genius. Another musical piece, entitled *Die Schiffende*, was published under her own name, by Schlesinger, as part of a miscellany album (Wilson Kimber 2002: 119). Upon hearing the piece performed in a Leipzig concert hall, Felix Mendelssohn himself wrote eloquently to his sister: "For my part, I thank you on behalf of the public in Leipzig and elsewhere for having published it against my will"¹². In this regard, it is essential to highlight how, within Fanny's passion for music, Hegelian aesthetics also assumed a decisive significance, establishing itself as a potent theoretical and hermeneutic framework¹³. For Hegel, music "dwells in inwardness" and opens onto an ideal temporality, thereby countering the world's chaos (Hegel 2000: 254-61). Unlike painting or sculpture, music lacks the element of materiality. Rather, it transmits a subjectivity stripped of all support, wherein sound manifests through its own temporal flow¹⁴. In the letters addressed to her beloved brother, Fanny frequently invokes the "depth" of music, revealing a profound resonance with the philosophical insights developed by Hegel (Weissweiler 1985).

In December 1831, the pianist conducted the sole known performance of the *Cholera Kantate, Musik für die Toten der Cholera Epidemie*,

¹² Letter of March 7, 1837: "Ich meinesteils bedanke mich im Namen des Publikums zu Leipzig und den anderen Orten, daß Du es gegen meinen Wunsch doch herausgegeben hast" (Hensel 1995: 480).

¹³ For an extensive reconstruction of Hegelian musical theory, see Olivier 2003.

¹⁴ "Music, however, preserves an inherent corporeality expressed through the vibration of the resonant medium, as cogently described in the framework of the Philosophy of Nature" (Michielon 2018: 156).

an intense and poignant work marking the end of the cholera pandemic that had ravaged Berlin for months. The composition channels the profound dismay she experienced following the sudden death of her friend Wilhelm (Hensel 2002: 293). Her final work, the *Piano trio in D minor*, composed shortly before her own death on May 14, 1847, following a stroke, had its première during a domestic concert held to celebrate her sister Rebecka's birthday. Despite adhering to the social conventions of her era, Fanny remained steadfast in dedicating her creative energies to music. In her diaries, she articulated her inner tribulations, alluding to her struggle for public recognition and her frequently conflicted relationship with Felix – who, despite their fraternal bond, often remained resistant to his sister's professional emancipation (Weissweiler 1985). Nevertheless, the decision independently to publish a selection of her works, disregarding her family's reservations, unquestionably reflects the pianist's enterprising spirit. Mendelssohn's surviving letters and diary fragments demonstrate that she was able to overcome the cultural constraints of her era. Not least, she was clearly unafraid to pursue professional validation in the face of an indifferent, or actively hostile, patriarchal society. Through her unwavering perseverance and musical brilliance, Fanny Mendelssohn captivated some of the era's preeminent figures, including Hegel himself, during the pivotal years in which the latter formulated his aesthetic reflections on music and art.

3. Writing and narratives from a female perspective

The historical power of narrative is reflected in the nature of the testimony that so many female figures, both celebrated and relatively obscure, have left behind. These materials bear witness to intellectual, artistic, poetic and musical creativity, and more broadly, to the textures and nuances of life itself. Too often, however, research has overlooked instances of lived experience that evinced the potential to nurture female autonomy. To convey a sense of empowerment, biographical accounts need not devise alternative endings or construct historical impossibilities. As Mary Wilson Kimber notes, "if feminist biography and women's history as a whole are to have any validity, they must not abandon a historical method" (Wilson Kimber 2002: 126). Conversely, as Jedlowski and Màdera observe, narration also possesses a "dynamic and transformable" dimension, essentially embodied by the narrator's stance: a story is com-

posed “of a voice, with a specific tone, and from a certain posture” (Jedlowski, Màdera 2024: 15). This latter aspect proves pivotal for a broad-spectrum inquiry into the role of narrative: “The facts may remain the same, unchanging, yet if the tone shifts, the impact of the story shifts with it” (*ibidem*). Indeed, the narrative tone profoundly influences the meaning that the reader ascribes to the biographical text, “a modification which, in autobiography as in analysis, is perhaps the most significant contributor to the reshaping of the future” (Jedlowski, Màdera 2024: 16).

Drawing on the transformative insights of Freudian psychoanalysis, Jedlowski and Màdera argue for the intensely subjective nature of narrative, a force whose primary strength lies in its capacity to disentangle the individual from the constraints of self-referentiality. The narrated world, moreover, exerts a profound influence on the reader’s psyche. Narratives help delineate our personal identity, manifesting a genuine transformative power. Writing thus emerges as a means of self-comprehension and recognition, via an encounter with “otherness”, bringing to light the infinite nuances of the human mind. Identification with literary characters should not be construed as “lazy imitation”, but rather understood as a dynamic process through which one’s own life experience is organized and reshaped. For Paul Ricoeur, a dialectical relationship exists between the imaginative world of the text and the actual world of the reader. The moment readers, “subordinate their expectations to those developed by the text”, they are transposed into an alternative dimension, one that identifies with the unreality of the narrative. On the other hand, they, “incorporate, little matter whether consciously or unconsciously, into their vision of the world the lessons of their readings” (Ricoeur 1990: 179). In this sense, the experience of reading becomes a liminal space to be traversed, rather than a destination in which to dwell.

If, on the one hand, such reflections carry significant weight in the context of biographical fiction – marked by an inventive liberty that melds historical reality with fictionalized, albeit verisimilar, nuances, as exemplified by, say, Marguerite Yourcenar’s 1951 novel *Memoirs of Hadrian* – they concurrently offer an invitation to contemplate the nature of biography as a genre, and its intersection with philosophical inquiry. Echoing the insights of Marcel Schwob, one may note that writing must distill, from a “chaos of human traits”, those essential elements required to forge “a form unlike any other” (Schwob 2002: 515). In this light, biography is comparable to a singular artistic endeavor, centered primarily on the act of discernment. Like a sculptor striving to reshape a block of marble, thereby imbuing it with new meaning, the narrator seeks to impose contours on

the endless flow of human experience. To do so is to capture, at least potentially, the diversity and complexity of daily existence. Philosophy may aspire to conceptual universality, but narration remains the expressive domain of the self. That said, speculative thought reveals itself, simultaneously, as a personal trajectory. Indeed, behind every theoretical construct lies not an incorporeal shadow, but the irreducible uniqueness of one's own individual history.

In this context, Cavarero (1997: 10) explicitly highlights how narration allows for the integration of an individual or an event into a discourse that is essentially rooted in memory. Such a discourse may be understood as a portrait that captures the defining features of a life. For that Italian philosopher, the practice of storytelling also encompassed relation, existence, and attentiveness, representing, indeed, “the only remedy to save the very name of philosophy from its tragic fate” (Cavarero 1997: 69). Consequently, a specific application of the biographical and narrative method aligns seamlessly with the path forged by Dieter Henrich in his investigation of the origins of German Idealism: it brings to light the interdependence and reciprocal connections between life and thought. Specifically, furthermore, this method constitutes a further expansion of constellation research (*Konstellationsforschung*), as it fosters the reconstruction of singular experiences, determining the extent to which narrative is capable of orienting both thought and communication. As Romano Màdera (2022: 48) reminds us, in this regard, the purpose of the biographical method is to broaden awareness and responsibility, an objective that “respects and nurtures the most inherent potentials of the human condition”. It is through the narration of a series of artistic and existential trajectories that it becomes possible for one to approach German Classical Idealism from a new perspective, viewing it as a “continuous and subterranean confrontation with female alterity” (Iannelli 2021). An interpretation of Hegelian philosophy via the lens of narrativity thus paves the way for new fields of discourse. It is precisely the fusion of non-systematic expressive forms, such as letters or diaries, that allows us “discursively to explore the ways in which our memory and our textures of meaning and learning unfold” (Mancino 2013: 417). These literary genres, on the other hand, cannot be strictly traced back to a predetermined model; rather, they bear witness to the dynamic and vital nature of philosophical inquiry. Thus, while philosophy unfolds through official sources, it simultaneously finds renewed vigor in epistolary exchanges, which are themselves stylistic and literary instruments capable of “accompanying and vivifying the dialogue between two subjects” (Spinelli 2012: 172). As is

widely acknowledged, nineteenth-century women's writing often found expression in diaries and letters, within which art and life appear to have been intimately intertwined. In our present context, it is precisely these documents that translate the vibrancy of intellectual experience into words, thereby stimulating the reader's critical reflection¹⁵. Consequently, the interpretation of epistolary exchanges should not be understood on a merely biographical level. Rather, it serves as a point of departure for a profound investigation of the theoretical core of these reflections, signifying an unprecedented convergence of art, life, and thought.

In this light, the biographical and narrative method emerges as a valuable instrument for disrupting the more conventional, author-centric, and linear narrative of philosophy. If narratives unfold within the tension between the text and extra-textual life, one may similarly speak of an ethical dimension inherent in the biographical and narrative method, and more specifically, one that rescues forgotten figures (such as Christiane Hegel and Fanny Mendelssohn) from oblivion. It does so by restoring their specific artistic qualities to memory, rather than focusing solely on their exclusion from a male-dominated society. It has already been observed that a narrative founded solely on the obstacles encountered by these two women, throughout their lives, would merely reinforce certain pre-conceptions inherent in the traditional canon. The hardships intrinsically linked to their pursuit of emancipation, as well as their untimely deaths, risk confining both the pianist and the poet within the narrow bounds of a "stereotypical biographical narrative of the suffering artistic genius" (Wilson Kimber 2002: 121). Such a perspective is, however, deceptive. To illuminate the obscure recesses of philosophy, it is not enough simply to restore voice and visibility to forgotten figures. Rather, it is necessary to establish a framework that foregrounds their desire for self-determination, their artistic merits, and the objectives they successfully attained. Indeed, patriarchal culture has hindered the advancement of women while deeply influencing how their stories are told (cf. Heilbrun 1989). In this light, biographical narrative should not be considered a detached description of a subject's life, but instead, it necessitates a kind of radical

¹⁵ This strand of literary theory traces its origins back to Friedrich Schlegel's aesthetics. In this regard, Gisela Dischner (1979: 17) writes: "While we can only bow in adoration before closed works of art, those art forms that embrace and reflect sociality stimulate the reader toward active participation – as Bertolt Brecht would observe some years later".

“re-authoring”. Narration of the female experience thus involves the coherent reconstruction of intricate life stories, avoiding the danger of “adhering to the same gender ideology that dictates women’s historical marginalization in the first place” (Wilson Kimber 2002: 123). As Karen Joisten clarifies, philosophical narrative is tasked with intertwining “sapiential” insights with facts, relations, and contingencies, thereby seeking a “synthesis of the heterogeneous” (Joisten 2025: 35). The result of this process is far from neutral, representing a deliberate selection. In other words, the text transmutes the singularity of life into language, protecting it from dissipation.

In fact, constellation research is singularly productive from a theoretical standpoint, revealing a common intellectual space, a locus of mutual influence among diverse figures. The constellations identified by Henrich symbolize reflective paths, aimed at investigating the creative impulses and conceptual breakthroughs that emerge from the interaction of various authors, within a shared space and a specific temporal horizon (cf. Henrich 1991). Such an innovative methodology, rooted in the analysis of a diverse corpus of documents, also opens significant avenues for research in the literary arena¹⁶. It is precisely the extreme heterogeneity of sources, indeed, that constitutes a cornerstone of *Konstellationsforschung*, bringing to light what Martin Mulsow and Marcelo Stamm define as the “dimension of possibility”. In this interpretation, the author is not a monolithic and immutable entity; rather, authors are progressively shaped through interactions and encounters with other figures, within a single “field of forces” (cf. Mulsow, Stamm 2005). Through an investigative inquiry aimed at reconstructing exchanges, convergences, and submerged links, the opportunity arises to shatter those prejudices via which German Classical Idealism, as a philosophical era, has been articulated exclusively in masculine terms. A rigorous examination of memoirs and epistolary exchanges prepares the way for an original narrative of the history of Western thought, liberated from cultural biases and divergent from socially codified frameworks. If, as Annie Ernaux observes, to speak of female writing is, above all, to “attribute to sexual difference a determining role in both the creation and reception of a text” (Ernaux 2024: 91), it nonetheless becomes imperative to illuminate the distinctive qualities of those women authors who, with quiet resolve, have contributed to the cultural evolution of an

¹⁶ Matteo Iacovella’s contribution, for instance, aims to demonstrate how Wolfgang Hildesheimer’s work on the Theatre of the Absurd unfolds “within a framework of twentieth-century German and European poetics” (Iacovella 2021: 127).

era. Thus, biographical narrative may “evolve into a form of recognition for others – a process of self-identification wherein one’s own lived experience is mirrored and re-examined through the story of another” (Mapelli 2011: 66).

In particular, it is through the pioneering work of Virginia Woolf that reflections on feminine narration began to take a systematic form. In her celebrated 1929 essay, *A room of one’s own* – based on a series of lectures delivered at Newnham and Girton Colleges – the English author investigates the nexus between femininity and literature. In doing so, she moves beyond a mere examination of individual women novelists, offering insights for a broader analysis of the role of narrative within the history of aesthetics. The intellectual journey undertaken by Woolf illuminates the systematic denial of validation for women’s creativity within male-dominated, patriarchal paradigms: “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf 2014: 2). Once a place of seclusion and restraint, the room evolves into a space of freedom, asserting itself as a catalyst for autonomy. Turning her gaze towards those figures that “need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh” (Woolf 2014: 112), Woolf delineates the contours of a credible feminist manifesto. It is not merely a matter of valorizing a “literature written by women for women” (Ernaux 2024: 91), in opposition to a masculine canon. Rather, one should discern an inherent vocation for inclusion within the peculiarities of diverse artistic and cultural experiences. Writing continuously generates and invents new meanings, through which “life comes to know itself through its own essence, through the time it has inhabited, a time reclaimed through words” (Mapelli 2011: 67). The redemptive power of language allows us to locate, and generate, new forms of meaning within human lives and communities. The same power allows the scholar to reclaim intellectual and artistic legacies that might otherwise be lost. In the present case, indeed, the narration of such legacies is doubly important, as an engine of validation and liberation.

In this expansive context, Hegelian philosophy constitutes “the matrix for a counter-narrative that can recognize and enhance the role of the above mentioned women and artists” (Iannelli 2023b: 79), unearthing the female contribution long concealed within the fabric of historical discourse. No longer, then, the dogmatic and monolithic philosophy of an author once dismissed by feminist movements, but a living discourse that continues to speak with force and lucidity to our present age. This research trajectory aligns with the practice of pluralistic thought, aimed at fostering

a nuanced reading of Classical German Idealism while also providing an interpretative key to grasp the complexities of the contemporary world. Engagement with the biographies and intellectual legacies of those female figures who, like guiding stars, illuminated Hegel's experience will be invaluable for a more inclusive interpretation of the Western canon, which will itself enrich the intersection of horizons, discourses and forms of knowledge. Moreover, Hegel himself "practiced, privately and publicly, the recognition of the value of the feminine while speculatively laying the foundations for a plural recognition of all diversity and otherness" (Iannelli 2023b: 79). In this manner, *Konstellationsforschung* allows for the unveiling of the unexpressed potential of Hegelian thought, while simultaneously bringing to light the importance of encounters and mutual influences in the reconstruction of a philosophical system. On the threshold of modernity, a path unfolds that will allow scholars to challenge the prevailing theoretical order. Although Hegel was the product of a society where women were profoundly intellectually disenfranchised, his philosophy, centered on the tenets of recognition and freedom, remains a vital source of inspiration¹⁷. The reappraisal of certain female figures who critically interrogated their own era represents, therefore, a cornerstone for interpreting German Idealism. It reflects and encompasses a double movement: from life to philosophy, and from philosophy to life.

4. Conclusions

The application of biographical and narrative methods to *Konstellationsforschung* represents a viable pathway for reconciling the universality of speculative thought with the singularity of existence. It thus constitutes a genuine act of resistance against oblivion and prejudice. In fact, the biographical-narrative method gives due attention to sources too often overlooked in traditional philosophical research, including letters, diaries, and various forms of textual archive material. In doing so, it emphasizes the intersections and continuities between (e.g.) psychological, personal, and social phenomena. As Riccardo Pozzo asserts, the aim of such an endeavor is to "reconstruct the impact that certain intellectual networks, which have mostly been overlooked by criticism, have had on canonical authors"

¹⁷ For an in-depth exploration of the tensions inherent in Hegelian thought, and a concurrent appraisal of its hermeneutic possibilities, particularly regarding the concept of *Anerkennung*, see Iannelli 2021: 239-41.

(Pozzo 2021: 9). This methodology has the potential to recall and valorize the contribution of certain female figures who, at the dawn of the modern era, overcame specific cultural obstacles – notably through artistic production such as poetry and music – and thus fostered a model of life and behavior diverging from the social conventions of the time.

Simultaneously, *Konstellationsforschung* offers an opportunity to reflect on the central value of narratives as the origin of every form of thought and communication, in a perpetual oscillation between art, life, and thought. If the “constellation” devised by Henrich constitutes a construct in which theoretics and historiography are indissolubly welded, it may itself be considered as a comprehensive model – one, in fact, that possesses the power to “render intelligible, name and depict the rich material excavated by the author over the decades” (Franchini 2021: 31). Moreover, as we have previously observed, writing is never neutral; rather, it reveals an intrinsic moral commitment. Every stylistic and lexical choice serves as an expression of a specific *Weltanschauung*. It is this narrative construction, in its dual aesthetic and ethical vocation, that creates, “the possibility for the reader to experience that very history, discovering fragments of their own within its events, lived experiences and reflections” (Mapelli 2011: 66). In this regard, the Hegelian constellation of the feminine emerges as a fertile ground for inquiry, the exploration of which facilitates a retrospective reading of the development of Western thought. From Kant to Hegel, and from Fichte to Schelling, the traditional narratives of German Idealism have offered an exclusively masculine inflection, overlooking the vital contributions of women writers, artists and thinkers. Through the examples offered by figures such as Christiane Hegel and Fanny Mendelssohn, whose life trajectories are profoundly intertwined with Hegelian philosophy, it becomes possible to interpret German Idealism from a novel perspective, transcending more conventional readings. Due to its inherent dynamism, *Konstellationsforschung*, enriched by biographical and narrative methods, provides a tool for the dismantling of traditional portrayals of speculative thought as a linear trajectory. It thus clears the ground for the construction of a “different philosophical path” (Màdera 2022: 47).

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