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THE DYNAMICS OF GOETHE'S *NOVELLE* The Never-Ending Journey to Newton's Burg

Heather I. Sullivan

Goethe favored volatile patterns, especially patterns of dynamic energy that disturb dreams of static equilibrium and pastoral peace. He saw the world around us, whether natural or cultural, as a flow of movement and active “becoming,” claiming “Nothing stands still.”¹ His action-packed 1828 *Novelle* exemplifies this dynamic perspective with its unfulfilled quest to enter the ruined Burg atop the mountain. Instead of allowing the reader’s view directly into the ruin, the *Novelle* instead diverts its focus ever more onto a flow of patterns. These patterns include the figures’ repeated yet deterred movements up and down the mountain, the irreconcilably polarized significances of each image (like the Burg), and the shift of perceptions from seeing to hearing. As many have noted, the *Novelle* has a frenetic and ironic tone despite its apparently idyllic ending.² Those readers disavowing the irony and tensions tend toward either celebrating this tale as utopian³ or else

¹ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Goethe: Sämtliche Werke*, Volume 23.1: *Zur Farbenlehre* (Frankfurt am Main: Klassiker, 1991), 515. All translations from the *Theory of Color* are mine, and hereafter noted as “*ToC*.”

² David Barry highlights the tale’s irony as the “tyranny of ambiguity”: “A Tyrant on the Loose in Goethe’s *Novelle*,” *Seminar* 25.4 (1989): 306–23.

³ Peter Höfke’s otherwise excellent essay sees the musical ending as a final stillness “taming” the people. “Ich fürchtete immer das Unglück zum zweitenmale zu erleben”: Über das Unerzählte in Goethes *Novelle*,” in Markus Heilmann and Birgit Wägenbaur, eds., *Ironische*

rejecting it as kitsch.⁴ Some readings have appropriately focused on the tale's scientific aspects—as Dorothea-Michaela Noé-Rumberg notes, Goethe the poet is inseparable from Goethe the scientific thinker⁵—although even some of these misconstrue the text's energy as moving towards a peaceful equilibrium.⁶ Surprisingly, these readings all overlook the marked similarities between the *Novelle's* ruined Burg (“Stammburg,” or ancestral castle) and the “ruined Burg” of Newton's optics, as Goethe so caustically labels it in the preface to his 1810 *Theory of Color*.⁷ In this Newtonian context, the tantalizingly harmonious resolution—the boy peacefully emerging from the Burg on high as he lulls the lion with his song—continues rather than ends the text's polarized energy. As Herbert Lehnert notes in his discussion of the *Novelle's* “tensions”: “the enhancement, the ‘Steigerung,’ of the lyrical ending can only be understood by way of the polarities that lead up to it.”⁸

Such an emphasis on energy patterns is shared by the relatively new field of nonequilibrium thermodynamics, a science that focuses on the dynamic systems arising from gradients (measurable differences in temperature, pressure, or chemical concentration) such as whirlpools, hurricanes, and living organisms. This essay examines Goethe's *Novelle* in light of nonequilibrium thermodynamics' energy transformations and

Propheten: Sprachbewusstsein und Humanität in der Literatur von Herder bis Heine (Tübingen: Narr, 2001): 145–68. Emphasizing “harmony” are Jürgen Jacobs, “Löwen sollen Lämmer werden: Zu Goethes *Novelle*,” in Hiltrud Gnüg, ed., *Literarische Utopie-Entwürfe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982): 187–95; and Emil Staiger, who claims that the finale brings unity: *Goethe: 1814–1832* (Zürich: Atlantis, 1963).

⁴ Regina Otto's summary of the *Novelle's* reception quotes Gottfried Benn, who called Goethe a dog and described the idyllic end as a “laughable” “caricature.” “Johann Wolfgang Goethe: *Novelle*,” in Bernd Leistner, ed., *Deutsche Erzählprosa der frühen Restaurationszeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1995): 26–65.

⁵ Dorothea-Michaela Noé-Rumberg, *Naturgesetze als Dichtungsprinzipien: Goethes verborgene Poetik im Spiegel seiner Dichtung* (Freiburg: Rombach, 1993).

⁶ Michael Mandelartz's reading of the Burg in terms of Goethe's geological ideas about granite mountains balances the utopian promise of art with skepticism about whether art can achieve such goals. “Vom Gestein zur Poesie: Zum Verfahren der Steigerung in Goethes *Novelle*,” *Herder-Studien* (Japan) 5 (1999): 127–59. Larry D. Wells speaks of the text's polarity and “organic growth,” concluding that it ends with a harmony between poetic structures and the laws of nature. “Organic Structure in Goethe's ‘Novelle,’” *German Quarterly* 53.4 (1980): 418–31.

⁷ Horst Fritz discusses Goethe's critique of Newton in the *Theory of Color*, yet only in reference to telescopes. *Instrumentelle Vernunft als Gegenstand von Literatur* (Munich: Fink, 1982).

⁸ Herbert Lehnert, “Tensions in Goethe's *Novelle*,” in William J. Lillyman, ed., *Goethe's Narrative Fiction* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1983): 176–92, 178.

open systems of exchange with the environment. While this scientific field understands the emergence of such tumultuous systems as an increase in complexity that more rapidly depletes energy, increases entropy, and thereby upholds the second law of thermodynamics, Goethe's *Novelle*, like his *Faust*, seeks the process rather than the end so that we always remain within the swirling patterns themselves.

Associated with ideas of self-organization and chaos theory (in light of which Herbert Rowland has most fruitfully analyzed the *Novelle*),⁹ nonequilibrium thermodynamics remains controversial as it questions some of the most traditional ideas of physics and biology such as time-reversible processes and closed systems. It radically insists on the complexity of open systems (including the earth's ecosystems and the organisms in them fueled by incoming sunlight) that are always exchanging matter and energy with their environment, as well as on naturally emerging energy patterns as the driving force of evolution rather than just random mutations. When comparing nonequilibrium thermodynamics to the classical thermodynamics of artificially closed systems, Eric Schneider and Dorion Sagan describe this science as a study of life, of:

how energy flow works to bring about complex structures, structures that seem to maintain themselves apart from their environment, structures that cycle the fluids, gases, and liquids of which they're made, structures that have a tendency to change and grow. Since you may recognize such structures—you are one of them!—as including life, the science in questions can be described as the thermodynamics of life.¹⁰

Schneider and Sagan note how this is also a study of "virtually all naturally occurring complex structures, from whirlpools to construction

⁹ Herbert Rowland emphasizes the "unstable configuration," "creative principle," and "generative forces" in the *Novelle*; and links it to "nonlinear dynamics," which is related to nonequilibrium thermodynamics. "Chaos and Art in Goethe's *Novelle*," *Goethe Yearbook* 8 (1996): 93–119. Rowland rejects the notion of equilibrium in the text, of an "end-state utopia," as the *Novelle* has "a view of the world as a system of unstably shifting and therefore ordering forces" (107).

¹⁰ Eric D. Schneider and Dorion Sagan, *Into the Cool: Energy Flow, Thermodynamics, and Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xii. Subsequent citations are made in the body of the essay.

workers” (xii). Moreover, the “systems of interest, the centers of flow, growth, and change, are not static, still or dead; they are not in equilibrium” (xii), much like Goethe’s ideas of nature. He studied the organic in botany and bones, the inorganic in minerals and mountains, and the polarity of light and color; in all of these areas he saw the same basic laws of movement and development: nature is always moving: “now as a simple attraction and repulsion, now as an igniting and extinguishing light, as movement of the air, as shaking of the body, as acid and basic; however, always as connecting or separating” (*ToC* 13). This type of polarity, as Astrida Tantillo notes, “is Goethe’s most basic universal principal,” and his ubiquitous polarities “are not antimonies or logical binaries, but represent opposing forces that often work together in order to create.”¹¹ Even while Goethe’s polarity looks backwards with some outdated notions such as the emergence of colors from the battle between light and dark, it also moves forwards toward a dynamic energy not so unlike that which arises from the gradients of nonequilibrium thermodynamics.

Goethe’s *Novelle*, with its action-packed yet fundamentally unresolved quest to seek out and enter the Burg, is, indeed, driven by multiple “gradients.” Thus Lehnert comments that “The flux of the images, the stark contrasts, the images of destruction, do not suggest a stable universe.”¹² The text’s unstable energy is both its primary characteristic and also that which delayed its completion: Goethe conceived the idea in 1797 (during his intense preoccupation with his *Theory of Color*) but abandoned it for years because its original epic form conflicted with its dynamic action.¹³ In its final form, the novella is a drama of interrupted hunting, a disrupted horse ride up the mountain to see the Burg’s magical ruins, a bustling market caught by fire, wild beasts on the prowl in German forests that must be killed or captured, and unrequited (or required yet unacknowledged) love; in short, it’s a tale in which no-one ever really gets to where they try to go. The prince’s hunt and the princess’s ride to the Burg are cut short by the fire’s outbreak in the market, Honorio virtually declares his love for the

¹¹ Astrida Orle Tantillo, *The Will to Create: Goethe’s Philosophy of Nature* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), 13 and 14.

¹² Lehnert, “Tensions,” 184.

¹³ Nicholas Boyle addresses the *Novelle*’s long production and exemplary status as the model “novella” in German literature. “Goethe, *Novelle*,” in Peter Hutchinson, ed., *Landmarks in German Short Prose* (Oxford: Lang, 2003): 11–27.

princess while kneeling on the striped corpse of the escaped tiger he's killed but receives no clearer answer than "stand up!," the family of animal keepers lose their bread-winning tiger but hope to regain the lion, and the princess and her entourage never enter the ruined Burg atop the mountain. Much of this redirected action has "vertical tendencies," that is, an emphasis on ascending (the mountain) which—seemingly—implies transcendence. Yet the blatant flow upwards in the text is always countered with a return downwards, thus it produces an overall spiral effect (similar to Goethe's botanical concept of the "Spiraltendenz") with both idyllic and unsettling qualities. Jane Brown describes this as "constant reversals of direction," however, she says they "generate stylistic disorientation and disconnectedness" rather than specific patterns.¹⁴ And Nicholas Boyle points out that: "In one sense the structure of the plot of *Novelle* is extremely straightforward: it is the story of the ascent of a mountain"; and yet he notes that: "The issue becomes more complicated, however, when we ask: who is making the ascent? For there is no single figure in the story who passes through all these stages."¹⁵ Although the text appears to strive upwards, toward the Burg, its more significant quest is an embrace of polarity that continuously moves into different patterns (and different protagonists).

Diverted physical action creates much of the *Novelle's* patterns, particularly the vertical tendencies of repeated travel up and down the mountain. We enter this Goethean world with the first image of horses rearing *up* in the fog during the preparations for the prince's hunting expedition. The hunters finally head *up* to the mountain leaving the newly betrothed princess watching wistfully *below* until the prince's uncle Friedrich joins her with sketches of the wondrous ruined Burg *atop* the mountain. She wishes to see the Burg herself after a quick visit to the village's market *below*, and so she and Friedrich ride with young, handsome Honorio (the only two figures with proper names) *down* to the crowded market before turning *up* to the mountain in a quest to visit the "magical ruins" *above*. While enjoying the view *part way up*, they are forced to rush *back down* after spotting the smoke of a fire in the market. Sending Friedrich on ahead, the princess and Honorio *descend* alone only to encounter the escaped tiger who chases them *back up* the mountain

¹⁴ Jane Brown, "The Tyranny of the Ideal: The Dialectics of Art in Goethe's 'Novelle,'" *Studies in Romanticism* 19 (1980): 217–31; 219.

¹⁵ Boyle, "Goethe" 20 and 21.

until Honorio manages to shoot it. He kneels *down* on the dying tiger in order to finish it off and to ask leave for travel—which actually is his indirect way of declaring his love to the princess (who repeats three times “*stand up!*”).¹⁶ Interrupting this scene of violence and passion is the dismayed family of animal keepers who arrive while escaping the fire *below* only to mourn the loss of their tiger with almost direct quotations from the Old Testament. Finally, after a long biblical speech from the father (describing up/down movements in nature),¹⁷ the prince, princess, and their entourage head *down* the mountain as the boy heads *up* the slope and then *down* into the ruins where he lovingly captures the lion with his flute and song. Every upwards move in this series is countered by a move downwards, producing less a harmonious balance than an unresolved yet productive tension (like a gradient).

The *Novelle*'s tensions gain additional dimensions with the polarity of its images, of which the “Burg” itself is the most significant. It is the primary image of the tale, the goal of the princess's quest, and yet its idealized interior remains unseen for us, despite the boy's “off-stage” visit there and despite the elaborately described sketches of what it “should become” presented early on by the prince's uncle Friedrich. He happily shows the princess the sketches he had made of the Burg and its interior, only to admit when the princess desires to ride up to the ruins to see them herself that these pictures actually show not what is, but “what eventually it can and will become” (*Novelle* 268). The magical quality of the Burg with its apparently transcendent position atop the mountain leads most readers to view it as one-dimensionally positive.¹⁸ I suggest in contrast that the Burg, however high it stands, also evokes

¹⁶ Johann Wolfgang Goethe *Novelle, Märchen*, ed. Ernst von Reusner (Stuttgart, Reclam: 1986), 18–19, translation mine. When possible, I refer instead to the Suhrkamp translation: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe *The Sorrows of Young Werther, Elective Affinities, Novella*, translated by Victor Lange and Judith Ryan; ed. by David E. Wellbery (New York: Suhrkamp, 1988). Such references are made parenthetically as (*Novelle*); for clarity I occasionally had to translate myself (from the Reclam edition), which is noted.

¹⁷ These biblical allusions describe the solid cliff which is crowned by “primeval trees.” Although seemingly eternal, a piece may finally fall down the mountain tumbling onward into brook, river, and into the depths of the ocean. The passage continues with a look upwards at the stars and then to the construction of bees. In sum, it, like the rest of the *Novelle*, looks up and down and also at the endless building and destruction of nature.

¹⁸ Daniel Hoffmann, for example, compares the ruined Burg to Goethe's reference to the Kölner Dom, and sees it primarily as a site of “reconciliation.” “‘Der Löwe brüllt, wer sollte sich nicht fürchten?’: Zur utopischen Restauration der alten Stammburg in Goethes *Novelle*,” *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 120.4 (2001): 527–39.

the detested "Burg," as Goethe terms it, of Newton's theory of light based on diffraction. Goethe saw light as a "unity" and avidly fought for much of his life against Newton's dominance in optics. In his self-avowed greatest accomplishment, the *Theory of Color*, Goethe writes: "We compare the Newtonian theory of color [his optics] with an old Burg" (*TofC* 15). This old Burg is a wild construction pieced together with endless renovations: "All of these strange pieces and additions had to be reconnected through the most bizarre galleries, halls and hallways. All damage, whether from enemy's hand or through the violence of time was quickly fixed. As it became necessary, people dug deeper moats, raised the walls, and didn't neglect [to add] towers, bay windows, and firing ports" (*TofC* 15). Goethe believed Newton's theory was itself an endlessly growing monstrosity, pieced miserably together and requiring convoluted restrictions that misconstrue nature's patterns.

We see Newton's Burg, "that eighth wonder of the world, as an already abandoned antiquity threatened by collapse" (*TofC* 16). The *Novelle's* Burg, similarly, is seen as "a venerable monument of its time" (translation mine); whose "strong battlements have, throughout many long years, resisted time and the elements...here and there the walls had to yield and have crashed down in ruins" (*Novelle* 266). Both Goethean Burgs are ancient and collapsing into ruin, even as efforts are made to renovate them. Friedrich desires a transformation of the novella's Burg into an aesthetic garden of memories, and Newton's followers endlessly try to shore up their Burg. "They were forced to enlarge the building, and to make additions here on the side, here on the top, here outwards; they were forced to do this by the expansion of internal needs, by the pressure of external critics, and by chance" (*TofC* 15). The decay of both Burgs is highlighted as nature takes its course, and thus the trees' encroaching power in the literary work appears like Goethean justice against a system he believed was intentionally misperceiving nature's patterns. The *Novelle's* Burg may stand atop the beautiful mountain, accessible to the boy and the lion, but in Goethe's thinking, it, like Newton's Burg, must eventually succumb to nature's energy. Goethe's *Theory of Color* marches us directly into the collapsing Newtonian Burg to expose its weaknesses, whereas his *Novelle* allows the reader only indirect views of the Burg's interior. Although Friedrich, the guard, and the artist are known to have been inside previously, the only figures who actually enter the ruins during the narrative are the flute-playing boy and the lion; this fact renders the interior both a mundane space appealing

to older men with dreams of times past as well as a magical site for fairy-tale figures. This fairy-tale quality should make us cautious, however, as Goethe scathingly and repeatedly refers to Newton's theory as a mere "fairy tale" in his *Theory of Color*.¹⁹ As such, its magic is soured.

In addition to the shared emphasis on ongoing reconstruction and renovation, and the (inevitable) victory of nature over such ancient ruins, both the Burgs of Goethe's *Novelle* and his *Theory of Color* are also the goal of "pilgrimages." In the *Novelle*, the princess's "pilgrimage" heads up the mountain to the Burg. This term ("*Wallfahrt*") appears in a lengthy description of their walk upwards from the meadow to the ruined Burg. The pattern of up/down polarity continues in that our view from above is immediately countered by an insistence that we then look all the way back down.

Soon they entered a sloping meadow valley, recently mowed for the second time, smooth as velvet, watered by a stream that rushed towards them from a spring higher up. The woods were left behind and after a steep climb they reached a higher and even more open spot. Some distance ahead, beyond clumps of trees, the old castle, *the goal of their journey [pilgrimage]*, rose like wooded peaks. *One could never reach the place without turning around*, and behind them to the left, through a clearing, they saw the Prince's castle bathed in the light of the morning sun. The upper part of the town lay half hidden in a light mist of smoke, and down farther to the right they recognized the lower town and a few bends of the river with its meadows and mills.²⁰

¹⁹ As I discuss elsewhere, Goethe repeatedly derides Newton's theory as a *Märchen*. His theory is "published, translated, and the public must for the thousandth time pay for this fairy tale" (*ToJ*C, 438). See Heather I. Sullivan, "Seeing the Light: Goethe's *Märchen* as Science—Newton's Science as 'Fairy Tale,'" *Goethe Yearbook* 14 (2006): 103–27.

²⁰ This quotation is partially from the Suhrkamp translation (*Novelle* 270). Yet I have made several changes to more accurately reflect the German—noted by the italics. Note, particularly, the insistence that one can *never* reach this height without looking back down: "*Rückwärts aber—denn niemals gelangte man hierher, ohne sich umzukehren*"; whereas the Suhrkamp translation weakens this entire passage by changing the tone to "One could not reach the place without occasionally turning around"; and by altering the two-sentence flow with one moving up and the next moving down into a multi-sentence description. These changes flow better in English, but they also change the text's own rhythm and so its meaning.

In the German, this quotation appears in only two sentences, where the first one takes our visual frame ever upwards from the meadow valley all the way to the ruins. The second sentence then insists that one can never resist turning to look back down, and so it takes our view all the way down, even further down, to the river. The up/down movements are extensively documented here, even as the "pilgrims" (the princess—and the reader) never complete the pilgrimage's path into the Burg.

The *Theory of Color* similarly declares Newton's "Burg" as a goal of pilgrims, "Pilgrims pilgrimaged there [*"Pilger wallfabrien dahin"*]" (TofC 15). Yet this Burg is accessible and the problem is not entry but rather escape from its illusory grandness belied by the collapsing walls and unlivable conditions. "Nobody noticed that the old building had become unlivable. One spoke only of its impressive duration and expensive layout" (TofC, 15). Newton's Burg is a ruin imposed as absolute truth onto future generations despite now being watched over only by a few invalids. "Brief sketches were handed around in all schools, and were recommended to the receptive youth for homage, even as the building already stood empty, watched over only by a few invalids who quite earnestly considered themselves armed" (TofC 15–16). The image of a collapsing building fêted even as it stands empty except for a weak guard also describes the *Novelle's* situation. This literary Burg is watched over by the castle guard, who, as if evoking the "invalid" guards of Newton's Burg, appears on the scene out of breath, weaponless, and seemingly rather powerless. He stays there alone, except during the brief residency of the artist. In the sequence leading to the lion's capture, we observe the guard's breathless arrival on the scene where he helplessly tells the prince about the lion above: "He was out of breath, but managed to report briefly that the lion was lying perfectly quiet in the sun behind the upper ring-wall at the foot of the century-old beech tree. He seemed almost annoyed as he concluded—'Why did I take my gun into town yesterday to have it cleaned? If I had had it with me, he would never have got up again'" (*Novelle* 275). The guard's breathlessness and lack of arms directly parallels Goethe's spitefully drawn Burg of Newton with its pilgrims and invalid guards who "quite earnestly consider themselves armed."

One should not, however, forget that the *Novelle's* Burg remains a mixed image: it reflects not only Newton's Burg, but also the site of the "ideal" taming of lion (ironic, in that the lion was already tame), and of

aesthetic beauty framed by trees. The princess sees this ancient family castle through the telescope that "strikingly revealed the fall colors of those many kinds of trees which had struggled up between the stones, unhindered and undisturbed through many long years" (*Novelle* 266). Later, we hear directly from the narrator, that high above stands "the green-crowned summit of the castle ruins" (*Novelle* 270). The Burg's green aesthetic combines with its Newtonian implications to create an unresolved internal polarity, and Goethe's famous comparison of the *Novelle's* development to the growth of a flower only increases this polarity.

In fact, the entire final scene taking place by and in the Burg appears on the surface harmonious, even while it makes overt references to the tensions such as the "victorious" yet peaceful boy who conquers the wild yet "tamed" beast. The lion lays himself down next to the transfigured boy playing the flute: "The child, with his exalted look, seemed now like a mighty victorious conqueror. The lion, on the other hand was not so much vanquished—for his strength though concealed was still in him—as tamed and surrendered to his own peaceful will" (*Novelle* 280). Highlighted here are the multiple tensions: the peaceful yet conquering child, and the not-conquered but rather self-tamed lion as a beast whose strength still resides within him. Furthermore, the final song itself that has the last word of the text has a repetitious and spiral form. Its lyrics continually emphasize a high/low spatial polarity ranging from the songs emerging from down in the lion's den to the heavenly view from above, and they are punctuated by the movement of both the angels and the lions to and fro and back and forth. In short, the Burg and the melody of the final scene deceive with their surface level of idyllic contentment; the polarity, the tensions, and the dubious reference to the magic of fairy tales (the terms used in the song are "beschwören" and "bannen" or "bewitching/enchanting and casting a spell") continue with unsettling reverberations. The Burg as the site of this concluding act thus functions both as the glorified goal of the unresolved quest and as an energized tension, or to use the terms of nonequilibrium thermodynamics, as a polarity creating its own "gradient."

In nonlinear thermodynamics, energy flows through gradients (of different temperatures, etc.) and produces specific patterns that can lead to the development of complex systems such as hurricanes and organisms as "dissipative structures." The dynamics of these energy patterns resemble in some ways Goethe's polarity that often produces

a spiraling movement upwards, or "Steigerung." Goethe's figures in the *Novelle* also swirl up and down the mountain with movements that seem drawn almost more by an impulse for patterns than logically determined choices. His multifaceted images like the Burg, in contrast, are less like the swirling hurricanes than the gradient itself which contains vastly productive as well as destructive *potential*. Gradients produce a tension that can erupt into violent storms or a clash of meanings, but they themselves function as a cusp of charged energy. The *Novelle's* Burg thus functions a producer of "gradients" in its mixed function as denigrated scientific "ruin" and, simultaneously, as an idealized green-crowned site ruled by trees and, finally, music. The Burg's elevated location and aesthetic greenery are tarnished by its shared qualities with Newton's Burg; and yet it is the tension between these unresolved aspects that provides the text's energy.

In fact, even the parallel between Newton's and the *Novelle's* Burg has itself several implications not all negative. The decay of both Burgs is driven by the aesthetic victory of nature over imperfect human constructions; even more so, there is the blending where art and nature merge (certainly suggestive of Goethean ideals and one of the most thoroughly discussed aspects of the text).²¹ Friedrich explains to the princess how the *Novelle's* Burg no longer exists as separate from its surroundings: "A tower has been built upon it, yet no one would be able to say where nature ends and art and craftsmanship begin" (*Novelle* 266). Furthermore, "this ancient summit is in reality almost completely surrounded by a forest. For one hundred and fifty years, no axe has sounded here, and everywhere huge trees have grown (*Novelle* 266–67). He celebrates this wilderness like no other, "a unique place, where you can see the traces of the long-vanished power of man in tenacious struggle with the ever-living, ever-working power of nature" (*Novelle* 267). It is this visible process of nature's workings that Friedrich wishes to expose with his work on the ancient Burg. Gerhard Kaiser sees

²¹ See, especially, the discussion of Goethe's attempt to bridge nature and art through reference to antiquity in Vittoria Borsò, "Der Rück-Blick auf die Antike: Formen der Vermittlung zwischen Kunst und Natur," in Bernd Witte and Mauro Ponzi, eds. *Goethes Rückblick auf die Antike: Beiträge des deutsch-italienischen Kolloquiums, Rom 1998* (Berlin: Schmidt, 1999). Gerhard Kaiser understands this mix of art and nature as "a common symbol of Goethe for a society still near to nature and early [in development]" (translation mine); "Zur Aktualität Goethes: Kunst und Gesellschaft in seiner *Novelle*," *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft* 29 (1985): 248–65.

Friedrich's plans as further human intervention into nature's works; in light of the parallel to Newton's Burg I read his role rather as ambiguous. Friedrich's desire to make the Burg accessible wavers between the ongoing building of Newton's dogmatic followers and Goethe's wish to tear it down and expose its weaknesses.

Indeed, working with nature to continue the alterations to Newton's Burg is Goethe's specific goal in his *Theory of Color*. We find both processes here: first, the endless attempts at restoration on the part of Newton's followers who keep trying to shore up its collapsing walls; and, second, Goethe's efforts to tear down the walls of "falsehood." One doesn't need to make use, he claims, of "a long-lasting siege or a dubious feud" as the Burg is already collapsing on its own: it appears "already as an abandoned antiquity threatening to collapse" (*TofC* 16). One has only to continue nature's work and bring sunlight into the shadows by clearing out the rubble. He wishes to begin:

Hauling it away from gable and roof with no further delay, so that the sun can finally, for once, shine into that old rats' and owls' nest and so reveal to the eye of the astonished wanderer that labyrinthine and mismatched construction that is so makeshift, randomly assembled, intentionally artificial, painfully patched. Such insight is only possible, however, when one wall after another, one arch after another falls, and the rubble is, as much as possible, forthwith cleared away. (*TofC* 16)

This process of opening up and leveling Newton's Burg in the *Theory of Color* is more radical than Friedrich's wish to celebrate the aesthetics of nature's victory. It is as if the *Novelle* is pessimistic regarding the actuality of achieving Goethe's goal (thus the endlessly postponed and incomplete quest into the Burg), and yet also optimistic in its refusal to allow this old ruin to assert itself directly.

In the *Novelle*, it does appear, however that "Newton's reign" may finally come to an end with the Burg's symbolic collapse under the strength of nature. Some work is being done by Friedrich's crew as they try to enter into the castle's yard: "The collapse of the old gate tower has made it inaccessible and no one had entered it for countless years. We tried to reach it from the side, and finally provided a convenient but hidden way by breaking through walls and blasting vaults" (*Novelle* 267).

Other work has already been done by nature: "Once we were inside, there was no need for further clearing. Here you will notice a flat rock smoothed by nature; in some places enormous trees found a chance to strike roots" (*Novelle* 267); and these trees have taken over: "we shall not drive them away—they have become the masters, and may remain so" (*Novelle* 267). The comparison to Newton's Burg therefore complicates the image as one of negative construction and yet also as a hope for the future where the old ruins (whether actual Burg or as scientific theory) are finally reshaped in light of nature's patterns.

Furthermore, the parallel between Newton's collapsing "reign" and the *Novelle's* decaying Burg is further supported by the unusual choice of names in the text. As noted earlier, only Honorio and Friedrich have proper names, whereas the other figures are designated by their titles as princess, child, father, guard, etc. The old prince Friedrich has a typically Germanic royal name, whereas Honorio has a foreign-sounding, Latinized name. Most have understood Honorio as a reference to "honor" or antiquity, and either ignore Friedrich or else note that he is "royal."²² A more specific parallel can be found when looking to the history of collapsing reigns: both Honorio and Friedrich find their namesakes in the rulers of the Roman and Prussian empires at the very moment of their most dramatic fall. Honorio's name (which was originally "Alfred") evokes the little-known emperor of Rome during its infamous sack in 410, Honorius (reigned as Roman emperor 393–95 and then as Western Roman Emperor 395–423); and Friedrich is less likely Friedrich the Great (reigned 1740–1786) or his despotic nephew Friedrich Wilhelm II (reigned 1786–1797) than Friedrich Wilhelm III who ruled Prussia as it finally fell to Napoleon in 1806 (reigned 1797–1840). Without the name of Honorio-Honorius, the implications of Friedrich would be less clear. With the two together, however, we find the only two proper names in the *Novelle* to be those of weak rulers who oversee the *fall* of their realms and the collapse of their empires. These empires continue but in a new form and greatly changed. These historical references further support the idea that the Burg's collapse reflects the (avidly desired by Goethe) collapse of Newton's reign and the inevitable changes wrought by history and nature.

²² A. G. Steer's political reading discusses the names in terms of Friedrich as nobility and Honorio as honorable. "Goethe's *Novelle* as a Document of Its Time," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 3 (1976): 414–33.

There is more to these characters, however. The narrative leaves both men at the crossroads; they end not in equilibrium, but rather remain right on the verge of a serious challenge. The last time we see Friedrich is as he departs down the mountain to face again that which he so fears: a burning market.²³ Honorio, as the handsome and knightly admirer of the princess, must face the fact that she has left his indirect declaration of love unacknowledged and appears instead to encourage his wish to travel. He sits staring into the evening sun, and is told by the woman animal keeper, “‘You are looking towards the west,’ continued the woman, ‘and you are right—there is much to do there. Hurry, do not delay, you will conquer. But first of all conquer yourself!’” (*Novelle* 278–79). Although this scene is usually read as the Goethean call for “*Entsagung*,” a call for Honorio to overcome his passion for the princess in order to develop himself or to contribute to the overall harmony of the social situation, I see it instead as a call to overcome the nostalgia for older systems and customs whether of courtly romance or Newtonian optics. This moment leaves us hanging as the rejection of older systems moves only towards a mere suggestion of other alternatives.²⁴ Neither the return to older forms as represented by Friedrich’s aesthetics and Honorio’s knightly escapades, nor the entry into the modern market-driven village, as depicted rather critically in the princess’s early visit,²⁵ provide real insight to the dynamics in the *Novelle*. The modernized economy simply indicates a new set of forces coloring knowledge and perception and utilizing nature without increasing access; and the older systems have obvious flaws. Neither modernized economics nor Friedrich or Honorio’s quest for systems of yore provide a sustainable vision in the tale.

This is one reason why the princess is the protagonist. She mediates between the men, including Friedrich and Honorio, as well as the prince who is himself torn between the antiquated aristocratic hunt and the fascination of the modern market. The princess’s role is to be

²³ See Hölfe on Friedrich’s “overcoming of his fear of fire,” especially 155–57.

²⁴ Lehnert, for example, sees the reference to the “west” as symbolic for America “because it is not burdened by useless traditions and useless strife, reactionary nobility and revolutionaries.” “Tensions,” 189.

²⁵ Gerhard Wild and others focus their interpretations on the market as social critique of the middle class in the *Novelle*. *Goethes Versöhnungsbilder: Eine geschichtsphilosophische Untersuchung zu Goethes späten Werken* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1991). See also Kaiser’s theory that the *Novelle* questions the chances of art in a modern society.

both observer and observed, that is as a catalyst and a reflection. Her function is mostly in the visual realm, and this is a text of visual themes and problems. The princess's visual role is repeatedly stressed such as during her ride through the market where the people crowd around as they "liked to see the young princess, and by their pleased smiles indicated their satisfaction that the first lady of the land should also be the loveliest and the most graceful" (*Novelle* 269). She, then, in turn, takes the observing role, noting the "motley crowd": "The princess looked at the people for a while" and then commented on their excessive decorations (*Novelle* 269). As with Honorio and Friedrich, however, the princess is also left to return down the mountain as the tale finally shifts its entire focus onto the flute-playing boy's theatrical moment that combines magic with biblical allusions and suggestions of Pan and Orpheus in an ambiguous ménage of "eternal" patterns of flow.

What is celebrated in the *Novelle*, then, is the embrace of ongoing, "eternal," ideas, processes, and patterns; that is, the celebration not of antiquity for the sake of its duration (think Newton's long-lasting Burg) but rather of ancient texts like the Bible, mythology, and *1001 Nights* because their complexity reflects, in Goethe's eyes, ongoing elemental patterns similar to those of nature and the world. The overflow of biblical citations in the *Novelle*, especially by the family of animal keepers, has been extensively analyzed;²⁶ I mention it here only in terms of Goethe's idea that the Bible's "primordial" complexity is like nature and so cannot be grasped in its entirety. As he states: "Actually, we learn only from books that we cannot judge... For that reason the Bible is an eternally effective book because, as long as the world stands, no-one will step forward and say: I grasp it in entirety and understand it in its parts."²⁷ Regarding "use and misuse" of the Bible, Goethe describes it as an elemental force or power continually exerting an influence regardless of our understandings: "Great and original [or elemental] forces, continuing through eternity or developing in time, operate unceasingly; whether helpfully or destructively is a matter of chance."²⁸

²⁶ Virtually every analysis addresses the biblical citations: see especially Herman Meyer's: *Natürlicher Enthusiasmus: Das Morgenländische in Goethes "Novelle"* (Heidelberg: Stiehm, 1973).

²⁷ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke*, Volume 13: *Sprüche in Prosa* (Frankfurt am Main: Klassiker, 1993), 119.

²⁸ Goethe, *Sprüche*, 123.

The *Novelle's* "idyllic" final song with its biblical and mythological references functions as a part of the "great and primordial [elemental] forces," and it reflects Goethe's efforts to tap into the patterns of energy shared by such powerful texts and nature. This is a scene evoking falling empires and rising music, a scene of shifting protagonists and upheavals with uncertain results, but above all, a scene of charged gradients and their patterns.

The tale's closure with a magical emphasis on "melody" is, of course, a complicated issue, one that brings us to the final section of this essay on the problems of perception. The clear move away from seeing (the fact that we as readers are denied direct entrance into the ruins) and toward hearing (of the boy's song) has potentially ominous implications.²⁹ The *Novelle's* final word "melody" may lull us into a contentment much like the lion's but should actually remind us of Goethe's famous preference for the visual. He repeatedly insists on the glory of the eye in contrast to the relative weakness of the ear: "Light delivers the visible to the eye; the eye delivers it to the entire human being. The ear is silent, the mouth is dumb; but the eye perceives and speaks."³⁰ Similarly, he notes in his "*Theory of Tone*" that "Considered in comparison to the eye, hearing is a silent sense, only a part of a sense."³¹ Goethe does not denigrate music itself, but rather the human sensory apparatus. He believes that the human eye is superior to our ear, even while musical tones have as much, if not more, potential for patterns. Hence the move to music is potentially an expansion of forms, yet it is also a move away from our own strengths. Furthermore, we should remember that Goethe's *Faust* depicts a quest dedicated to ongoing striving in whatever form, and thus to *avoiding* being lulled like the lion into tamed and "grateful contentment." The *Novelle's* music combines with nature's victory over the Burg—as both green aesthetic and as the figure of Newton's theory—but it also shifts us out of Goethe's

²⁹ Andreas Kasper also stresses this shift away from seeing and onto hearing, yet he sees it as a positive move out of the "overly civilized and artificial" vision into the more natural "hearing." "Das Wissen der Anthropologie: Goethes Novellen," *Goethe Jahrbuch* 107 (1990): 158–68. Similarly, Bernhard Jahn celebrates this move as a "change of media" bringing us "closer to the origin." "Das Hörbarwerden des unerhörten Ereignisses: Sinne, Künste und Medien in Goethes *Novelle*," *Euphorion* 95.1 (2001): 17–37.

³⁰ Johann Wolfgang Goethe *Sämtliche Werke*, Volume 23.2: *Schriften zur Farbenlehre 1790–1807* (Frankfurt am Main: Klassiker, 1991), 269.

³¹ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke*, Volume 25: *Schriften zur allgemeinen Naturlehre, Geologie, und Mineralogie* (Frankfurt am Main: Klassiker, 1989), 181.

preferred arena of the visual into our much weaker ability of aural perception. The final move into music provokes our idyllic desire even while weakening our powers of perception.

The *Novelle* dedicates much energy to the problems of visual perception that so engaged Goethe in his scientific and optical studies. The themes of (mis-)perception abound in the *Novelle*, including the issue of "not seeing" the interior of the Burg and the fire that breaks out below; the practice so criticized by Goethe of using telescopes (as he writes: "Microscopes and telescopes actually confuse the pure human senses");³² and the fact that much of what we the readers and the figures do see is prefigured and thus mediated by other images, tales, or references coloring our perception.³³ This issue of perception molded by previous experience applies not only to the Burg but also to most of the tale's images. For example, as the princess rides through the market she ponders what she sees in light of what her husband told her the day before. She notes: "I seem to be repeating yesterday's lesson [from her husband]" (*Novelle* 269). The animals first appear as images on posters that prefigure the later encounters with them—the tiger attacking and the lion reposing in majesty. Of the fire, we only see the smoke and then are told instead about Friedrich's previous terrible experience in the form of the princess's recollections. These instances of manipulated perception have been understood variously as irony, distancing,³⁴ and as the failure of art in a modern world;³⁵ yet above all they continue the textual trend of complicating the view and calling attention to the tension of mediation. In addition to the prefigured images or outright replacements and the princess's "visual" function, there is also the typically Goethean tendency to overrun the story with extra-textual references (as if the text is itself an "open system" of thermodynamics and constantly engaged with its "environment"). Just the overt

³² Goethe, *Sprüche*, 42.

³³ The text's visual emphasis is highlighted by many; see especially Rosemary Picozzi Balfour "The Field of View in Goethe's *Novelle*," *Seminar* 12.2 (1976): 63–72; Brown; and Klaus Müller-Dyes, who sees the *Novelle* as demonstrating that everything we experience is "mediated." "Goethes 'Novelle': Von der 'Unlesbarkeit' eines Klassikers," *Goethe Jahrbuch* 121 (2004): 197–207.

³⁴ Similar to Müller-Dyes, Diethelm Brüggemann sees the tension in the text as one creating distance between the reader and the text. "Goethes 'Novelle': Literatur als Gegenliteratur," *Jahrbuch für internationale Germanistik* 2.3 (1976): 162–69; and Richard Thieberger describes this as a process of "alienation." *Gedanken über Dichter und Dichtungen* (Bern: Lang, 1982).

³⁵ See Kaiser.

references to the Old Testament, mythology, *1001 Nights*, and Schiller are so many in number that we, like the figures in the text, must endlessly struggle to reconcile their meanings with the overall story; we remain caught in the veils of cultural expectations.³⁶ Finally, as if to highlight the fact that the *Novelle* is about visual impairments, the very first words of the text are "a thick autumn fog." While this fog lifts with the morning sun, it embodies the emphatic role of problematic vision in the *Novelle*.

These problems of perception bring us finally back to Newton as one of the main inspirations for Goethe's extensive writings on the topic. For Goethe, Newton's theories were weakened by an over-reliance on theory that neglected the extensive experiments of the true scientific spirit. He stressed the challenge of overcoming wrong-minded views of nature that emerge more from our own egos than from the world, views that hinder our perception. He notes: "When considering nature in small and large I continually raised the question: Is it the object, or is it you that is speaking here?"³⁷ Goethe was on a quest to perceive nature itself rather than only one's preconceptions, and he saw this as an enormous, lifelong challenge. He argued vehemently against the false construction (the collapsing Burg) that he believed underlay Newton's theory of light, and he emphasized the physiological or subjective process of perception. His views have received much recent attention for their very modern insights, despite his inaccuracy regarding the composition of white light.³⁸ And now, with the insights from contemporary ideas about perception, chaos theory, and nonequilibrium thermodynamics, we see that Goethe may have been right to give up the idealized notion of achieving entry into the "Burg's" interior as if it were

³⁶ These references have received much critical attention; I mention them here only as part of the larger issue of their influence on our perception in encounters with the world. See Meyer for biblical discussion; and Brown, Kaiser, and Mandelartz for the mythology. Katharina Mommsen overreaches slightly with her sketch of the *Novelle* as a retelling of the *1001 Nights* tale "Prince Ahmad and the Fairy Peri-Banu," yet she is most thorough: *Goethe und 1001 Nacht* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981). Regarding references to Schiller, see Brown, and Friedrich Strack's utopian discussion "Goethes *Novelle* and Schillers *Idylle*: Zwei Wege ästhetischer Versöhnung," *Euphorion* 77.4 (1983): 438-52.

³⁷ Goethe, *Spprüche*, 50.

³⁸ For readings of Goethe's work in terms of contemporary science, see Peter Matussek, ed., *Goethe und die Verzeitlichung der Natur* (Munich: Beck, 1998); and David Seamon and Arthur Zajonc, eds., *Goethe's Way of Science: A Phenomenology of Nature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998).

a magically closed system with all the answers, and to seek instead the ever-present and much more complex pathways of energy's flowing patterns.

As if prefiguring his *Novelle* with its problems of perception, Goethe writes in the *Theory of Color* that we never really avoid imposing preconceptions onto what we see, in other words, theorizing. "Every viewing turns into a considering, every considering into contemplating, every contemplating into linking, and so one can say that, already with the first attentive glance at the world, we are theorizing. To do and to plan to do this, however, with consciousness, with self-knowledge, with freedom, and to make use of a daring word, with irony, great skill is needed" (TofC 14). While wishing to avoid the prejudices of theory that may override nature's actual patterns, we nevertheless always fall into theory; hopefully, however, we do this with an "irony" constantly reminding us to remain aware of the tension produced by the fluctuations of both our perceptions and the world's patterns. Goethe's *Novelle* therefore reverberates with the irony of tensions, and it keeps us aware as we are precariously poised between the senses of seeing and hearing, between protagonists, views, the multiple meanings of the Burg as either "idyllic" or Newton's construction, and the polarity of up/down movements—not in harmony or equilibrium but rather moving amidst the differences that make up the gradient. This story from 1828 is not so much a prediction of late twentieth-century physics as it is a producer of "gradients" with a flow of energy patterns that are nevertheless remarkably similar to those of nonequilibrium thermodynamics. We may never complete the *Novelle's* impossible journey into Newton's magical Burg, but at least we join the quest and enter into the energetic fray of swirling spirals and polarized gradients.