

On the Ontological Priority of Ends And Its Relevance to the Narrative Arts

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Against the assimilation of *end to purpose* I underline the distinction between ends and purposes and the ontological priority of ends. In other words, and contrary to Heidegger, I argue that *actuality stands higher than possibility*. In what can be considered to be the fundamental sentence of *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger asserts that “possibility stands higher than actuality,”¹ which means that there are no ends, there are only purposes, or as Heidegger calls them, “projects” (*Entwurf*). This is why ethics disappears from the account of human existence in *Sein und Zeit* to be replaced by authenticity² (*Eigentlichkeit*) and resoluteness³ (*Entschlossenheit*). I also point to the distinction between *end* and *consequence*. I conclude with the claim that the distinctions among *end*, *purpose*, and *consequence* make possible the narrative arts or what Aristotle called “poetry.”

I

End as a translation of *telos* means what a thing will be that has become fully determined in its being, the defined, the complete, a condition of perfection, completion, fulfillment. End, as *telos*, signifies a continuing state of perfectedness; it is akin to the meaning of *finish* where we are speaking about what a cabinet maker does last in making a piece of furniture: when

¹ “Höher als die Wirklichkeit steht die Möglichkeit” (Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* [Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1967], p. 38).

² Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, pp. 42–43.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 297: “In resoluteness the most primordial truth of Dasein has been reached because it is *authentic*.” P. 298: “[R]esoluteness as authentic disclosedness is, after all, nothing other than *authentically being-in-the-world*.”

he puts the finish on it the piece is brought to completion in perfection; it is displayed as a completed whole. End means the completion, perfection, fulfillment of a thing as the kind of thing it is. End means "fullness of being."⁴ It is in this sense of "completed whole" that *end-telos* means "termination."⁵ "Ripeness is all."⁶

It is said that *end-telos* also means "purpose," but although the words are commonly used as synonyms, *telos* does not mean purpose. A perusal of the entry under *telos* in the *Liddel-Scott Greek Lexicon* is instructive in this regard. Purposes characterize agents and actors as they determine themselves to action. *Purposes* are motives, "motors" propelling actions of various sorts. The words *motive and purpose* are words that denote something possessing an exclusively "mental existence," whose being is in consciousness. *Ends*, on the other hand, are characteristic of all kinds of things. Aristotle is at some pains to indicate that doing what they do for the sake of an end is not exclusively characteristic of beings that do things "on purpose." In *Physics* II he says: "It is absurd to suppose that nothing comes into being for an end if we do not see the moving cause deliberating."⁷ In constructing the honeycomb and gathering the nectar the bee is not the executor of a purpose. Things that exist by nature and which act neither by art nor after deliberation or inquiry, i.e. "on purpose," nevertheless do what they do for the sake of an end.⁸ It is the assimilation of end to purpose that obscures our view of this. Ends are not executed by agents. Purposes require agents. Purposes belong to agents as they determine themselves to actions. "Man" has an end; individual men have intentions and purposes in executing their actions.

The end of the art of medicine, a body of knowledge and skills, is the restoration and maintenance of the condition called health. A man's purposes in practicing medicine can be various, from the making of money to the relief of suffering humanity out of a love of mankind, just as long as the purpose is congruent with the end for which medicine exists. The art of medicine does not exist in order to provide the people who practice it with

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 18, a. 1-2.

⁵ "Where a series has a completion all the preceding steps are for the sake of that" (Aristotle, *Physics* II.8.199a8-9). And *Physics* II.2.194a32-33: "Not every stage that is last claims to be an *end-telos*, but only that which is best."

⁶ *King Lear*, Act V, Scene 2, lines 10-12. Edgar to Gloucester: "Men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither: Ripeness is all."

⁷ *Physics* II.8.199b26-28.

⁸ "Things that act for the sake of something include whatever may be done as a result of thought or of nature" (*Physics* II.5.196b22).

money;⁹ nor does it exist in order to allow those who practice it to demonstrate their sympathy with and benevolence toward their fellow human beings. One may, of course, execute such purposes in the practice of the art of medicine. But suppose that the money-making physician finds that there is much more money to be made using his medical skills to kill people rather than to cure them; or, suppose again, that the philanthropic physician's sympathy for the suffering leads him to kill his patients "mercifully." These purposes, making money and demonstrating love for one's fellow men, are no longer congruent with the end of the art of medicine. Systematic execution of such purposes by most physicians would lead to the destruction of the art itself. For, if physicians acquired a reputation for killing rather than, or even as much as, for curing, no one would wish to consult them. Since everyone would do everything possible to avoid them, there would soon be no physicians, for without patients the art cannot be practiced and so cannot be learned.

This is why the Hippocratic Oath, which used to be taken by all physicians, forbids the use of the art of medicine to kill people. Killing those upon whom they attend is forbidden to physicians by the Hippocratic Oath, not because it is morally wrong to murder people—the wrongness of murder is something that applies to all men and it is forbidden by whatever laws they acknowledge themselves to be subject to—but because to use the art of medicine to kill people destroys the art. The Oath does not forbid murder by medicine to physicians on account of the patients, nor on account of the physician considered simply as a human being, but on account of the art of medicine. It is aimed at the preservation of the art. A physician does not violate the Oath by murdering a person in a manner that does not depend upon the art of medicine: a doctor taking a shotgun and killing someone—even someone who was his patient—does not thereby violate the Hippocratic Oath. What makes the physician is the end pursued, in the case of the medical art the health of human beings, their physical well-being. A doctor using medical knowledge to kill is executing a purpose, but he is not doing what physicians do; he is doing what assassins do.

"The idea is that you start out with certain ends—things you favor or want."¹⁰ This sentence from Gilbert Harman's *The Nature of Morality* exemplifies the confusion of ends with purposes. "What we favor," or "what we want," describe purposes, not ends. The doctor *favors* wealth; or he

⁹ "Nor would you say that medicine is the art of receiving pay because a man takes fees when he is engaged in healing?" (Plato, *Republic* I.346).

¹⁰ Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 31.

wants to help people in need. These are not the ends of medicine, *that-for-the-sake-of-which* medicine exists. Nor are they ends—meaning fulfillments—of man. The end for the doctor *qua* man is to be actually a complete human being, something that is there independently of what he *wants* or *favors*. Depending on circumstances “making money” or “helping human beings” may or may not be compatible with that. Ends exist independently of our willing them to be; they do not originate in our willing them to be. Purposes take their origin from our willing them; purposes would not be if agents did not give them being. The reality of purposes is in consciousness. Human beings act, whether or not they recognize it explicitly in their purposes, in order to be complete as human beings, and physicians in order to heal. Completeness as a human being—what Aristotle calls εὐδαιμονία and we translate *happiness*—is the end of human life not because it is projected as such, but because of what human beings are. Just as health is the end of the medical art, regardless of the purposes of individual physicians, so happiness is the end of human life whatever the purposes of human beings may be. Happiness is the end not because I choose happiness and make it my purpose, but because of what I am, the intrinsic character, or nature, of the human being itself. Happiness is the end and my purposes must be congruent with it, if I am to be a fully realized human being.

Favoring and *wanting* are words indicating what can loosely be described as some kind of “mental activity.” Purposes presuppose such activity, ends do not. The reality of ends is not constituted by such activity. The reality of purposes is always something directly given in consciousness and therefore, in so far as they are my purposes, something I am always aware of. The purpose with which I act is never hidden from me, but the ends for which I act often are.¹¹ I do not have to be conscious of the end that an action has for the action to have that end. I can always recognize my purpose, since it is after all something experienced in consciousness, and yet be ignorant of the end that my action presupposes. The doctor who practices “*euthanasia*” is an instance of this. My ignorance of the end and its absence from my consciousness does not lessen its reality; it only makes the impact of its reality more forceful. “*You can throw nature out with a pitchfork, but it always comes back, and breaking in unexpectedly is victorious over your perverse contempt.*” This remains the most succinct statement of the distinction between purposes and ends and of the ontological priority of

¹¹ As in St. Augustine, *Confessions*, X, 27: “Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved Thee!”

ends.¹² The reduction of ends to purposes is the reduction of the ontological to the psychological. The psychologizing of ends as purposes is the true anthropomorphism.

Without presence in consciousness, there is no purpose. The being of purpose is in consciousness. The description of ends as *avored* or *wanted* things implies that *favoring* and *wanting* are what make “the thing” an end. This is to construe ends as things that have their being in consciousness, whose reality in so far as they are ends is entirely psychological. The criticism of teleology as “anthropomorphic” issues from this assumption that ends are a form of psychological reality. John Stuart Mill’s statement is typical in this regard: “Phaenomena are accounted for by supposed tendencies and propensities of the abstraction Nature; which, though regarded as impersonal, is figured as acting on a sort of motives, and in a manner more or less analogous to that of a conscious being.”¹³ More accurately, the construal of teleology as anthropomorphic depends upon the reduction of end to purpose.

For we are bringing forward a teleological ground where we endow a conception of an object—as if that conception were to be found in nature instead of in ourselves—with causality in respect of the object, or rather where we picture to ourselves the possibility of the object on the analogy of a causality of this kind—a causality such as we experience in ourselves—and so regard nature as possessed of a capacity of its own for acting *technically*; whereas if we did not ascribe such a mode of operation to nature its causality would have to be regarded as blind mechanism.¹⁴

It is this reduction of end to purpose that makes possible the argumentative strategy employed against teleological explanation. And here lies the ground for the explanation of how prudence comes to be construed, as in Kant,¹⁵ as cleverness in contriving the production of effects, how to assure

¹² Horace, *Epistles* I, 10, 24–25. “Naturam expellas furca, tamen recurret; et mala prerrumpet furtim fastidia victrix.” Though far removed from Horace’s elegant succinctness, Rudyard Kipling’s verses, *The Gods of the Copybook Headings*, make the same point with some force.

¹³ John Stuart Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1961), p. 11.

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), Part II, Introduction, p. 5. Contrast Kant’s statement with the sentence quoted above (note 7) from Aristotle, *Physics* II.8.199b26–28: “It is absurd to suppose that nothing comes into being for an end if we do not see the moving cause deliberating.”

¹⁵ Prudence, for Kant, means skill in producing effects contributing to one’s own greatest advantage. “Now skill in the choice of means to one’s own greatest well-being can be called prudence” (*The Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton [New York: Harper & Row, 1964], p. 83).

the occurrence of consequences favorable to the execution of my purposes and to avoid those which hinder it. As an executor of purposes I must anticipate—hold before my consciousness—consequences, calculating their probabilities. Skillfulness in this comes to be called prudence. Being able to anticipate means being able to shape what is brought about or effected. Just to the extent that I am able to envisage the consequences, there is some chance of my being able to produce the consequences specified by my purposes. Being-able-to is power.¹⁶ Prudence becomes the power to shape the future to conform to my purposes. The foregoing simply paraphrases *Leviathan*, chapter 8, where Hobbes says: “When the thoughts of a man, that has a design in hand, running over a multitude of things, observes how they conduce to that design; or what design they may conduce unto; if his observations be such as are not easy, or usual, this wit of his is called *prudence*. . . .”¹⁷ “The thoughts of a man that has a design in hand” = purpose; “running over a multitude of things,” observing “how they conduce to that design; or what design they may conduce unto” = calculation of consequences.¹⁸ Prudence is “the knowledge, or opinion each one has, of the causes, which produce the effect desired.”¹⁹ Hobbes is a great critic of teleology. It is pride, of course, to think that what are your own designs are plans of nature. But if nature has plans, we had best be sure that our purposes conform to them. If nature has no plans, then it would appear that we are free to follow our own. Nature must be construed as *end-less* for modern freedom. Thus, determinism in nature guarantees human freedom. Ends are constituted by our choice. They are our “projects.”

Prudence as the *techne*, or skill, of producing consequences is the prudence of an economic, not a moral, agent. In the perspective of such an agent *end* means a desirable consequence, a “favored or wanted thing.”²⁰ Having been effected, a consequence which it was my purpose to effect is no longer an end, since it is no longer a “favored or wanted thing.” Again, this does no more than paraphrase Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapter 11: “Felicity is a continual progress of the desire from one object to another; the attaining of the former, being still but the way to the latter.”²¹ Ends, however, are

¹⁶ “For the foresight of things to come, which is providence, belongs only to him by whose will they are to come” (Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I, 3, in *Blackwell's Political Texts*, ed. by Michael Oakeshott [Oxford: Blackwell, n.d.], p. 16. Hereafter cited as *BPT*).

¹⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 8, in *BPT*, p. 48.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 11, in *BPT*, p. 63.

²⁰ See above, note 2.

²¹ See note 19.

real whether they are our purposes or not, whether they are *avored or wanted things* or not, and *prudence, the knowledge of ends*, is not the calculation of consequences in terms of costs and benefits. Acts may have consequences which are high benefit plus low cost, but the act itself is destructive of the actuality of the actor as a fulfilled and completed human being. *Life is action (πρῶξις), not production (ποίησις).*²² *What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his soul?*

II

End as *telos* is to be distinguished from such notions as *consequence* or *result*, something that follows upon or happens after an act. It may be a consequence of attending college that after graduation I happen to find opportunities to make a substantial amount of money. But "making money" is not the end of the action "attending college." If it were the end of this action, the condition of having made a substantial amount of money would generally obtain among those who have attended college, which of course is not the case. The end of the action "attending college" is the acquisition of arts and sciences. This end will generally be realized if the action is not frustrated, i.e., the students do not study, the teachers do not teach, and the college awards degrees solely on the condition that the students' fees are paid. However, if the perception of a strong correlation between the occurrence of a consequence and a given action exists, this consequence may be confused with the end. Thus, there is a perception that economic advantage is strongly correlated with graduation from college, and hence the judgment is made that colleges and universities exist in order to promote economic and social advancement.²³ As the number of those attending colleges motivated by such purposes increases, many, if not most, of the things traditionally done by colleges and universities seem irrelevant. Consequence and purpose conspire to obscure end.

Though I intend them to occur, consequences may or may not occur. Other things may happen instead of, or as well as, the intended consequence. There is the unintended consequence: something that happens as a result of what I do that was not part of my purpose. "Every policy disaster of the last half-century started out as someone's sensible idea."²⁴ Even if

²² Aristotle, *Politics* I.5.1254a6.

²³ The significance of the facts that until relatively recently scholars were "poor" and colleges and universities were regarded as eleemosynary institutions are lost sight of.

²⁴ James L. Payne comments on the role of the *Community Mental Health Centers Act of 1963* in creating the problem of "the Homeless." Payne, "Solutions That Made the Problem Worse," *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 March 1994.

we did not intend them to occur, we are held responsible for some of the consequences of what we do, because it is reasonable to expect us to foresee the possibility of their occurrence, and when they fail to occur we say we were "lucky." That many consequences can be foreseen does not mean that they will inevitably occur, only that there is "a chance" that they may. But some consequences could not have been foreseen and are not part of anyone's purpose; when they occur we speak of "accidents." We cannot be assigned responsibility for consequences, which cannot be foreseen, even if we believe that we intend them.

When I buy a lottery ticket I say that I intend to win. But since I cannot foresee this consequence, and it cannot be my purpose—buying a lottery ticket does not *cause* me to win, it is an *occasion* of my winning—what I mean is that I *hope* to win. Thus we call them "games of chance." The imputability of responsibility for the consequences of one's acts depends upon their being able to be foreseen, not solely on whether or not they are *intended*. With respect to my actions I am responsible for unintended foreseeable consequences just as much as for intended foreseeable consequences. It is not sufficient *not to intend* a consequence and to *hope* it will not happen, if it can be foreseen that it may happen as a consequence of what is going to be done and that, if not done, will not happen. "I didn't mean it" does not excuse when I should have taken care. Examples of this abound on every side. Take the action of the FBI in the instance of the Branch Davidians near Waco, Texas. It could have been foreseen that use of the chemical agent CS to force the Davidians out of their buildings might result in fire and cause the death of a large number of persons, but while it is not likely that it was the *intention* of the FBI directors to produce this state of affairs, nevertheless they must be assigned the responsibility for the deaths of these people as it was a foreseeable consequence. (It was a culpably irresponsible act.) Consequences insofar as they are unforeseeable are the realm of *chance*, or what in human affairs is known as *fortune*, what there is no reason to expect, the undeserved for good or ill.

In the following days we could hardly understand that the operation [the evacuation of the German forces from Sicily in August 1943] had been such a complete success. There had been so many chances against us. An indication of the fact that the success could not be understood was the fact that otherwise sane people maintained that the Allies had intentionally allowed the German divisions to escape to the mainland, and they based this nonsense on fantastical political theories. Sober and clear-thinking comrades laughed at this of course, but the fact that such rumors were spread throws remarkable light on the

events of the preceding days and weeks, which seemed like a miracle.²⁵

Thus, while we may reasonably anticipate many of the consequences of our actions, or those of others, we can never know consequences in all their complicated detail.²⁶ But it is always possible to know the ends for which we act, though their being ends is not dependent upon their being known as such. Ends are never accidental, never a matter of chance.

We are surprised when what comes to be does not correspond to our purposes. It is just because ends are real and I can be ignorant of them that mistakes are made about what we are doing with consequences that had not been calculated and our purposes revealed to be "purposes mistook fall'n upon the inventor's head."²⁷ The incongruity of purpose with end is revealed by the presence of the end in realization or frustration.

Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us
There's a divinity shapes our ends,
rough-hew them how we will.²⁸

Ends are the nature, which cannot be tossed aside with the pitchfork of purpose. "Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting."²⁹

III

Narrative art attempts the presentation of what R. P. Blackmur called "the theoretic form of life itself."³⁰ It is *theoretic* form because something is offered to our gaze to be contemplated. Narrative, presenting the interplay between purpose and end, is the classic form that allows us to contemplate human life in its completeness and incompleteness. Theoretic form in this sense is what narrative art, however it is practiced, is "all about," for, as Aristotle indicates in the *Poetics*, "all human happiness or misery takes the form

²⁵ Colonel Bogeslaw von Bonin [Chief of Staff, XIV Panzer Corps], "Consideration of the Italian Campaign, 1943-44," quoted in Carlo D'Este, *Bitter Victory, The Battle for Sicily*, 1943 (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), p. 526. The differences between *end* and *consequence*, or *result* are brought out by Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.10.

²⁶ Thus Francis Bacon's well-known saying that having children is "giving hostages to fortune."

²⁷ *Hamlet*, Act V, Scene 2, lines 385-86.

²⁸ *Hamlet*, Act V, Scene 2, lines 8-11.

²⁹ Dueña Alfonso in *All the Pretty Horses* by Cormac McCarthy (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 238.

³⁰ R. P. Blackmur, *The Lion and the Honeycomb* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1955), p. 269.

of action,"³¹ and whether in novels, on the stage, in film, or in painting, poetry imitates action. The story imitating an action complete in itself manifests an *end-telos* against which are profiled those images or representations of ends that are human purposes. The narrative arts presuppose the ontological priority of ends to purposes because without that priority there is nothing to be revealed about the adequacy or inadequacy of human purposes to the completeness of human life, for in action a human being "purposes" the realization of his life as a whole, complete in itself. Life as action is a whole, and it is the presence of an end that makes it a whole. Stories imitate actions by being themselves wholes that represent the manifestations of ends in action. In doing so they attempt to present "the underlying classic form in which things are held together in a living way, with the sense of life going on."³²

What happens when end is reduced to purpose and consequence becomes visible in the films of Quentin Tarentino,³³ which picture a "world" in which there are only the purposes of human beings, a "world without ends." In such a world there cannot be any congruity or incongruity of purposes with ends. There being no ends by which purposes can be measured, all purposes are in themselves incommensurate and incongruous with one other. This is a world in which everything is violent, because there is no natural way for anything to move. But a world in which everything is violent means that violence becomes ordinary, the usual, the way things are. The violent displaces and becomes "the natural." Nietzsche observed that "[o]nce you know that there are no ends (*zweck*), you also know that there is no accident; for it is only beside a world of ends (*zweck*) that the word 'accident' has meaning."³⁴ The violence shocks because we are not nihilists, because we are still measuring what people do in these films by a world in which there are ends, not just human purposes. Tarentino says he doesn't take violence seriously and finds it funny. "To me, violence is a totally aesthetic subject."³⁵ Commenting on these films Michael Wood says:

³¹ Aristotle, *Poetics* 6.1450a17–19.

³² Blackmur, *The Lion and the Honeycomb*, p. 269.

³³ *Reservoir Dogs*. *True Romance*. *Pulp Fiction*. *Natural Born Killers*.

³⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, #109, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

³⁵ In an interview excerpted and printed in the published screenplays of both *Reservoir Dogs* (London: Faber, 1994) and *True Romance* (London: Faber, 1995), Tarentino goes on to observe that "saying you don't like violence in movies is like saying you don't like dance sequences in movies." Michael Wood thinks the violence in these films "an act of immature bravado" ("My Kind of Psychopath," *London Review of Books*, 17, no. 14 [20 July 1995], pp. 9–10.) According to Wood, what these films are really about is "evoking the ungovernable and . . . unspoiled energies of the world" (p. 9). In other words, Heidegger's words, "Possibility stands higher than actuality."

[T]he violence mainly suggests that everyone and everything is out of control, that no rules apply and chaos is come again. What interests Tarentino is not violence . . . but fiasco, the sense that life is a mess even in fiction. And then into this mess he introduces *not order but style* and a peculiar kind of innocence.³⁶

A world of purposes only is a world of cross-purposes, the definition of fiasco. What is intended in the portrayal of such a world is not, of course, a "classic form," the manifestation of an order, "things held together in a living way with the sense of life going on," but the manifestation of an author. Style, then, not order. Where there are only the purposes of human beings, there are no actions to imitate; there are events to be strung together, not stories to be told. Life must be a string of events strung together "anyhow."³⁷ Just how must depend upon the postures assumed by the author. Works such as these films reveal—and are intended to reveal—the sensibility of their creators, in this instance "a peculiar kind of innocence." A "peculiar kind of innocence" for there is no place for dismay that what is done wrecks havoc. In such a world that is a "natural" result of anything anyone does. A world of fiasco is a world in which guilt is impossible, because guilt requires responsibility for actions, and there are actions only if purposes are measured by ends. Wood remarks that in Tarentino's films: "A desperate ordinariness might inhabit the most extreme of circumstances."³⁸ The *ordinariness* is human purpose *desperate* when detached from ends, because detached from ends there are no "reasons" other than our purposes for doing anything. Wood continues: "There is also the sense that if you can't get a plausible reason for behaving the way you want to, an implausible one will have to do."³⁹ Reason reduced to purpose produces *the most extreme of circumstances*.

Macbeth inhabits a world in which he acknowledges only human purposes, a world in which he must ceaselessly strive to become the master of consequences. When the achievements of great ambition fall apart, his life seems to him, as all lives seem to him, "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."⁴⁰ Macbeth cannot tell the story of his own life. But Shakespeare could and we understand Macbeth's life because we see it within the context of the whole which human life is as apprehended by Shakespeare. The screenplays of Tarentino are and are intended pre-

³⁶ Wood, "My Kind of Psychopath," pp. 9–10.

³⁷ Actions, in contrast, are wholes manifesting ends.

³⁸ Wood, "My Kind of Psychopath," p. 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

⁴⁰ *Macbeth*. Act 5, Scene 5, lines 26–28.

cisely to be “tales full of sound and fury signifying nothing”—but without paying the price of having to regard himself as an idiot. *Pulp Fiction* and *True Romance*, the titles he chose for two of his films, suggest that Tarentino believes that he can maintain a distance between himself and the tales that he tells. “Pulp fiction” and “true romance” do not describe Tarentino’s view of his own films, but the character and status he attributes to the stories human beings tell in the effort to understand and give substance to their lives, which these films expose (supposedly) as “pulp fiction” and “true romance.” Tarentino, self-indulgently, ridicules all purposes except his own. But if there are no ends, what privileges the purposes of the artist?

In contrast to Tarentino’s pop post-modernism Franz Kafka, an artist of high order, understood that there is a price to be paid for telling the tales of an idiot. In one of his letters Kafka described his understanding of his practice of the narrative art:

Somewhat as if one were to hammer together a table with painful and methodical technical efficiency, and simultaneously do nothing at all, and not in such a way that people could say: “Hammering a table together is really nothing to him,” but rather “Hammering a table together is really hammering a table together to him, but at the same time it is nothing,” whereby certainly the hammering would have become still bolder, still surer, still more real and, if you will, still more senseless.⁴¹

Seldom have such tales been told with such perfection. In them Kafka achieved the anti-poetry appropriate to a world without ends.

It was very early in the morning, the streets clean and deserted, I was on my way to the station. As I compared the tower clock with my watch I realized that it was much later than I had thought and that I had to hurry; the shock of this discovery made me feel uncertain of the way, I wasn’t very well acquainted with the town as yet; fortunately, there was a policeman at hand. I ran to him and breathlessly asked him the way. He smiled and said: “You asking me the way?” “Yes,” I said, “since I can’t find it myself.” “Give it up! Give it up!” said he, and turned with a sudden jerk, like someone who wants to be alone with his laughter.⁴²

⁴¹ Franz Kafka, *The Great Wall of China*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken, 1946), p. 136. See Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 219.

⁴² Franz Kafka, *Give It Up!* in *The Basic Kafka* (New York: The Washington Square Press, 1979), pp. 157–58.