14. Quoted in Paul Fyfe, *By Accident or Design: Writing the Victorian Metropolis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 189–90.
15. Tom Standage, *The Victorian Internet: The Remarkable Story of the Telegraph and the Nineteenth Century's On-line Pioneers* (New York: Walker and Company, 1998), 102–03.
16. Iwan Rhys Morus, "'The Nervous System of Britain': Space, Time, and the Electric Telegraph in the Victorian Age," *British Journal for the History of Science* 33, no. 4 (2000): 455–75.
17. Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: Norton, 2011), 225–28.

Teleology

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> [It] would not, after all, be a bad sort of teleology to keep it in mind, as a heuristic fiction or Kantian 'idea', in the midst of our political action. . . . Teleology usually involves the assumption that there is some potential in the present which could result in a particular sort of future. But this need not mean that this potential lurks within the present like petals within a bud. It is present rather in the sense that I have a potential to travel up to Glasgow right now, which is hardly some kind of secret structure of my being. Teleology here is just a way of describing where I am in the light of where I could feasibly get to.
>
> —Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*[1]

FEW words were as reviled in literary criticism and theory of the eighties, nineties, and early aughts as "teleology." It seems strange when you remember that teleology—derived from the Greek world *τέλος*, "end" or "purpose"—simply means interpreting things in relation to their possible goal or outcome. It's hard to imagine reading a novel without any consideration of its conclusion, or a sonnet without considering what its volta seems to do. And, as Eagleton notes, you can't interpret (much less formulate) politics without addressing the question of purpose, the ends desired as well as the means by which those ends might be achieved. In our current moment, as we grapple with the problem of climate change and collective action, as we struggle to figure out

what world we are heading toward, the question of ends has never felt more important.

Eagleton is uncannily sensitive here to the importance of teleology in the history of thinking about living systems. Teleological thought was especially important in the long nineteenth century, when generations of writers, scientists, and thinkers struggled to explain just how things like "petals" form out of things like "buds." Immanuel Kant—writing with an eye toward contemporary science—was enormously important in making purpose a central question for natural philosophy and aesthetics. Natural purposes, he argued, were impossible to discern, given the uncertainty of natural knowledge, and our uncertainty in a divine author. Yet organisms are defined by the integration of their organic parts—both the way that different organs fulfill different functions, and the mutual interdependence of organs and the body. This meant, according to Kant, that the study of living systems required a presumption that specific parts of those systems achieve ends that help the whole. This "purposiveness" governs the study of organic bodies, in Kant's account, but it also governs works of art, insofar as they achieve an analogous integration of elements in a larger effect. Extended to the analysis of how societies develop and operate (as G. W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx were quick to do), purposive analysis became a dominant mode for thinking about natural, artistic, and social collectives. It was also central to the vocabulary of Victorian criticism, which emphasized the fitness of plot and the aptness of character (putting the "good" in Jesse Rosenthal's recent study, *Good Form*).[2]

Kant's purposive philosophy drew on the long-standing concerns of natural theology, which studied the place of godly design in nature. The nineteenth century, however, witnessed a crisis in the notion of natural design, as materialists like Thomas Henry Huxley worked to expunge questions of purpose from the study of nature. Later histories of the period have generally endorsed Huxley's argument for how Charles Darwin explained away natural purposes, as figured by adaptations, by describing them as the fruit of chance events. But Darwin's theory of natural selection in fact *required* thinking about purpose: in order to imagine the natural history of a given adaptation, one had to guess what that adaptation does, and then explain how that purpose might have developed through gradual changes in specific behaviors or structures.

Even as it sidelined divine intervention and design, natural selection required positing what selection selects *for*—whether the fleetness of the wolf (which helps capture its prey) or the sweetness of the flower's nectar (which lures pollinating insects), to take two of the earliest examples

given in *The Origin of Species*. Abandoning the conceit of a divine hand at the wheel, and with it, confidence in teleological certainty, only exacerbated the problem of explaining how things came to do what they do.

Natural selection fused the question of ends to the methods of natural history, and with it, formulated a softer, more flexible notion of purpose for the study of social and natural systems. This does not mean that the program of natural selection was ill-conceived, or hobbled by a cryptic metaphysical commitment. A soft teleology is central to any study of natural or social systems in time. All studies of *structure*, whether morphological or social, raise the problem of *purpose*; all inquiries into *form* imply questions of *function*; all questions of *transformation* foster the study of new *possibilities*. Teleology, understood in Eagleton's terms as the question of "potential in the present" as well as in the past, allows us to imagine change and study its ends.

Adapted as an open hermeneutic, teleology is about exploring possible ends, not faith in a singular outcome. To stress the importance of purposive thinking to current scholarship, I might point to the importance of "affordance" in Caroline Levine's formalism, or to the role of "anticipation" in Paul Saint-Amour's recent recounting of trauma theory, or to the growing importance of utopia and science fiction as genres of climate politics.[3] Instead, however, I'd like point to teleology's significance to the various arguments over reading practices—suspicious vs. reparative, depth vs. surface—that have ranged across the critical literature of the last two decades. These discussions place extraordinary emphasis on the ethical potential of literary analysis, and in doing so, examine the purpose of literature and criticism.

This turn toward purpose has an inherently teleological flavor about it. Beyond its unforgettable reference to Carly Simon, the foundational discussion for this line of thinking—Eve Sedgwick's 1997 essay, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You"—engrained the problem of purpose into the reparative turn. It begins with a discussion between Sedgwick and the sociologist Cindy Patton about the conspiracy theories that swirled around the AIDS epidemic. Asked whether she believed rumors that the disease was a government-engineered plot to attack black and gay communities, Patton said it was pointless to study the question, as it could only confirm assumptions about the structural violence of the modern state. As Patton put it, "What would we know then that we don't already know?"[4] This marked a hard teleological claim about the purpose of the government, and of AIDS, but also of

knowledge. For Sedgwick, this conversation was a revelation: "I suppose this ought to seem quite an unremarkable epiphany: that knowledge *does* rather than simply *is*."[5] Sedgwick's reorientation enlarges the question of matters of fact to include matters of concern. In asking not simply whether X is true but also what X would do, Sedgwick exhumed a shared interest in purpose and a consensus belief in the social ends of facts. All research is pursued in the belief that the answer will serve a larger end, and often with an answer in mind. Guesses about both outcome and purpose are conditions of investigation.

In revisiting this moment, I seek to extend its reparative impulse while elucidating the problematic way it handles purpose. Guesses—whether about politics or about what research will find—shouldn't determine (even if they often influence) the occasion and outcome of the research itself. To conflate a guess about purpose with certain knowledge is to erase the distinction between soft and hard teleology, between the study of possibilities and the assumption of a singular end. Patton's answer implied the impossibility of proving the negative: that the government did *not* engineer the AIDS epidemic, or that this would matter. But I'm assuming that it does matter whether the US government engineered H. I. V. Even as Sedgwick sides against unqualified suspicion, she gives qualified endorsement to a suspicious politics that resonates with today's maniacally suspicious "post-truth" public sphere. Formally, though to radically different ends, the American right today echoes this skepticism of basic research, with one important difference (among many) being their suspicion that this research (say, into climate science) will contradict, rather than confirm, their politics. My key point is that we require a critical but productive relation to teleology. Rita Felski suggests suspicious reading and detective fiction have one real distinction, that in the former, there's no real mystery:[6] we already know who done it. The paranoid style lives on, and it knows both too much and not enough about outcomes.

If the hermeneutics of suspicion operates within a relatively closed teleology (the end is presumed), then reparative readings work to open teleology, emphasizing the productive possibilities of the critical encounter. All research—not just research in the suspicious mode—is teleological: oriented toward ends and purposes. This is one legacy of the nineteenth century, with its wide-reaching effort to explain social and natural entanglement in the absence of design. Our guesses about purpose and outcome are essential as we try to figure out how we got here, what's going on, and where this planet might be headed. It wouldn't be so bad to keep in mind *that we are always reading with something in mind.* Teleology

does not mean we're caught in a trap; it just means we can't help thinking about the future. Carly Simon still puts it best: We can never know about the days to come, but we think about them anyway.

Notes

1. Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 108.
2. Jesse Rosenthal, *Good Form: The Ethical Experience of the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).
3. Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Paul K. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Fredric Jameson has famously argued that we are unable to imagine a better world, and that science fiction confronts the impossibility of imagining the future in *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005). To this, Kim Stanley Robinson responds, "We can imagine utopia; it's easy as pie"—it's imagining how to get there that's the dilemma—but "we have come to a moment of utopia or catastrophe; there is no middle ground. . . . utopia is no longer a nice idea but, rather, a survival necessity" ("Remarks on Utopia in the Age of Climate Change," *Utopian Studies* 27, no. 1 [2016]: 7, 10).
4. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You," in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 4.
5. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," 4.
6. Rita Felski, "Suspicious Minds," *Poetics Today* 32, no. 2 (2011): 215–34, 225.

Temporality

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WHEN Gerard Manley Hopkins reflects on the "grandeur of God," he claims that it "will flame out, like shining from shook foil"