

THE DEATH OF DIONYSOS: FORMATIVE EXPERIENCE AND  
HUMAN AUTONOMY IN WILHELM MEISTERS LEHRJAHRE

By

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To my wife and best friend, Caroline

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## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is the protocol of an investigation. Or if you will, of two investigations. The central interest and purpose has been, and is, to present a phenomenology of Wilhelm Meister's consciousness as it develops from his childhood—fragments of which he relates to not a few others, but chiefly to his first beloved, Mariane—to his confession in the concluding lines of the novel, “daß ich ein Glück erlangt habe, das ich nicht verdiene, und das ich mit nichts in der Welt vertauschen möchte” (610). [“that I have attained a happiness I never earned and that I would not trade for anything in the world” (DWH).]<sup>1</sup> If, as he insists, he has not earned the unexpected happiness of marriage to his new beloved, Natalie: how has he come by it, and in what sense can he call himself happy? This may seem a strange question to ask of a novel, since finding happiness in love is certainly one of the chief interests, and the prospect of happy marriage a rather common conclusion not only of novels/romances, but of comic theater as well. Yet *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* is not a common novel. While erotic love is a central theme and one of Wilhelm's chief interests, the conclusion truly comes as something of a surprise, for both Wilhelm and the reader. That is to say, it is not the consequence of any emotional or erotic entanglement. How is this so?

Dieter Borchmeyer has pointed to the various ways in which the disorderly power of Eros is subjected in the *Lehrjahre* entirely to the economic calculation of burgher rationalism. Recalling Novalis's discovery of an anti-lyrical/spiritual tendency in Goethe's novel, Borchmeyer notes the irrelevance of erotic love to any of the three

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<sup>1</sup>All German citations from *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* refer to the Hamburger Ausgabe (hereafter abbreviated as HA), volume VII, edited by Erich Trunz. Most English translations of Goethe's novel are taken from the translation by Eric A. Blackall with Victor Lange, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, vol. 9 of *Goethe's Collected Works* (New York: Suhrkamp, 1989). The page numbers from this translation will be preceded by Blackall's initials (EAB). Occasionally, as in the above instance, I have opted for greater clarity with a more **literal** translation of my own (or with parenthetical insertions). In these instances I give my own initials (DWH). All translations of German philosophy and secondary literature, including Goethe-contemporaries such as Schiller, are likewise my own; in those instances I do not give my initials.

marriages that are planned in the final chapter. He then concludes, “[S]o könnte man den Roman nicht nur als ein Buch gegen die Poesie und die Religion, sondern beinahe auch als ein solches gegen den Eros bezeichnen” [“In the same way one might characterize the novel not only as a book against poetry and religion, but for the most part as one against Eros, too”] (195). Certainly, Wilhelm’s aristocratic bride-to-be is herself entirely suspicious of a romantic or erotic love that she ascribes entirely to “Märchen” [fairy tales] (538). Her agreement to marry the agreeable burgher boy is largely due to her supplemental character—her defining urge to match need with surplus—as her brother Friedrich had predicted earlier. Noting his sister’s inability to appreciate particular love, he surmised that she never would marry, “als bis einmal irgendwo eine Braut fehlt, und du gibst dich alsdann nach deiner gewohnten Gutherzigkeit auch als Supplement irgendeiner Existenz hin” (565). [“until some bride or other is missing, and you, with your customary generosity, will provide yourself as a supplement to someone’s existence” (EAB 346)]. We will see that her “generosity” is directed at individuals not so much for their own sake as in the cause of humanity as a whole: to whose peaceful and ambitious social progress she devotes her whole efforts.

Wilhelm’s only experience of love in an erotic sense is his affair with Mariane in Book One, the traumatic disruption of which results in his emotional and even physical breakdown. He does have a later flirt with a countess, but that is never consummated. At various points in the novel he will recall his love for Mariane with elegiac longing and even hope for a reunion and reconciliation. But that expectation will be crushed once and for all toward the end of Book Seven, when Mariane’s former servant Barbara reveals the awful fate that befell her mistress: after Wilhelm abandoned Mariane in the mistaken belief that she had betrayed him. The in every sense tragic consequences of her faithfulness to Wilhelm and their love were pregnancy and social isolation, want, illness, death. It is a textbook instance of the ultimate middle-class nightmare. Wilhelm does shed some tears, but he adamantly rejects Barbara’s effort to implicate him in Mariane’s



misfortune; and he recovers his peace of mind with remarkable speed. When not long thereafter a sudden cardiac arrest robs him of his child protégé, Mignon—in comforting whom he earlier had taken comfort—he scarcely seems **affected** at all. Wilhelm von Humboldt, one of the first readers of Goethe’s novel, attributes this to Wilhelm’s “Lauigkeit, wenn ich nicht Kälte sagen soll, der Empfindung, ohne die sein Betragen nach Marianens und Mignons Tode nicht begreiflich sein würden [. . .]” [“lukewarm, if I shouldn’t say cold sensibility, without which his conduct after Mariane’s and Mignon’s deaths would be inconceivable (. . .)”] (659). Humboldt links Wilhelm’s emotional tepidness to his fondness for speculation (“Räsonnieren”), instances of which we see already in Book One. Yet even as he recognizes something disturbing in Wilhelm’s reaction (or lack of one) to those two deaths, Humboldt overlooks entirely the debilitating trauma that befalls Wilhelm early in the novel. Wilhelm’s emotional coolness in Books Seven and Eight cannot be due simply to a bent for reasoning that dulls his sensibility to experience. Wilhelm talks and reasons more than ever in the Book One; but that does not prevent the emotional collapse to which he succumbs, when he believes that his love is cheating on him.

Humboldt’s chief concern about Wilhelm was his inaptitude for decisive action, or even for a definite character. He even questions Wilhelm’s capacity for personal development altogether, representing perhaps the first word of doubt regarding what would come to be a general assumption that the *Lehrjahre* is a Bildungsroman. My interest, on the other hand, is precisely the stark contrast presented by Wilhelm’s youthful despair over lost love and his later composure in the face of **lost loves**. In fact, Wilhelm still teeters on the brink of despair even as late as the last chapter of the novel; but that anxiety is limited entirely to the seeming inaccessibility of his new blue-blooded belle. That he can recover so quickly, scarcely even stumble at all, when death robs him of the two individuals with whom he had been most intimate in life, is evidence of **a new independence and confidence in himself**. Goethe’s first and most interested reader,

Friedrich Schiller, had likewise observed with satisfaction Wilhelm's new "Selbstgefühl" in Book Eight: a new sensibility of self—today we would say "self-esteem"—that alone might qualify him for marriage to Natalie and inclusion among the mostly aristocratic Society of the Tower.<sup>2</sup> Schiller was right. The Wilhelm who objects to being treated like a child is not the same one who once was crushed over the appearance of a manlier rival for the love of Mariane and its favors. Even more striking is his resilience in the face of possible personal guilt in the fate of Mariane, and even of Mignon.<sup>3</sup>

Strangely, the whole question of guilt on Wilhelm's part in other's misfortunes represents something of a black hole in critical response to the *Lehrjahre*. In addition to Mignon and Mariane, we have only to remember the absurd but nevertheless sad consequences of his Platonic romance with the countess, and it becomes clear that Goethe himself did not go out of his way to spare his protagonist any **occasion** for remorse. His immunity to guilt must therefore lie in Wilhelm's consciousness. A rare exception to an otherwise general silence on this matter is a recent study by Stefan Blessin, who stresses the radically modern ethos and world view that prevail in Goethe's novels.<sup>4</sup> While he absolves Wilhelm of any direct responsibility for the deaths of Mignon and others in the *Lehrjahre*, Blessin acknowledges an exception in the case of Mariane:

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<sup>2</sup>Schiller is referring specifically to Wilhelm's indignant objection to the manipulations or machinations of Jarno and the Tower in his life. He writes to Goethe: "Ich gestehe, daß es mir ohne diesen Beweis von Selbstgefühl bei unserm Helden peinlich sein würde, ihn mir mit dieser Klasse so eng verbunden zu denken, wie nachher durch die Verbindung mit Natalien geschieht." ["I confess that without this proof of self-esteem in our hero, I would be embarrassed to imagine him connected as closely to this circle as later is the case with his (marriage) tie to Natalie."] See letter to Goethe of July 5, 1796 (HA VII, 638).

<sup>3</sup>Wilhelm berates himself in Book Eight for having neglected Mignon: "Ich zog das liebe Kind an, seine Gegenwart ergötzte mich, und dabei hab' ich es aufs grausamste vernachlässigt" (504). [Wilhelm to himself: "You took charge of the poor child, her companionship delighted you, and yet you have cruelly neglected her" (EAB 308).] Nevertheless, this self-recrimination represents his new social conscience—the need to send her to school—rather than any sense of **personal** responsibility for her.

<sup>4</sup>See by Blessin, *Goethes Romane: Aufbruch in die Moderne* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1996).

Alle, die sonst noch in den Lehrjahren zu Tode kommen [. . .] haben sich ganz von innen aufgezehrt. Es gibt keinen, der nachweislich schuld daran wäre. Im Gegensatz stürzt Mariane in einen sozialen Abgrund. Das nicht verhindert zu haben, muß sich Wilhelm vorwerfen. Aber viel zu spät. *Denn da er um keinen Preis an eine nicht wiedergutzumachende Vergangenheit gekettet sein soll, bleibt er die längste Zeit von der Schuldfrage dispensiert* (90, my italics).

[All of the others that die in the Lehrjahre devour themselves from within. There is no one who evidently bears any guilt for it. In contrast, Mariane falls into a social abyss. Wilhelm must recognize that he bears responsibility for having let it happen. But much too late. *He shall not be chained to an unredeemable past; for this reason he is spared for the longest time any question of guilt* (my italics).]

Curiously, Blessin's choice of words suggests an explicit, even imperative interest on Goethe's part to spare Wilhelm the sensibility of personal guilt—even though the narrative makes no effort to mitigate, but rather **underscores** those consequences of his actions that constitute a **suggestion of guilt**. Why is this the case?

Now, it is not the interest of this dissertation to catalogue Wilhelm's sins, or even to offer a moral reading of Goethe's novel. It has been my purpose from the outset, rather, to trace the development of Wilhelm's consciousness, so as to account in some way for apparent incongruities in the way that he responds to setbacks and other negative experiences in his life. Humboldt was the first to point out something inconsistent in Wilhelm's cognitive makeup. The father of humanistic education or *Bildung* in Germany attributed that incongruity largely to Wilhelm's habit of philosophizing about life—that is, of trying to frame his particular experiences in terms of general or even universal truths, a tendency that leads repeatedly to misunderstanding and even misfortune. Humboldt finds Wilhelm's character weak and disappointing; but in the same vein he admires the independence of the world of Goethe's novel from any particular individual and his or her perception.

Undoubtedly the most emphatic accusation of inconsistency in Wilhelm's character is to be found in a rather remarkable study published in 1953 by the Nietzsche-scholar, Karl Schlechta. Full of admiration for the passion he sees in Wilhelm's youthful

attachment to Mariane and the theater, Schlechta traces through the rest of the novel a constant and ever farther departure of Wilhelm from the immediate experience of life. Pulling no punches, Schlechta lays the blame for this decline squarely on the Abbé and his secret Society of the Tower. While we will have our differences with Schlechta, his accusing finger nevertheless points to the pivot on which the fate of Goethe's protagonist undoubtedly turns. The novel that was the subject of a lengthy correspondence with Schiller was, we now know, based on a lengthy fragment from Goethe's pre-Italy production. Since the discovery in the twentieth century of a fragment now known as *Wilhelm Meisters theatralische Sendung* (*Wilhelm Meister's Theatric Calling*), we can compare the fragment with the parallel first five books of the *Lehrjahre*.

Without doubt, what sets the first five books of the *Lehrjahre* apart from the last three is the introduction and significant presence in the latter of the Tower Society. Moreover, even as he reinscribed Wilhelm's youthful attachment to the theater, turning the theatric vocation of the fragment into a mistake that Wilhelm must learn to recognize as such—Goethe inserted into Wilhelm's vacation from middle-class respectability encounters with characters who later turn out to be associated with the Tower. These drop sometimes small, sometimes bigger hints that Wilhelm is pursuing life on the wrong track; that his understanding of his life and the world around him is mistaken. In view of the central, if partly hidden conceptual significance of the Tower in the *Lehrjahre*, we will have to consider in what relation it stands to Wilhelm's evolving consciousness. This does not mean that we must share Schlechta's assumptions about what value should be placed on Wilhelm's early love and views, or about how (and why) these change in the course of his experiences and development. It does mean, though, that both the symbolic significance and real influence of the Tower will have to be addressed and accounted for.

I have chosen to begin with an exploration of the very concept of experience (*Erfahrung*) in the novel, especially as it relates to the nature and quality of Wilhelm's experiences. Edmund Husserl has taught us that consciousness is not simply the passive

recipient of experience, as early empiricism had tended to conceive it. Husserl stresses that the mind always has a stake in, and an influence on, how it registers the empirical world. Consciousness as he describes it is always on the move, always directed. I would only suggest that Goethe in his own way understood this, or at all events conceived something very similar. From the opening pages of the novel *Wilhelm Meister* has a **mind of his own**. His is a consciousness that bends or refracts the experience he perceives with his senses, making it hard to discern anything remotely similar to a one-to-one equivalence of what happens to him and what he knows of it. Even so, however, we must bear in mind that, just as the word *Erfahrung* was understood by eighteenth and nineteenth-century epistemology more and more in terms of empirical knowledge, to be measured by the rigorous ruler of (mathematical) objectivity—literature was gaining new momentum as the preferred medium in which the self asserted its right to a different kind of experience: the personal experience of life, which in German came to be called *Erlebnis*. While the natural sciences sought to minimize the separateness of a consciousness that mediated the world as nature, on the one hand, and knowledge of the same, **prose fiction** and **biography** explored the personality that accumulated somewhere between nature and the natural sciences. If modern novels generally have participated in this grand humanistic enterprise, those that come under consideration as *Bildungsromane* certainly are special instances of this interest. Regardless of whether or not such a distinct subgenre really exists—or if so, of which novels qualify as *Bildungsromane*—the critical tradition itself bears witness to our modern fascination with those model personalities that exemplify the aspiration of modern humans to make, and be, their own mark.

Undoubtedly for this same reason the German language found the need to coin a new word for personal experience, especially experience that exemplified the great personality generally, and the (Kantian) creative genius in particular. In his attempt to articulate the distinct legitimacy of the *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences), Hans-Georg Gadamer points in *Wahrheit und Methode* to the rise of *Erlebnis* in the nineteenth-

century as the new watchword of aesthetic humanism.<sup>5</sup> While Gadamer is deeply suspicious of Kantian aesthetics and its influence, he undertakes to demonstrate how terms such as *Bildung* exemplify the hermeneutic approach of the humanities to their truth, as distinct from the inductive methodology of the natural sciences. Of particular interest to us is Gadamer's observation that, while the word *Erlebnis* emerged only after Goethe had died, his life, work, and language in many ways anticipated and called out for a new word to describe the human experience of life. *Erlebnis* in Gadamer's analysis typifies a new Kantian value placed on the great individual, whose experience reflects solely on the unique character of his life, rather than on what is generally valid or common to all. Gadamer stresses that, unlike the universal validity of truth in the natural sciences, *Erlebnis* is characterized by the distinctly individual and personal nature of such experience; that the unique individual attracts, as it were, those experiences suited to his personality, while those foreign to his nature scarcely register at all. In this sense human consciousness as Gadamer describes it includes something like a customs official who keeps watch at the borderline of personal identity, and who diligently differentiates between those experiences that bear the visa stamp of individual character and may enter as qualified *Erlebnisse*, as opposed to those that are too foreign to be admitted at all.

For us this means that we will have to look beyond the word *Erfahrung* and its knowledge in order to demarcate the full range and limits of Wilhelm Meister's experience. We will be attentive to note those experiences to which he is receptive, as well as those he either rejects or scarcely perceives. Far more important for the purpose of this thesis will be an inquiry into the reasons why certain experiences are favored, while others are turned away at the port of entry into his mind. What makes Wilhelm Meister so interesting is the fact that the customs official of his consciousness is not yet fully trained; it still finds every newcomer very interesting and agreeable and welcomes him to the

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<sup>5</sup>See Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1990), pp. 61-87.

table, including those that have the capacity to wreak havoc on his still tender and vulnerable individuality. We will see that the Society of the Tower are experienced tutors of modern consciousness—even if the Abbé has an at times excessive fondness for covert operations. We will consider the ways in which they intervene in Wilhelm’s life, as well as note the sorts of influence they avoid.

I suggested at the beginning that this study is in some respects a dual investigation. From the beginning of my research I was convinced that Wilhelm, despite the sheer amplitude of his emotions, is somehow predisposed by Book Seven to a very selective sensibility when he is confronted with Mariane’s awful end. My theoretical framework five years ago recognized something significant in what I then assumed was his callousness, although I saw no need to scratch much beyond the surface. I believed that my makeshift Heideggerian reading was in its own way water-tight, and that it could account for just about everything that interested me. I might compare myself to a rookie district attorney, for this dissertation has been something of an apprenticeship in scholarly inquiry. Like many a rookie prosecutor, I was perhaps overzealous in my ambition to convict modern consciousness for a moving violation. Goethe is, after all, no mean citizen of the modern academy; his work and legacy are of truly monumental proportions and cannot be bothered with the petty scruples of this or that philosophical school. Like the *Erlebnis* or lived experience of the great personality, he must be addressed on his own terms, and that made my case far more difficult to make.

The result has been a thesis that proceeds at times more like an archeological dig than a methodical, even-paced argument. While my metaphor may seem to have a distinctly Foucauldian flavor, this study bears little resemblance to his postmodern readings of history. What I mean by archeology is that the first three or four chapters are more interested in unearthing relevant details in the language and social conditions of Goethe’s novel, and placing them in context, than in following a distinct, premeditated

argument. At the same time, the analysis does share a few characteristic interests with Foucault. For one, I too am interested in Goethe's novel as a historical artefact: a relic, in fact, of the same late eighteenth, early nineteenth century that looms so large as the origin of **humanity** in Foucault's *Order of Things*. But the similarities end there. The modern human consciousness that this study examines reaches back centuries earlier and has passed through what is called postmodernity with scarcely more than cosmetic alterations. Nevertheless, Foucault's historical sensitivity deserves our admiration; for we too will recognize in the end of the eighteenth and turn of the nineteenth century a defining moment for modern consciousness.

But something else sets this archeological dig apart. It is not least of all an attempt to exhume the lost body of Mariane and let it give testimony of her awful suffering. I do this, because her cruel misfortune is carefully omitted from Wilhelm Meister's *Lehrjahre*, i.e. from the biography of his life that joins the Tower's library of *Bildung*. In fact, while the barely pubescent body of Mignon is embalmed, made over, and housed in the monumental *Saal der Vergangenheit* (Hall of the Past) of the Tower, where even the corpse of the neurotic harpist is accommodated: the all-too lovely/lovable body of Mariane, prostituted as it was, never is retrieved from the dark trash heap where philistine respectability had dumped it. If not for the same reasons, even the Society of the Tower proves more than willing to leave the frightening pain of her life and death in the darkness of oblivion, far away from the bright and cheerful murals of its humanistic crypt. No life-affirming requiem is sung for her; and that, even though the Abbé admits that she was not altogether "unworthy" of Wilhelm after all, at least not "in spirit".<sup>6</sup> The problem is her body.

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<sup>6</sup>In response to Wilhelm's question regarding his paternity, the Abbé affirms, "Felix ist Ihr Sohn! Bei dem Heiligsten, was unter uns verborgen liegt, schwör' ich Ihnen, Felix ist Ihr Sohn! und der Gesinnung nach war seine Mutter Ihrer nicht unwert" (496). ["Felix is your son! I swear it by all our most sacred mysteries. Felix is your son, and in spirit his deceased mother was not unworthy of you" (EAB 304).]



Unlike those of Mignon and the harpist, that become useful case studies for its pathological archive, Mariane's body cannot be made to represent an idea or concept of its humanistic vocabulary. Its meaning in the life of modern society had long since been inscribed, for many men had "known" her. She was the object of an entirely new empiricism: the new and peculiar epistemology of *Erlebnis*. As a figure in fiction, Mariane and her body cannot actually be retrieved and laid to rest again in a more suitable, more dignified grave. But that also represents an advantage. For the characters in literature come to life again, die again, each time we read a novel or play. This suggests that there may be some moral value in literary scholarship after all: something to redeem what otherwise is only a milestone in an academic career, a document of personal *Bildung*. The act of criticism has allowed me to unearth a body in literature, buried deep in a body of literature, and let it live and die once more, so as to make a case against a modern mind that continues to have its victims. We will see that the reasons for this lie deep in the history of modern human consciousness. It is a history that Goethe concentrates and exemplifies in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*.

## CHAPTER I

### SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE AND THE SELF

#### Subjective vs. Objective Experience

Wilhelm spends some weeks hobnobbing with Serlo's first-rate thespians, before he finally turns to the matter that has weighed on his conscience. To his relief, however, the letters that await him from his family prove happily benign. Having anticipated a scolding for his epistolary silence, a grateful Wilhelm decides to reward the home office with a detailed and informative account of his travels. But no sooner do paper and pen lie before him than he makes a troubling discovery: "daß er von Empfindungen und Gedanken, von manchen Erfahrungen des Herzens und Geistes sprechen und erzählen konnte, nur nicht von äußern Gegenständen, denen er, wie er nun merkte, nicht die mindeste Aufmerksamkeit geschenkt hatte" (266). ["that he could talk about his feelings and thoughts, his experiences of heart and mind, but not about external things (objects) which, as he now noticed, had not in any way attracted his attention" (EAB 159, my insertion).] It turns out that his knapsack of memories includes nothing of interest to Baedeker or a *Handelsblatt*: no sights or statistics, nothing concrete about nature or culture; just a hodgepodge of ideas—highly quotable abstractions—soaked in the perfume of romance. He turns for help to Laertes, a companion during his travels, and together they assemble facts from almanacs and travelogs, composing a "Kunststück" ["work of art"] for Wilhelm's family and friends (267; EAB 159).

The reader, of course, is not likely to share Wilhelm's vexation. After all, what experiences could be of more interest to a patron of novels than such of the mind and heart? Nevertheless, Wilhelm's dilemma echoes an observation that Aurelie had made earlier regarding her philosophizing friend:

“Ohne die Gegenstände jemals in der Natur erblickt zu haben, erkennen Sie die Wahrheit im Bilde; es scheint eine Vorempfindung der ganzen Welt in Ihnen zu liegen, welche durch die harmonische Berührung der Dichtkunst erregt und entwickelt wird. Denn wahrhaftig”, fuhr sie fort, “*von außen kommt nichts in Sie hinein* [ . . . ]” (257, my italics).

[“Without having ever seen things in reality (objects in nature) you can recognize the truthfulness of their image. It seems as if some presentiment of the whole world lies within you, and this is brought to life and developed by your contact with poetry. For truly,” she went on, “*nothing comes into you from the outside world*” (EAB 153, my parenthetical insertion and italics).]

In spite of reassurances as to his character, Aurelie’s words trouble our hero, as it confirms his own “Ahnung [s]eines schülerhaften Wesens” [“suspicion of (his) own schoolboyish nature”]: a childlike naivety about the world that more than once has caused him embarrassment (Ibid.; DWH). When word reaches Wilhelm that his father has died, his ensuing reflections on his life reach a conclusion that reflects the portrait Aurelie had made of him. He regrets that he lacks “Erfahrung” [“experience”] of his environment; that he relies instead on the experiences of others for his understanding of the world (see 284ff.; EAB 171). As readers we cannot help but be a little puzzled over such a pessimistic account of his experiences. To the contrary, we have enjoyed following the eventful trail of his young desire. The conclusion of Book Five, on the other hand, marks an abrupt end to his romantic adventures—to the loves and losses, that is, that had secured for Wilhelm our interest. If we plod through the often puzzling, even disappointing books that follow and reach the happy, albeit nervous end, it is only for the sake of those same “Erfahrungen des Herzens” [“experiences of heart”], through which we shared his joy and pain.

We don’t have to look far to learn the meaning of *Erfahrung* in the above passage, as it is posited opposite Wilhelm’s experiences of the heart. Just as Aurelie observes his blindness to “Gegenstände [ . . . ] in der Natur” [“objects in nature”], Wilhelm himself concludes that he has paid little notice to “äußern Gegenständen” [“external objects”] (257, 266; DWH). Experience here refers clearly to knowledge derived empirically from

observation of the world, of objects and activity in nature and society. Yet Wilhelm has been entirely preoccupied with his imagination and feelings; his “Vorempfindung der ganzen Welt” [“presentiment of the whole world”] finds its substance and expression in poetry and on stage. So engrossed is Wilhelm in his subjective blueprint of life, that Aurelie speaks with the sanction of the narrator when she asserts that nothing enters him from outside. He is a monad without windows. Rather than walking in the light of day, he follows instead—to echo the words of a blinded Faust—the light within.<sup>7</sup> He looks to his *Schicksal* or fate as to the author of his life, such that all events and relationships of his personal plot are assumed to fit into a higher design, and as such will lead to an inevitable conclusion, be it comic or tragic. In Wilhelm’s Weltanschauung, all the world really is a stage, and his life is a drama composed by destiny.<sup>8</sup> More than once in the *Lehrjahre* Wilhelm will anticipate a dramatic reappearance of his long lost love, Mariane—as if he were the hero of a fantastic **romance** rather than . . . of a modern, realistic **novel**.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> After he has been blinded by the breath of *Sorge*, the always *care*-free Faust reflects, “Die Nacht scheint tiefer tief hereinzudringen, / Allein im Innern leuchtet helles Licht” [“The night seems deeper, deeply to intrude / Only within is shining radiant light”] (v. 11499-500; DWH).

<sup>8</sup> Wilhelm’s faith in and fidelity to destiny even silences his conscience with respect to filial piety, as he imposes his own agenda on his first solo business trip: “So groß war seine Leidenschaft, so rein seine Überzeugung, er handle vollkommen recht, sich dem Drucke seines bisherigen Lebens zu entziehen und einer neuen, edlern Bahn zu folgen, daß sein Gewissen sich nicht im mindesten regte, keine Sorge in ihm entstand, ja daß er vielmehr diesen Betrug für heilig hielt. Er war gewiß, daß ihn seine Eltern und Verwandte in der Folge für diesen Schritt preisen und segnen sollten, er erkannte *den Wink eines leitenden Schicksals* an diesen zusammentreffenden Umständen” (42, my italics). [“He was so passionately convinced that he was doing the right thing in escaping from the burden of his present form of life by embarking on a new and nobler course that he did not have the least pangs of conscience or anxiety: Indeed, he felt that this deception was somehow sanctioned by Heaven. He was sure that his parents and relations would eventually approve the step he was about to take. He perceived in this concatenation of circumstances *the guiding hand of fate*” (EAB 21, my italics).] He anticipates that his own little bourgeois melodrama will be resolved in a happy (and undoubtedly tear-filled) denouement.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Doody has obliterated the willful modern distinction drawn between the romance and the (supposedly new) novel in her important study, *The True Story of the Novel* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996). Doody traces the lengthy prose narratives we call novels to ancient narrative ancestors. These include Greek and Roman romances in which Doody has identified a religious interest centering on various goddesses or goddess-figures. In fact, we will see that Goethe’s novel itself undertakes (under the auspices of the Tower) to cure the unheroic hero of what, following Doody, may be called Wilhelm Meister’s **romantic** fatalism: his passive

## *Imagination and the Theater*

Wilhelm's dramatic reading of life has limited bearing on our inquiry into the meaning of *Erfahrung* in the novel. However, the origins and consequences of his poeticized perception are certainly relevant, for it is that which upstages experience in his mind. To locate the source of the problem we turn to Wilhelm's childhood. It is worthwhile to note that Wilhelm's early life represents one of the most significant changes that Goethe made when he revised the earlier fragment, *Wilhelm Meisters theatralische Sendung* (*Wilhelm Meisters Theatrical Calling*), as the first five books of the *Lehrjahre*. Not only are relations in Wilhelm's family altered, but the narrative perspective changes as well. Whereas an omniscient narrator relates the hero's growing pains in the opening chapters of the *Sendung*, the young Wilhelm of the *Lehrjahre* recalls his childhood experiences with puppet shows and amateur stage productions, as he bears his soul to Mariane. One particular word that he uses no less than six times in his narrative is *Einbildungskraft* (imagination). Now, in our own day nothing could seem more appropriate to childhood than an active imagination. One can even see advertisements on PBS, inviting children to "use your ima-gi-na-tion!"

But in the eighteenth century imagination had to do with more than just fairy tales and "let's pretend". Above all else it occupied a central role in perception and cognition. Since, as Locke had taught us, we had no innate, *a priori* ideas about the world, the imagination coordinated sensory perceptions and supplied the mind with images or representations of reality. Knowledge might then be gleaned inductively by comparing the representations of distinct but similar phenomena. Even if the maidenly *Ding an sich* [thing in itself] evaded man's gropings to know her, the inductive method of science,

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submission to a supposed higher power and design. As we will see, this includes his escape from the wrath of a goddess figure in the novel. This is done in order to prepare him for enlightened, **realistic** and, above all else, manly activity. In this respect *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* may be seen to prescribe for its sick (i.e. fatalistic) protagonist what Doody, referring to a standard set for the modern novel, terms "prescriptive realism". In the case of Wilhelm Meister, this means rising to a clear-sighted and autonomous command of his own life.

armed with the distinct impressions of the imagination, could harness what might not be penetrated. Descartes had insisted, and Newton demonstrated, that natural and cosmic phenomena might be reduced to formalistic relations expressible in the rational terms of mathematics, which in turn made it possible to predict the outcome of other, analogous phenomena. Such success was possible, only because the imagination provided **rational** representations of the objective world, without which recent advances in technology and engineering would have been impossible. Men were confident that they recognized reality because, armed with technology, they could imitate and sometimes even alter it to suit their purposes.

Unfortunately, the imagination turned out to be something of a maverick, even eccentric member of the cognitive team.<sup>10</sup> Indulged with too many unreal impressions—due, say, to religious mysticism, to the surreptitious reading of romances, or to all too frequent visits to the theater—a captive imagination might end up ignoring the input of the senses, preferring the flattering representations of fiction to mundane reality, favoring unreason over reason. That is precisely the trouble with the boy Wilhelm when the visions afforded him by the puppet theater disappear, leaving only the dull doorframe of the day before: “Den andern Morgen war leider das magische Gerüste wieder verschwunden, der mystische Schleier weggehoben, man ging durch jene Türe wieder frei aus einer Stube in die andere, und so viel Abenteuer hatten keine Spur zurückgelassen” (17). [“Next morning that magic structure had vanished, the mystic curtain was gone and you could once again move without hindrance from one room to the next. All the enchantment had disappeared and left no trace” (EAB 6).] A second production of the puppet show offers Wilhelm a glimpse behind the curtain and into the technical apparatus

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<sup>10</sup>Foucault writes of the “arbitrariness of the imagination” in what he calls the classical age. See *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), pp. 93-94. He notes that, while the imagination was not thought to be the **source** of madness, “it is profoundly rooted in it”. What he means is that the images it provides were assumed to be entirely subject to the will; that when passions disrupt the balance in mind and body, the imagination is hijacked, as it were, to provide the image that suits desire.

that produces the illusion. He later finds the puppets boxed up in the pantry, memorizes the dialogue of “David and Goliath”, and recruits his friends to put on their own shows with the marionettes and, later, real plays with costumes and acting. But they never manage an entire production from start to finish. Mastery of the art, Wilhelm confesses, was not his real interest: ““Die größte Freude lag bei mir in der Erfindung und in der Beschäftigung der Einbildungskraft”” (24). [““My greatest pleasure lay in the invention and in the excitement of my imagination”” (DWH).] His interest lay always in the exercise of his imagination. As he matures, the attraction of the theater persists; and he looks forward to graduating from spectator to cast member: to joining Mariane on the stage, where the pair of them—mated adepts of an erotic Eucharist—would initiate the audience into a collective, even cultic transcendence of self.<sup>11</sup>

Following his supposed discovery of Mariane’s infidelity, Wilhelm abandons his imagined vocation as the “Schöpfer eines künftigen Nationaltheaters” (35). [“the founder of a future National Theater” (EAB 16ff).] This vision had been rooted, no doubt, in his mistaken conception of the theater as a locus of moral and spiritual communion. He could not grasp, he once insisted, why church and theater should be at odds with one another, and wished, rather, ““daß an beiden Orten nur durch edle Menschen Gott und Natur verherrlicht würden!”” (66). [that ““both would glorify God and Nature through the mouths of noble human beings”” (EAB 35).] He recognizes in both institutions, as in his erotic union with Mariane, occasions of **shared affective experience**, such as might overcome the alienation of the bourgeois individual. Hence his astonishment, when he

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<sup>11</sup>Wilhelm uses such erotic/cultic images and language in his letter to Mariane: “[. . . ]ich will’s nicht aussagen, aber hoffen will ich, daß wir einst als ein Paar gute Geister den Menschen erscheinen werden, ihre Herzen aufzuschließen, ihre Gemüter zu berühren und ihnen himmlische Genüsse zu bereiten, so gewiß mir an Deinem Busen Freuden gewährt waren, die immer himmlisch genannt werden müssen, weil wir uns in jenen Augenblicken *aus uns selbst gerückt, über uns selbst erhaben fühlen*” (66ff., my italics). [“I (. . .) say—better perhaps not say but hope—that someday we will appear together, a pair of noble spirits, opening up the hearts of men, touching their souls, and offering them heavenly delights. I believe this because the joys of being with you were always heavenly delights, because we were *lifted beyond ourselves, and felt above ourselves*” (EAB 35ff., my italics).]

accompanies Mariane backstage into the sensuous disorder of the dressing room; or his disappointment over the shallow and selfish interests of the actors (59-60). These were not the “edle Menschen” [“noble human beings”] he had imagined, ordained to glorify God and Nature! Although Wilhelm has grown older since his first experiments on a homemade stage, he is little wiser when it comes to the true nature of the theater. He fails to recognize that acting is an art that requires mastery; that (in Goethe’s novel) the actor must have his voice, features, and movements under control, so that he can project an image for which there is no underlying conscious state. To the contrary, Wilhelm confuses the illusion of art with a higher truth, imagination with revelation. This misunderstanding will persist, if not without some revision, even after he has performed with some success with Serlo and his professional actors. Not until his initiation into the Tower Society does Wilhelm recognize his error (“Irrtum”): “daß ich da Bildung suchte, wo keine zu finden war, daß ich mir einbildete, ein Talent erwerben zu können, zu dem ich nicht die geringste Anlage hatte!” (495). [“seeking cultivation where none was to be found, imagining I could acquire a talent to which I had no propensity” (EAB 302).]

During the initiation ceremony a man whom Wilhelm recognizes from an earlier encounter, and who bears some resemblance to the Abbé, appears from behind the curtain and declares:

“Nicht vor Irrtum zu bewahren, ist die Pflicht des Menschenerziehers, sondern den Irrenden zu leiten, ja ihn seinen Irrtum aus vollen Bechern auschlürfen zu lassen, das ist die Weisheit der Lehrer. Wer seinen Irrtum nur kostet, hält lange damit Haus, er freuet sich dessen als eines seltenen Glückes, aber wer ihn ganz erschöpft, der muß ihn kennenlernen, wenn er nicht wahnsinnig ist” (494ff).

[“The duty of a teacher (of humans) is not to preserve man from error, but to guide him in error, in fact to let him drink it in, in full draughts. That is the wisdom of teachers. For the man who only sips at error, can make do with it for quite a time, delighting in it as a rare pleasure. But a man who drinks it to the dregs, must recognize the error of his ways, unless he is mad” (EAB 302).]

In these words the speaker formulates a central tenet in the pedagogical program of the Tower. Most people get along in life, with more or less success, guided by flawed, perhaps dogmatic notions about the world and proper conduct. The true teacher of humanity (“Menschenerzieher”), however—who would raise humans worthy of the name—



teaches by **experience** rather than by precept. Specifically, such a master will arrange or encourage circumstances that suit precisely the ideal or desire of the pupil. The youth must then learn through negative experience that his prejudices about the world, even about himself, had been mistaken—assuming, of course, “[daß] er nicht wahnsinnig ist” [that “he is (not) mad”]. As a consequence of acting on one of the finest stages in Germany, Wilhelm learns that he was not born to be an actor: an occupation, “zu dem [er] nicht die geringste Anlage hatte!” [“to which (he) had no propensity”] (495; EAB 302, my insertion). In other words, the vocation to which he had seen himself destined was really just a semester at the School of Hard Knocks.<sup>12</sup> Now, in the *Theatralische Sendung* Wilhelm had not set his hopes on the stage; rather, the theater draws the inchoate genius imperceptibly into its service, implying that providence has made him its protégé. In the *Lehrjahre*, however, destiny is turned inward, reduced to a personal intention. But Wilhelm’s subjective vision does not correspond to objective reality. And so, without his knowledge, the Abbé enrolls him in Real World 101: Wilhelm learns his inaptitude for the social reality of the stage by living out his dream of acting.

### *Bildung Conceived as Self-Representation*

In Book One we detected a mystical, even religious fervor in Wilhelm’s devotion to the theater: it provided, that is, an avenue of escape from the pain and isolation of individuated existence. Wilhelm imagined a unity of audience and actors, a ritual sharing of the joy or sorrow of the hero: a oneness that he hoped to enact himself as Mariane’s partner on stage. Since Nietzsche, we may call this a manifestly **Dionysian** experience of drama.<sup>13</sup> It depends on identification with the hero, the sort of experience Wilhelm relates

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<sup>12</sup>The Abbé’s curriculum, then, is an inversion of the program set out in Rousseau’s *Emile*, where conditions were arranged that would shield the pupil from even the possibility that he might form erroneous (i.e. not sufficiently **primitive**) notions of reality. Instead, the Abbé arranges circumstances that will disabuse his young charge. And the bitterer the lesson, the more certain the correction.

<sup>13</sup>See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*. In: Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 1, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1999). Nietzsche’s aesthetic categories of the Dionysian and the Apollonian will prove to be of central importance to this study, as my title also suggests. Yet the numerous points of contact would seem remarkable, even despite Nietzsche’s early interest in Goethe,

to Mariane as he describes his childhood reading from *Jerusalem Delivered*: “Ich konnte nie die Worte aussprechen: “Allein das Lebensmaß Chlorindens ist nun voll, / Und ihre Stunde kommt, in der sie sterben soll”, daß mir nicht die Tränen in die Augen kamen, die reichlich flossen” (27). [“I could never, without tears coming to my eyes, utter the words: “But now the measure of Clorinda’s days is full / The hour draws near, the hour when she must die”” (EAB 12).] Wilhelm’s tears are the emblem of his identification with the tragic heroine. What is more, in the *Lehrjahre* such affective experience of art is not limited to drama. In Book Two sexual frustration leaves Wilhelm in vexed agitation (“[i]n der verdrießlichen Unruhe”); he finds peace at last only as he listens to the dark songs of the *Harfner*:

Wilhelm stand an dem Pfosten, seine Seele war tief gerührt, die Trauer des Unbekannten schloß sein beklommenes Herz auf; *er widerstand nicht dem Mitgefühl* und konnte und wollte die Tränen nicht zurückhalten, die des Alten herzliche Klage endlich auch aus seinen Augen hervorlockte. Alle Schmerzen, die seine Seele drückten, lösten sich zu gleicher Zeit auf, er überließ sich ihnen ganz [. . .] (137, my italics).

[Wilhelm stood by the door, deeply moved, his own constricted heart opened up by the immense grief of the stranger. *He was overcome by such fellow feeling* that he did not, could not, restrain the tears brought to his eyes by the old man’s bitter lamentation. The sorrows oppressing his heart all came out into the open. He abandoned himself completely to them (. . .) (EAB 78, my italics).]

Listening to the harpist, Wilhelm feels the same *eleos* (“Mitgefühl”, i.e. pity) to which Aristotle had ascribed in part the power of tragedy: an experience made possible only if the audience identified with the tragic fate of the hero. Wilhelm is receptive to the old man’s songs, because his own frustrated desire lets him sympathize with the voice behind their hopeless content.

Nonetheless, by the time Serlo offers him the title role in *Hamlet*, Wilhelm has an altered view of acting and the stage. Explaining to Werner his decision to become an actor, he writes: “mich selbst, ganz wie ich da bin, auszubilden, das war dunkel von Jugend auf mein Wunsch und meine Absicht” (290). [“Even as a youth I had the vague

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without the important intermediary figure, Friedrich Schiller. I consider the latter’s categories of beauty, a *schmelzende Schönheit* and an *anspannende Schönheit* (a “melting” and a “rigidifying” beauty), to be an anticipation of Nietzsche’s categories of tragedy. Nevertheless, Goethe and Schiller clearly preferred the ennobling character of what Nietzsche would loathe as the Apollonian drama of Euripides.

desire and intention to develop myself fully, myself as I am” (EAB 174).] Wilhelm finds nothing to attract him in Werner’s exclusive devotion to business and pleasure; for the latter had limited his “joyous credo” to trade, profits, and private pleasure, with no concern for anything outside the marketplace or the bridge table.<sup>14</sup> Wilhelm, on the other hand, is more concerned with his personal development than with economic activity, be it production, trade or consumption. What is more, he has determined that the “allgemeine” [“general”] or “personelle Ausbildung” [“personal education”] he desires—representing in one’s person, that is, a higher social ideal—as opposed to vocational training, is a privilege of the aristocracy and unavailable to the burgher (Ibid.; DWH). He reasons: “Wenn der Edelmann durch die Darstellung seiner Person alles gibt, so gibt der Bürger durch seine Persönlichkeit nichts und soll nichts geben. [. . .] Jener soll tun und wirken, dieser soll leisten und schaffen” (291). [“Whereas the nobleman offers his whole self in the representation of his person, the burgher offers nothing with his personality, nor is anything demanded of it. (. . .) The former shall act and influence, the latter is supposed to work and produce” (DWH).]

Dieter Borchmeyer has traced Wilhelm’s contrasting ideas of merit to the ancient Greek distinction of *praxis* and *poiesis*.<sup>15</sup> He observes that, while the former word (or its verb form *práttein*) signified to the Greeks activity that **was its own purpose**, *poieîn* referred to production, or labor directed toward an outcome. Borchmeyer describes a social climate in late eighteenth-century Germany still governed by the representative values of the *Adel*: whose measure of social significance placed a limited, even negative value on the skills or accomplishments of a successful burgher. Borchmeyer cites Goethe-contemporary Christian Garve as an example of the restive burgher who aspires to break through the marble ceiling and garner social recognition. Like Garve, Wilhelm complains

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<sup>14</sup>Werner: “Das ist also mein *lustiges Glaubensbekenntnis*: seine Geschäfte verrichtet, Geld geschafft, sich mit den Seinen lustig gemacht und um die übrige Welt sich nicht mehr bekümmert, als insofern man sie nutzen kann” (287, my italics). [“So here is my *joyous credo*: conduct your business, acquire money, enjoy yourself with your family, and don’t bother about anybody else unless you can use them to your advantage” (EAB 172ff., my italics).]

<sup>15</sup>See Borchmeyer, *Höfische Gesellschaft und französische Revolution bei Goethe: adliges und bürgerliches Wertesystem im Urteil der Weimarer Klassik* (Kronberg/Ts: Athenäum, 1977), pp. 9-12.

that his middle-class origins reduce his personal worth to specialized knowledge and skills, and to the bottom line of a balance sheet. Of middle-class merit Wilhelm complains, “[Der Bürger] soll einzelne Fähigkeiten ausbilden, um brauchbar zu werden, und es wird schon vorausgesetzt, daß in seinem Wesen keine Harmonie sei, noch sein dürfe, weil er, um sich auf *eine* Weise brauchbar zu machen, alles übrige vernachlässigen muß” (291). [“(The burgher shall) develop() some of his capabilities in order to be useful, but without it ever being assumed that there is or ever can be a harmonious interplay of qualities in him, because in order to make himself useful in one direction, he has to disregard everything else” (EAB 175).] What good is it, he wonders, to have material affairs under control, “wenn ich mit mir selber uneins bin?” [“if I am at odds with myself?”] (290; DWH). His fear, we see, is that vocational specialization will alienate him from himself.

Wilhelm’s anxiety, that a conventional vocation will jeopardize his harmonious identity, may be traced to the middle-class separation of public and private life, a distinction virtually absent in the representative world of the aristocracy.<sup>16</sup> He fears that, amid the hustle and bustle of providing goods or services, his self will get neglected. What use is it to him if he manufactures good iron, he asks Werner, if his inner self is “voller Schlacken” [“full of slag”]? (289-90; EAB 174). He worries that his personality will get lost somewhere between production and consumption; that it needs conscious cultivation if he is to realize the *Bildung* (literally, **formation**) of his self or personality. His theatrical ambition has been fueled at this point in the novel by his recent

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<sup>16</sup>Jürgen Habermas has analyzed “bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit” [“burgher publicity”] and has shown how it distinguished itself from the “repräsentative Öffentlichkeit” [“representative publicity”] of the nobility. According to Habermas, this was due in part to the fact that the public life of the burgher was constituted in its relation to a private life, notably absent in the society of the court, and the exclusion of the same from public interest only signified its characteristic intimacy and ideality in middle-class consciousness. See *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* [The Structural Transformation of Publicity: Investigations into a Category of Burgher Society], 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1999). See especially chapter 6, “Die bürgerliche Familie und die Institutionalisierung einer publikumsbezogenen Privatheit” [“The Burgher Family and the Institutionalization of a Public-Oriented Private Life”], pp. 107-16. Of the philosophical literature that comes under consideration in this study, Habermas’s analysis has unique relevance, as it includes a brief excursus treating *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* as a model of the competing visions of aristocratic vs. middle-class public life. See “Exkurs: Das Ende der repräsentativen Öffentlichkeit, illustriert am Beispiel Wilhelm Meister” [“Excursus: The End of Representative Publicity, Illustrated with the Example of Wilhelm Meister”], pp. 67-69.

sojourn in the residence and society of the Count, where he was fascinated with the representative forms of the court. That his high idea of the nobility persists—despite the vapid self-importance and often childish self-indulgence of the nobles themselves—is evidence of more than just his distorted view of reality. It testifies also to his high **idea of nobility** itself, of which the particular nobles he met were but flawed manifestations. In the letter to Werner, Wilhelm expresses his aversion to vocational specialization, his ineluctable fate given his burgher origin, describing it as a monotonous confinement of his self to what he can offer in the marketplace. Of aristocrat and burgher, he writes: “Jener darf und soll scheinen; dieser soll nur sein, und was er scheinen will, ist lächerlich oder abgeschmackt” (291). [“The former may and shall appear; the latter shall only be, and should he wish to make an appearance, it is absurd or in bad taste” (DWH).] To be or not to be, it turns out, is not the question. Wilhelm wants the chance to appear or **seem**. In other words, only where there are opportunities for role-playing in public does he anticipate the possibility of **self-cultivation** or *Bildung*.

The words “Person” and “Persönlichkeit”, as well as their derivative forms, appear several times in the letter to Werner. That is because **personality** names precisely what Wilhelm desires, the aim and result of *Bildung*; but he ascribes it exclusively to “öffentliche Person[en]” or public figures. Wilhelm understands personality not as an essential aspect of human psychology, but as a balance of mind and body—of taste, tact and bearing—unique to individuals in representative roles, whose appearance and conduct are what matters. The stage, he observes, is the only arena available to one whose birth excludes him from the court: “Auf den Brettern erscheint der gebildete Mensch so gut persönlich in seinem Glanz als in den oberen Klassen; Geist und Körper müssen bei jeder Bemühung gleichen Schritt gehen, und ich werde da so gut sein und scheinen können als irgend anderswo” (292). [“On the stage a cultured human being can appear in the full splendor of his person, just as in the upper classes of society. There, mind and body keep step in all one does, and there I will be able simultaneously to *be* and to *appear* better than anywhere else” (EAB 175).] Whereas the tradesman is measured only by the goods or services he provides, an actor can display his personal culture on stage; his personality is what matters.

Wilhelm's twofold attraction to aristocracy and theater, as well as his mistrust of productive, profitable activity, follow from his conception of personality—both the source and the manifestation of individual identity—as inseparable from **representation**. The linkage is not accidental. In both English and German the mediaeval word *person* referred originally to the characters in a play and the masks they wore, reflecting their origin in the Latin *persona*. By extension the word applied to the roles occupied by such individuals as performed prominent social functions, typically within the hierarchies of church and court. The similarities extended to the standard **costumes** and **customs** that were defined strictly for either theatrical or social *personae*. The semantic range of *person* extended to include the actual body of a living, breathing soul: a costume, too, after all, that would return in the end to ashes and dust. But by the eighteenth century the meaning of the word in English had undergone a shift that registered the presence and importance of a wealthy and influential middle class. Beyond naming a dramatic, literary or aristocratic character, *person* was more likely to signify the unique individual, and *personality* those physical and psychological traits that distinguished him or her from others. Still more striking is the fact that, in the legal jargon of an increasingly merchant and industrial economy, “person” referred to the private individual as distinct from the functions he performed. In a very literal way, the genteel significance of *person* and *personality* changed hands, just as so much of the property of aristocratic families was liquidated and added to the capital of the middle class. The person, then, as distinct from his vocation, was the **private** individual, who discovered and cultivated his unique personality in the intimacy of home and family.

While the meaning of the German words follows largely similar lines, the changes appear to have taken place more slowly than in English.<sup>17</sup> *Person* retained much longer in Germany than in England—even into the nineteenth century—its primary meaning of dramatic or social representation, accumulating only slowly, like layers of sediment, the

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<sup>17</sup>See entries for “person” and “persönlichkeit” in: *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm*, vol. 13, ed. Matthias von Lexer (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1984), pp. 1561-1562 and 1567-1568. Compare “person” and “personality” in: *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, vol. XI (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 596-598 and 602-603.

more private, individual significations. *Persönlichkeit*, on the other hand, appeared only rarely as a variation of *Person* until, in the eighteenth century, it denoted individual identity in a largely psychological sense. Whereas in England, then, *personality* follows close on the heels of *person*, from its feudal conception all the way to its baptism in the murky waters of middle-class subjectivity: in Germany we see a semantic fissure appear between *Person* and *Persönlichkeit*, as if they had been allocated by agreement to *Adel* and *Bürger* respectively. If *Person* still referred to the occupant of signifying roles, *Persönlichkeit* tended to point inward, to the inner self. Wilhelm, however, fails to notice the difference. Just as he associates personal refinement exclusively with the aristocracy, he is unaware that personality may be cultivated in anything other than a representative vocation.<sup>18</sup>

Although in his letter Wilhelm never explicitly attributes a personality to the aristocrat, he does so implicitly when he points with envy to the *Adel* and concludes that his own personality can be salvaged only in a profession that, like aristocracy, calls for representation or *Darstellung*.<sup>19</sup> Given Wilhelm's idea of personality, it is only natural that he stresses "Leibesübung" ["bodily practice"], such as fencing exercises for the stage, and acquires a heightened fashion consciousness manifested in his Prince Harry attire. The latter, gone to his head, is largely to blame for the group's disastrous run-in with highwaymen. But even if Wilhelm will still confuse *Schein* and *Sein* (appearance and

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<sup>18</sup>Borchmeyer likewise has noted the pre-modern sense of *Persönlichkeit* as Wilhelm uses it: "Was bedeuten nun diese Begriffe der Person und Persönlichkeit sowie der auf ihre universale Entfaltung zielenden Ausbildung? Der Zusammenhang des Briefs [an Werner] zeigt [. . .], daß Goethe noch nicht an den modernen verinnerlichten, sondern an den alteuropäischen Person-Begriff denkt, der gewissermaßen vom Theater aufs Leben übertragen worden ist" (10). ["Now what is meant here with the concepts of person and personality, as well as of an education that aims at their universal development? The context of the letter (to Werner) shows (. . .) that Goethe does not yet conceive it in the modern, internalized sense, but rather in terms of the old European concept of a person, that has been taken from theater and applied to life."] Borchmeyer apparently does not consider the possibility that, by attributing such an outdated idea of selfhood to his erring hero Wilhelm, Goethe might in fact be favoring implicitly a more modern, psychological grasp of personality, rather than sharing Wilhelm's representative understanding of the same.

<sup>19</sup>Such is the progress he reports to Werner: "Ich habe, seit ich Dich verlassen, durch Leibesübung viel gewonnen; ich habe viel von meiner gewöhnlichen Verlegenheit abgelegt und *stelle mich so ziemlich dar*" (291ff., my italics). ["Since I left you I have made progress exercising my person; I have overcome much of my usual awkwardness and *present myself very well*" (DWH, my italics).]

being) now and then, his costume is not without its effect on those who matter most: “Die Frauen beteuerten, diese Tracht lasse ihm vorzüglich gut” [“The women assured him that the costume suited him perfectly”] (210; EAB 124). The study of Corneille and neoclassicism had refined Wilhelm’s taste and had taught him how to make a good impression, especially on the women “in der großen Welt” [“in the world of the great”] of court life (212; EAB 124). Similarly, his introduction to “Shakespeares Welt” [“Shakespeare’s world”] prepares him to take on the “wirklich[e] Welt” [“the real world”], as he assures Jarno (192; EAB 113). Thanks to the aesthetic make-over, Wilhelm’s personality will qualify him for a short but otherwise legitimate acting career in the same theater company to which his beloved Mariane had been attached. It takes some prodding, but Wilhelm finally agrees to perform the lead role in *Hamlet*. He enjoys moderate success on stage. Yet personnel changes and an ungrateful public; troubling reminders of Mariane followed by the death of Aurelie; and not least of all, the fire that destroys the theater: amid the aftershocks of these upheavals, Wilhelm’s eyes are opened to the transient, make-believe nature of the theater. It is at this juncture, just when he is faced with the instability and emptiness of a life on stage, that Wilhelm will enter the world of Abbé and Lothario.<sup>20</sup>

#### Subjective Experience in “Confessions of a Beautiful Soul”

We would appear to have strayed far from our initial interest, the meaning of *Erfahrung* in the novel. But it proved necessary to investigate the reason why Wilhelm **lacks** experience and the objective understanding of the world it affords. We have discovered that he is captive to his myopic imagination; that his attraction to the theater lay first in his preference of imagination and its representations to the isolation he felt as an individual in the world. Later Wilhelm becomes aware that his real desire is for self-cultivation or *Bildung*, and that he finds acting on stage more conducive to personal development than production in the marketplace. Finally, in the Tower ceremony he

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<sup>20</sup>Wilhelm reflects on the **emptiness** of his experience with the wandering troupe of actors: “[W]enn ich an jene Zeit zurückdenke, die ich mit ihr zugebracht habe, so glaube ich in ein unendliches Leere zu sehen [. . .]” (422). [“(W)hen I think back on the time I spent with them, I seem to be peering into an unending void” (EAB 257).]



reaches two life-altering conclusions: that *Bildung* is not to be found on stage; and that Felix is his son. The two are by no means unrelated. Commencement now behind him, Wilhelm enters the empirical world: a world he sees for the first time, as it were, through the eyes of his son:

Felix war neu in der freien und herrlichen Welt, und sein Vater nicht viel bekannter mit den Gegenständen, nach denen der Kleine wiederholt und unermüdet fragte. [. . .] *Wilhelm sah die Natur durch ein neues Organ*, und die Neugierde, die Wißbegierde des Kindes ließen ihn erst fühlen, welch ein schwaches Interesse er an den Dingen außer sich genommen hatte, wie wenig er kannte und wußte (498, my italics).

[Felix was a newcomer in this world of freedom and beauty, and his father was not much better acquainted with the things that the boy repeatedly and tirelessly asked about. (. . .) *Wilhelm was observing nature through a new organ*, and the child's curiosity and desire to learn made him aware how feeble his interest had been in the things outside himself and how little he knew, how few things he was familiar with (EAB 305, my italics).]

If Wilhelm's language had assumed in his youth the contours of poetry, words have for Felix a more fundamental purpose: naming the objects he discovers in nature. Wilhelm, who in the past had been at no loss for words, cannot answer all of his son's questions about what the things he sees are called. He lacks experience of the real world; but now he is getting an object lesson in objective living, and it is his new responsibility as a father that fuels his desire to learn: "An diesem Tage, dem vergnügtesten seines Lebens, schien auch seine eigne Bildung erst anzufangen; er fühlte die Notwendigkeit, sich zu belehren, indem er zu lehren aufgefordert ward" (Ibid.). ["On this day, the happiest of his entire life, his own education seemed also to be beginning anew (*sic.*): he felt the need to inform himself, while being required to inform another" (Ibid.).]<sup>21</sup>

Book Seven ended with the words of the Abbé to Wilhelm: "Heil dir, junger Mann! deine Lehrjahre sind vorüber; die Natur hat dich losgesprochen" (497). ["Hail to you, young man. Your apprenticeship is completed, Nature has given you your freedom" (EAB 304).] Wilhelm's apprenticeship has ended, he is told; but in what sense? He

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<sup>21</sup>In this instance my parenthetical insertion refers not to misspelling or bad grammar, but to the fact that the word "anew", present in Blackall's translation, does not have its equivalent in the original. Blackall fails to recognize that, from the epistemological standpoint of Goethe's novel, Wilhelm's education in the nature of reality really is beginning for the first time rather than "anew".

concludes that he has just begun to learn. As for the Abbé's solemn declaration, it seems to imply nothing more than that fathering a child means school is over. But what school? What has been the substance of Wilhelm Meister's *Lehrjahre*? Our analysis would appear to have led us right into one of the thorniest problems that has occupied scholarship of the *Lehrjahre*. If nineteenth-century readers simply assumed that Wilhelm's adventures result in the harmonious development of his personality, scholarship of the novel in the twentieth century proved more skeptical—or, in the case of the faithful, more frustrated—about the status of the novel as a Bildungsroman. A few scholars, notably Karl Schlechta and Stefan Blessin, have finally broken down Wilhelm's story into separate spheres or worlds, connected to one another by little more than chronology or concept, while sharing no *mythos* that would be centered in the experience of the hero.<sup>22</sup> Be that as it may, our interest in the meaning of *Erfahrung* in the novel provides another thread of continuity between the spheres. We recall that Wilhelm, while lacking experience of *Gegenstände* (objects) in the world, could at least lay claim to experiences of the heart and mind. These may seem of little importance in the eyes of Jarno or Lothario: paragons of restless, manly activity; but they are not without consequence in the course of Wilhelm's own development. The Abbé had, after all, assured him that all episodes of one's life contribute imperceptibly to one's *Bildung* (422). The pedagogue would even declare the advantage of Wilhelm's erring education: “Kein glücklicheres Schicksal kann einem Menschen werden” (495). [“No man could have a happier fate” (EAB 303).] Did he say *Schicksal*?! The same fate that he earlier had dismissed?

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<sup>22</sup>Blessin describes the structure of the *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* thus: “Der erste Meisterroman ist seiner Entstehung und inneren Logik nach aus drei Romanen gebildet: der Mariane-Handlung, der *Theatralischen Sendung* und den *Lehrjahren*”(89). [“In terms of the production and inner logic of the first *Meister* novel, it is comprised of three novels: the Mariane-story, the *Theatric Mission* and the *Apprentice Years*.] Regarding the content of Book One, the Mariane-romance, he concludes, “[Es] ist ein selbständiges Buch und aus mehreren Gründen nicht völlig in den Roman integriert” [“(It) is a separate book and for several reasons not fully integrated into the novel”] (Ibid.). Blessin finally traces the unity of the novel to the world it presents—rather more like a universe, really, that encompasses the particular worlds of the characters: “Wir sehen darin die eigentliche Leistung der *Lehrjahre*, die eine Welt aus lauter Welten sind” (207). [“We recognize the actual achievement of the *Lehrjahre*, that is a world made up of separate worlds.”] Compare also the first and lengthiest part of Schlechta's study, *Goethes Wilhelm Meister* (Frankfurt a/M: Klostermann, 1953), titled “Die Sphären”, which dissects the two *Wilhelm Meister* novels into spheres, or loosely related clusters of plot and meaning. We will see, however, that the separate story of Mariane is indeed woven carefully into the thematic matrix of Goethe's novel.

### *Religious Experience as Awakening of Subjectivity*

Although Wilhelm lacks experience of the world, essential for mature activity, his experiences with Mariane, among the nobility, and in the theater do in fact contribute to his *Bildung*. For a standard by which we might assess their importance, we turn to the “Bekenntnisse einer schönen Seele” [“Confessions of a Beautiful Soul”] of Book Six. What makes the Confessions relevant to the present study is the fact that *Erfahrung* and *erfahren* appear more often there than in any other book of the novel. That may come as a surprise, in view of the formative illnesses of the *Stiftsdame* [canoness], that insulate and finally isolate her from the objective and social worlds; and given her exclusive loyalty to her “Invisible Friend”, God (370; EAB 224). Nonetheless, for all her delight in fairy tale princes in childhood, or her devotion to the edifying sensibility (“die erquickenden innerlichen Empfindungen”) of her adult piety (378): her life story attests again and again to **the empirical basis of her faith.**<sup>23</sup>

“Mit dem Anfange des achten Jahres,” she writes, “bekam ich einen Blutsturz, und in dem Augenblick war meine Seele ganz Empfindung und Gedächtnis” (358). [“Then, when I had just turned eight, I had a hemorrhage, and from that moment I was all feeling and memory” (EAB 217).] In a very real sense, the anniversary of her hemorrhage is her real birthday, since she remembers nothing of her life before that crisis. Yet in spite of the heightened sensibility caused by her illness, she is anything but delicate or withdrawn. We learn that her father entertained her “mit Gegenständen der Natur” [“with objects of nature”], including the animals he had killed while hunting and specimens from the human anatomy (Ibid.; *ibid.*). And lest we mistake her for a faint-hearted invalid, she describes the relish with which she butchered a chicken or a young pig. Indeed, that she pairs her characteristic sensitivity with memory only underscores the empirical openness of the young patient to her environment, limited as it may be.<sup>24</sup> She may recall that her mother

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<sup>23</sup>Blessin: “[Die Schöne Seele] macht nicht nur eine Karriere zur Stiftsdame—*Gott wird ihr zur lebendigen Erfahrung*. Es ist, als suchte Goethe gerade in der Schönen Seele den natürlichen Grund aller Religion.” [“(The beautiful soul) does not just make her career as a canoness—*God becomes her lived experience*. It is as if Goethe investigated in the beautiful soul the natural causes of all religion.”] See *Goethes Romane: Aufbruch in die Moderne*, p. 206 (my italics).

<sup>24</sup>Friedrich Strack likewise identifies “‘Empfindung’ und ‘Gedächtnis’” [“‘sensation’ and ‘memory’”] as “‘Seelenkräfte’” [“forces of the psyche/soul”], that for Pietism opened the way “zu einer reinen Innerlichkeit” [“to a pure inwardness”]. See by the same, “Selbst-Erfahrung oder

told her stories from the Bible, but she retains in her memory a far more detailed record of the objects that her father brought to her from his naturalist *Kabinett*. The world of her childhood is not a fog of faith or feeling, but the careful articulation and retention of what she experiences; her illness narrows the scope of her world, but it amplifies rather than impairs her receptivity to objective phenomena.

“[U]nd damit doch auch der Fürst der Welt eine Stimme in dieser Versammlung behielte, erzählte mir die Tante Liebesgeschichten und Feenmärchen.” [“And so that the Prince of this World should not go neglected in this company, my aunt told me love tales and fairy stories”] (Ibid., *ibid*). In addition to religion and natural science, the tales of her aunt represent the last course of her primary trivium. She was fascinated with their romantic content, certainly; but they likewise formed and exercised her imagination. Natalie’s aunt recounts how she invented her own adventures with lambs, virtuous princes and even angels. One fantasy, involving a diminutive angel who tries to win her heart, assumes such detail in her mind: “daß meine Einbildungskraft sein Bild fast bis zur Erscheinung erhöhte” (359) [“that my imagination almost raised my mind’s image of him to an appearance” (DWH).] This girlish fantasy is characteristic of how she will experience love. Although she does recover her health for the most part, the illness, she writes, had purified her heart, so that “nichts Wildes” [“nothing wild”] was left to her childhood (Ibid.; EAB 218). This certainly applies to love, given her exclusive attraction to males who have been tamed by either illness or disgrace. Indeed, her perception of erotic love is of something threatening, even sinister; while her own Cupid has no arrow, so to speak. A favorite tale is of an enchanted prince whose alter ego is . . . a sheep—not a phallic unicorn or a slimy toad. The stories she recounts from her childhood are downright antiseptic, so entirely free of the uncanny that they bear more resemblance to Bennett’s *Book of Virtues* than to anything of the Brothers Grimm. They are edifying, even comforting, but in no sense **fascinating**—a necessary condition of desire.

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Selbst-Entsagung? Goethes Deutung und Kritik des Pietismus in ‘Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahren’” [“Experience of Self or Self-Denial? Goethes Interpretation and Critique of Pietism in ‘Wilhelm Meister’s Apprentice Years’”]. In: *Verlorene Klassik? Ein Symposium*, ed. Wolfgang Wittkowski (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1986), pp. 52-73.

It is therefore characteristic that, when two brothers compete for her affection, she favors the one who falls ill. Nor does Narziss, a later suitor, become her beau until he has lain bleeding in her arms. If in the world of chivalry a lady's **pity** presaged her surrender to his erotic advances—to heal him of his suffering *qua* passion—no man can evoke the pity of the *schöne Seele* until he has surrendered his vigor, or in other words his phallus: the erotic emblem of his commanding manhood. In fact, the succession of castrated men in the Confessions, beginning with her own son-less father, are so many milestones on her journey inward, her retreat from the outside world into the comforting arms of her “Invisible Friend” and Confidante. Even if the ambitious Narziss abandons his ghostly bride for the sake of worldly connections and career, he is only the fugitive exception in a narrative where, just like the Count of Book Three, more than one blue-blood is spirited away from his decaying caste in a conversion from life to death. It is understandable, then, that Barbara Becker-Cantarino has taken exception to Goethe's redaction of Susanna von Klettenberg's memoirs. While the religious life of the latter led to emancipation, wide travels and countless friendships, the independence of Goethe's *schöne Seele* progressively isolates her from every kind of social interaction and personal intimacy.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Becker-Cantarino: “Diese Abwesenheit von anderen Frauen in der Fiktionalisierung der pietistischen Frauenbiographie ist ein eklatanter Unterschied zu dem historischen Vorbild—Susanna von Klettenberg hatte einen geselligen Kreis von Freundinnen, darunter waren enge Vertraute wie Goethes Mutter. Sie reiste und führte ein abwechslungsreiches, mit Korrespondenzen und vielerlei Begegnungen angefülltes Leben. Dagegen ist die Fiktion der ‘Bekenntnisse’ stark reduziert: es zeichnen Krankheit, Isolierung und Eigenwilligkeit die ‘schöne Seele’ von Anfang an” (79). [“This separation from other women in the fictional account of a Pietist woman's biography stands in sharp contrast to its historical model—Susanna von Klettenberg had a lively social circle of woman friends, among them close confidantes such as Goethe's mother. She travelled and led an eventful life filled with correspondence and a variety of new acquaintances. The fictional ‘Confessions’, on the other hand, is extremely limited: illness, isolation and willfulness distinguish the ‘Beautiful Soul’ from start to finish.”] I agree with all but the last three words. There are moments in her life when the *schöne Seele* seems poised to leap into the social and erotic currents of life. In fact, there is nothing of the *Stiftsdame* in the bed-ridden but otherwise balanced child. Nevertheless, crucial accidents—either illness or disappointment—intervene each time to strengthen her attachment to “die erquickenden innerlichen Empfindungen” [“the edifying inner sensations”] (378). Hannelore Schläffer, who is likewise disturbed by her withdrawal from society, finally applies to the *schöne Seele* herself the name by which she had called her fiancée: “Narzißisch wie die ‘schöne Seele’ ist, ohne Kinder und ehelos, hat ihre mühsam erarbeitete Sittlichkeit keine Richtung auf die Außenwelt. Ihre Moral korrespondiert der Kunst des Malers am Lago Maggiore, der nicht für andere, sondern zum Selbstgenuß singt.” [“Narcissistic as the ‘Beautiful Soul’ is, having no children and unmarried, the morality for which she worked so hard has no connection to the outside world. It corresponds to the art of the painter on Lago Maggiore, who sings not for others, but for his own pleasure.”] See by the same, *Wilhelm Meister: Das Ende der Kunst und die Wiederkehr des Mythos* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1980), pp. 78-79.

It is all the more puzzling, then, when the author of the *Confessions* insists repeatedly that her trust in God is founded on **experience**. The first few times that the words *Erfahrung* and *erfahren* appear in Book Six, they refer to what the narrator learns from her life in society or in other words, from lived experience. Eventually, though, even the tender sensations (*Empfindungen*) that she enjoys whenever she retreats from society into prayer and reflection come to be equated with experience—her experience of God—because she learns by experience how to replicate them. She even conducts an alchemical experiment, as it were, to determine the origin of the cherished sensations. Retreat and reflection are conducive to spiritual feelings, she discovers; society and “sinnlich[e] Munterkeit” [“robust sensuality”] are not (364; DWH). She concludes:

Je sanfter diese Erfahrungen waren, desto öfter suchte ich sie zu erneuern, und ich suchte immer da den Trost, wo ich ihn so oft gefunden hatte; allein ich fand ihn nicht immer [. . .]. Ich spürte der Sache eifrig nach und bemerkte deutlich, daß alles von der Beschaffenheit meiner Seele abhing; wenn die nicht ganz in der geradesten Richtung zu Gott gekehrt war, so blieb ich kalt. (376ff.)

[My experiences in this quarter were so soothing that I returned there ever more often, always seeking the consolation that I had found before. But I did not find it always. (. . .) I asked myself, seeking the reason and coming to the conclusion that it all depended on the state of my own soul: if it were not entirely directed straight toward God, I remained unwarmed (. . .) (EAB 229).]

Her single-minded quest for the god of her heart lead her first to give up dancing and more frivolous social intercourse, and then to break off her engagement to Narziss; later that same devotion to her personal faith will interrupt her communion with fellow believers and finally separate her even from her family and relations.

### *Innerness and Aesthetic Self-Awareness*

This rather pessimistic reading of Book Six follows the social logic of Becker-Cantarino’s contrast of the *schöne Seele* with her historical model, the gregarious Pietist von Klettenberg. The analysis of Friedrich Strack could scarcely reach a more different conclusion.<sup>26</sup> While he diagnoses in the religious convictions of the *schöne Seele* “eine

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<sup>26</sup>See Strack, “Selbst-Erfahrung oder Selbst-Entsagung? Goethes Deutung und Kritik des Pietismus in ‘Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre’”, in: *Verlorene Klassik? Ein Symposium*, ed. Wolfgang

Verwirrung oder Fehlentwicklung der menschlichen Natur” [“a confusion or misdirection of human nature”], Strack insists that for the narrator of the Confessions, Pietism is but another, albeit important stage in the unfolding of her self-awareness (56). He traces through certain episodes in her sexual development the parallel formation of her self-awareness, which finds its final and fullest expression in her admittedly (from a Christian standpoint) troubling profession of faith: “der Körper wird wie ein Kleid zerreißen, aber Ich, das wohlbekannte Ich, Ich bin” (415). [“the body will be rent like a garment, but I, the well-known I, I am” (EAB 253).] Measured by an orthodox theological standard, her total freedom from personal guilt or sin is heresy, and her Jehovan pronouncement blasphemy. But in the novel by Goethe, who had long since left Christian faith and moral scruples behind him, the religious experience of the *schöne Seele* merges with the humanist religion of the *Oheim* and his Abbé, who by the time she pens the Confessions had perhaps exercised more influence on her than she herself realizes. After all, it is only after the *Stiftsdame* has herself broken ranks with the Pietists that she is introduced into the New Eden of the *Oheim*—including a new Adam and Eve!—and to its core values of human life, worth and beauty. Even if she is made to feel the inferiority of her Pietist jargon, she and the *Oheim* will nonetheless find common ground in their respective faiths; and she will be satisfied to see a resemblance to herself in Goethe’s modern saint, Natalie.

Strack traces the multiple intersections at which the religion of the aunt merges with the *Weltfrömmigkeit* (worldly piety) of the *Oheim* to a shared faith “in [ein]er schönen Selbstgewißheit” [“in a beautiful certainty of self”], or in what I would term an **aesthetic self-consciousness**. For that is the ultimate certainty of the decidedly unorthodox Pietist (Strack: “[Goethes] *christlich sein sollend[e]* Stiftsdame”, or “*supposedly Christian* canoness”), who knows no fall from grace, and who calls her god “Ich” (Strack 66, my italics). “Damit trifft [Goethe] zwar nicht das pietistische Selbstverständnis, aber doch die Zukunftsperspektive, die der Pietismus durch seine Innerlichkeitserfahrung öffnet. Der Anfang einer neuen—*weltlichen*—Religiosität auf der Grundlage des ästhetisch-sittlichen Selbstbewußtseins zeichnet sich ab” (Ibid.).

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Wittkowski (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1986), pp. 52-73. See also the ensuing discussion, pp. 74-78.

[(Goethe's) portrayal reflects not how Pietism understood itself, so much as the progressive perspective opened up by its experience of inwardness. The commencement of a new—*worldly*—religion distinguishes itself on the basis of an aesthetic-moral self-awareness.”] To the aunt’s disappointment, the patriarchal *Oheim* and his Abbé will strictly limit her contact with her nieces and nephews. It is not just because they are conducting a grand human experiment—the generation of a new race of godlike humans in an aesthetic paradise—which, like all experiments, requires strict control of the environment.<sup>27</sup> Rather, her otherworldly orientation presents a danger to their humanistic, life-affirming creed. Even her memoirs will be administered, like a sedative, to hysterical women such as Aurelie, rather than find their way with the other *Lehrbriefe* into the pedagogical archive of the Tower. Lovesickness in the novel, as all other forms of longing, is a derailment of the self from its natural course through self-awareness and individuation to active autonomy in the world.

Due first to poor health and later to conviction, the *schöne Seele* never advances so far. She never becomes a productive member of society. Even acts of charity were performed out of duty, as a way of “buying [her]self off” (418; EAB 254)—a rare exception, perhaps, to her otherwise characteristic, concluding assertion: “Ich erinnere mich kaum eines Gebotes, nichts erscheint mir in Gestalt eines Gesetzes, es ist ein Trieb, der mich leitet und mich immer recht führet” (420). [“I can scarcely remember any commandment, nothing compels me in the form of law; I am guided by an instinct that always leads me right” (DWH).] Her lifelong voyage of discovery to harmonious and beautiful self-awareness constitutes another’s *Lehrjahre* within *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. It too, then, is a story of *Bildung* in the form of a confession, just as she observes of her first childhood romance with a sickly boy: “soviel trug er zur *Bildung meines Herzens* bei” (362). [“it influenced greatly the *development of my emotional life*”

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<sup>27</sup>Schiller, in a letter to Goethe, describes “Meisters Lehrjahre”, the novel itself, that is, as “eine Art Experiment” [“a kind of experiment”], rather than “[e]ine bloß blinde Wirkung der Natur” [“just a blind force of nature”]. His matter of fact observation goes on to suggest that “die Mächte des Turms” [“the powers of the Tower”] are the agency or “verborgen wirkender höherer Verstand” [“hidden but active, higher understanding”] that introduces the experimental character into what otherwise would be an entirely natural course of development. See letter of July 8, 1796 (HA VII, 640).



(heart)” (EAB 220, my italics and insertion).] In this we hear an echo of the “Erfahrungen des Herzens und Geistes” [“experiences of heart and mind”] that had crowded out all memory of people or places met in the course of Wilhelm’s sentimental journey (266; EAB 159). We are not all that surprised, then, when Wilhelm later makes the otherwise hyperbolic claim regarding the Confessions, that he had read them “mit der größten Teilnahme und nicht ohne Wirkung auf [s]ein ganzes Leben” (518). [“with sympathetic understanding and it has had a great effect on the course of my (his) life” (EAB 317, my insertion).] Does he perhaps see in her sometimes erring pilgrimage, through sectarian liturgy and schism to the shining altar of the god within, a parallel to—perhaps even an apology for—his own disappointed faith in destiny and his mistaken hope for *Bildung* as an actor? That is almost certainly the case.

And Strack names precisely the sort of experience that they also have in common, when he points to the “Innerlichkeitserfahrung” [“experience of inwardness”] central to Pietist conversion and personal renewal (66). Both Wilhelm and the *schöne Seele* turn away from the social mainstream, because its encroaching homogeneity contradicts the guidance of a more **immediate**, personal authority that is attributed to either destiny or God, but whose voice is perceived within, typically in the heart, where it is registered by sensation (*Empfindung*). While they readily admit (Wilhelm to Mariane and the aunt to her reader) the role of imagination in their childhood fantasies, they also share the conviction that their lives are directed by another agency that is distinct from (if not unrelated to) their own wishes and dreams, and that they know by experience. Be that as it may, neither of them find that their devotion calls for self-denial or even self-control. The aunt describes it as “ein Trieb, der mich leitet” [“an instinct that leads me”] (420; DWH); Wilhelm likewise cites more than once in his letter to Werner an inner “Trieb” or instinct as one agency that advocates his theatric career. The other is a supposed “Fähigkeit” or talent for acting, for which, he later will conclude, he had “nicht die geringste Anlage” [“no propensity”] (495; EAB 302). And what of the *Trieb*? And why, he will wonder, had the Tower intervened to promote, rather than to prevent, that mistaken instinct?

We have already answered the last question. Rather than tell their charges that they are wrong, the Abbé and his shadow faculty facilitate the realization of their pupils wishes, so that the latter might learn from experience their error, even drink it to the bitter dregs (495).<sup>28</sup> Wilhelm learns more from Natalie, a graduate of the Tower school, about the pedagogical theory of the Abbé, who, rather than the youthful Wilhelm—in an unromantic reversal of Wordsworth—plays “Nature’s Priest” in the novel.<sup>29</sup> She recalls his fundamental precepts, “daß die Erziehung sich nur an die Neigung anschließen müsse” [“that all education should build on inclination”]; and that man was meant to be active: “das Erste und Letzte am Menschen sei Tätigkeit, und man könne nichts tun, ohne die Anlage dazu zu haben, ohne den Instinkt, der uns dazu treibe” (520). [“the most important thing (for a human) is to be active, but one cannot engage in any activity without the necessary predisposition or the instinct impelling us in that direction” (EAB 319).] She adds that the Abbé was critical of ambiguity and confusion that prevailed in childhood education: “sie erregt Wünsche, statt Triebe zu beleben, und anstatt den wirklichen Anlagen aufzuhelfen, richtet sie das Streben nach Gegenständen, die so oft mit der Natur, die sich nach ihnen bemüht, nicht übereinstimmen” (Ibid.). [“it arouses desires rather than active impulses, and instead of helping to develop predispositions, it directs our activity toward objects, which are often out of line with the minds that are so taken up with them” (Ibid.).]

“Trieb” or instinct here is contrasted with desire, which can obscure or be mistaken for an individual’s real capacities and potential. Paired with its verb form *treiben*, *Trieb* suggests that authentic activity is determined less by its results than by the instinct or drive that motivates it. The necessary assumption, of course, is that a child will be inclined **by**

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<sup>28</sup>Some time after his initiation ceremony, when Wilhelm reflects on the Abbé’s intervention in his own life, he comments to Natalie on the peculiar way that “dieser merkwürdige Mann” [“that remarkable man”] exercised influence: “und mich, wo nicht geleitet, doch wenigstens eine Zeitlang in meinen Irrtümern gestärkt hat” (521). [“and if he has not precisely guided me according to his fashion, he has at least *encouraged me* for a time *in my mistakes*” (EAB 319, my italics).]

<sup>29</sup>“The Youth, who daily farther from the east / Must travel, still is Nature’s Priest”. See William Wordsworth, “Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood”, in: *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, vol. IV (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), pp. 279-85 (l. 72-73).

**nature** to the right activity or vocation, because *talent* decides the orientation that directs the labor, while *Trieb* supplies the engine that drives it. This tidy equation worked perfectly, unless “Wünsche” (i.e. desire) intruded as the most irrational of variables.<sup>30</sup> The novel has no shortage of characters whose desire overrides instinct to the point of self-destruction; Mariane, Aurelie, the *Harfner* (harpist) and Mignon all die more or less literally of a broken heart (Mignon clutches her heart as she falls dead). Book Eight opens with Wilhelm himself staring into the abyss of a senseless life, in which disappointed desire or “Herz” [heart] finds its only comfort in Felix, without whom he foresees the loss of “Verstand und Vernunft” [“reason and sense”], “Sorgfalt und Vorsicht” [“care and caution”], even his “Trieb zur Erhaltung” [“impulse of preservation”], implying a fate like those of his unfortunate friends (509; EAB 312). In the end, the apparently fatal poisoning of Felix is the catalyst that binds Wilhelm to his heart’s real object, Natalie, and preserves our hero for a sequel.

Nevertheless, the accidents that lead to a happy rather than tragic end to Wilhelm’s story only obscure an outcome that is not itself wholly accidental. Even if he is ashamed at one point that he has nothing to show for in the way of “zweckmäßige Tätigkeit” [“active purpose”], the central value of the Tower, he does have experience all the same (505; EAB 309). His “Erfahrungen des Herzens und Geistes”—what Strack calls *Innerlichkeits-erfahrung*—survey and clear a space within consciousness, where a modern species of self-awareness may take up residence.<sup>31</sup> We have bandied about some with the epistemological terms object (or *Gegenstand*) and objective to name the sort of experience

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<sup>30</sup>The Abbé’s distinction between wishes and instinct, as essential as it is to his educational approach, is blurred even in the novel itself. None other than the Faustian *Oheim* complains, ““Meine Schuld ist es nicht, [. . .] wenn ich meine Triebe und meine Vernunft nicht völlig habe in Einstimmung bringen können”” (539). [““It is not my fault, (. . .) if I have not completely been able to harmonize my mind with my instincts”” (EAB 330).] Whether he blames an irrational upbringing or an **irrational nature** is unspecified.

<sup>31</sup>Carolyn Steedman traces the origin of the distinctly modern idea of what she calls “interiority”—an English equivalent to the German *Innerlichkeit*—to the late eighteenth century. See her important study, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930* (London: Virago Press, 1995). Steedman points specifically to childhood, and to its retention in the sub-conscious, as the source of (as well as the necessary condition for) interiority. She even presents *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* as the representative text for this understanding of the self. Nevertheless, the character of interest to her is not Wilhelm or the *schöne Seele*, but Mignon. We will have reason in Chapter Three of this study to devote further consideration to Steedman’s book, both its valuable insights and its post-structuralist limitations.

that Wilhelm lacks even into Book Eight. This would seem to suggest that those experiences that he has enjoyed, experiences of the heart and mind, might be ascribed to the **subjective** side of the cognitive equation. While the few instances of the word *Subjekt* in the novel offer no guidance in this regard, the correspondence of Goethe and his Kantian reader, Schiller, does not leave us empty-handed. Specifically it is a commentary made by Goethe on his writing of the Confessions that is of interest to us. He remarks that the entirety of what he calls the religious book of his novel is founded “auf der zartesten Verwechslung des Subjektiven und Objektiven” [“on the most delicate confusion of the subjective and the objective”], implying that what she perceives as the experience of her invisible Friend—an Other sensed by the soul—is in reality the experience of something within, and part of, her self.<sup>32</sup> Goethe goes on to say that the content of the Confessions refers to what both precedes and follows that book in the novel. This key position and function of Book Six might be supposed to open the way for Wilhelm into the Tower, since the book that follows begins with Wilhelm’s journey to the family of the *schöne Seele* and closes with his gothic initiation into its secret society.

But in fact, it is not until Book Eight that any reference is made to the saintly old maid or to her Confessions; and Wilhelm has entered the home, not of Lothario and his spiritual father, the Abbé, but of the *Oheim* and his priestly progeny, Natalie. Wilhelm smells the sacral air of the house almost as soon as he steps through the doorway. When he finds his *Amazonen* in the Palladian mansion, he exclaims, “Es ist kein Haus, es ist ein Tempel, und Sie sind die würdige Priesterin” (519). [“it isn’t a house, it’s a temple, and you are a noble priestess” (EAB 318).] Soon thereafter he mistakes a portrait of the *schöne Seele* for one of her niece, whereupon he confesses the influence of the aunt’s Confessions “auf [s]ein ganzes Leben” [“on (his) whole life”] (518; DWH). Even if one adjusts for his habitual enthusiasm, or for the lover’s wish to strike a sympathetic

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<sup>32</sup>Goethe to Schiller: “Ich bekam Lust, das religiöse Buch meines Romans auszuarbeiten; und da das Ganze auf den edelsten Täuschungen und auf der zartesten Verwechslung des Subjektiven und Objektiven beruht, so gehörte mehr Stimmung und Sammlung dazu als vielleicht zu einem andern Teile.” [“I had the desire to expand on the religious book of my novel; and since the whole of it is founded on the most delicate confusion of the subjective and objective, it required the right mood and more concentration than perhaps any other part.”] See the letter of March 18, 1795 (HA VII, 624).

chord, the ensuing conversation brackets off the pair at a respectful, but also **skeptical** distance from the Tower, as they provide the reader with Cliff's Notes to the Confessions. What struck most him, Wilhelm says, was “die Reinlichkeit des Daseins, [. . .] diese Selbständigkeit ihrer Natur und die Unmöglichkeit, etwas in sich aufzunehmen, was mit der edlen, liebevollen Stimmung nicht harmonisch war” (Ibid.). [“the purity of her life (. . .), her independent spirit and her inability to make anything part of herself which did not conform to her noble loving nature” (EAB 317).] The content of her faith does not even come up. It is the formal consistency of her life that impresses him, her natural resistance to any compromise of her “precious” self-identity. Wilhelm's choice of the word “liebevoll” [loving] seems strange, given her habit of distancing herself from others: a trait that Wilhelm implies and that Becker-Cantarino underscores. In the immediate context, however, Wilhelm certainly means not so much loving as **lovely**; it is what Strack characterizes as “ein[e] schön[e] Selbstgewissheit” [“a beautiful certainty of self”]. Natalie's apologist eulogy that follows is directed at those (men of the Tower) who are less inclined to admire “eine schöne Natur[, die] sich allzu zart, allzu gewissenhaft bildet, ja, wenn man will, sich überbildet” (518). [“a lovely nature (that) develops rather too sensitively, too contentiously, well, one might say, over-cultivated” (DWH).]

In this passage Natalie mentions *Bildung* and its variant forms no fewer than four times in quick succession. This confirms our impression that Book Six stands as a *Bildung*-narrative in miniature at an important juncture in the novel. What is more, the characterization of the Confessions as a tale of excessive self-cultivation or *Bildung* also sheds light on Wilhelm Meister's own Bildungsroman. We remember that the aunt's early encounter of her “Invisible Friend”, a comfort in times of illness or distress, leads her into communion with other believers, whose experience of God resembles her own. Later, differences and dissension separate her from the Pietists, and she returns to spiritual solitude, at which point she is introduced to the aesthetic/humanistic values of the *Oheim*. The parallels to Wilhelm's story are unmistakable. He too turns to the theater as a sanctuary from pubescent pain and isolation; for his own pain lets him identify with the troubled, sometimes tragic hero. His ensuing adventures among the nobility and actors introduce his imagination to the rigors of custom and criticism. His admiration, that is, for

the representative forms of the *Adel* gradually assumes the character of a critique, as he is forced to recognize that the habits and vanities of the court are often at odds with the aesthetic demands of art. This awareness leads him to the stage, where he hopes to realize his personality in a vocation that calls for representation. After Wilhelm becomes caught in the web of selfish interests and intrigues that prevail among actors and audience, he encounters the model humans (“treffliche Menschen”) of the Tower (500).

The introduction to aesthetic humanism takes place too late for the elderly canoness to have any influence on her personal development; she already had assumed her final form, as it were, as which she would be remembered by all who knew her. Nonetheless, the encounter did come in time to influence how she perceived her subjective experience. Her definitive “Ich bin” (“I am”) signifies how far she had come (strayed?) from faith in God as transcendent Other to an ultimate and abiding confidence in her self. Wilhelm, on the other hand, is still young, but he too insists in his letter to Werner that he has progressed personally. Even if he defines it in purely representative terms—a public role similar to those that the *schöne Seele* preferred to avoid—he can assert with satisfaction: ““ich habe viel von meiner gewöhnlichen Verlegenheit abgelegt und stelle mich so ziemlich dar”” (291ff.). [“I have overcome much of my usual awkwardness and present myself very well”” (DWH).] Again, this confidence in his ability to represent himself well stands in stark contrast to the ontic certitude of the *schöne Seele*—but it is a **form** of self-assurance all the same.<sup>33</sup> And the path through the theater, rather than ever inward, has an advantage, due precisely to its openness to an admiring public and to a larger social environment: it is an openness mirrored in Shakespeare’s dramas, with their

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<sup>33</sup>Strack’s brief and passing comparison of the Confessions to Wilhelm’s theatrical detour is nevertheless insightful: “Wie das bürgerliche Theater erweist sich das religiöse als ein notwendiger aber heilsamer Irrtum auf dem Weg zu einer edlen Humanität, die des metaphysischen Scheins nicht mehr bedarf” (68). [“Like the middle-class theater, religion proves to be a necessary but healing error on the way to a noble humanity than no longer needs any metaphysical illusion” (DWH).] Strack is referring specifically to the motif of changing apparel in the Confessions, a recurrent theme in the novel that is of significance to Michael Neumann in his cultural-archetypal analysis, *Roman und Ritus: Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (Frankfurt a/M: Klostermann, 1992). As for the healing benefit of Wilhelm’s brief career as an actor, Strack is unspecific. He may be thinking of the psycho-analytic reading of David Roberts, who sees in Wilhelm’s identification with, and performance of, Hamlet a therapeutic resolution of Wilhelm’s oedipal fixation with his grandfather’s lost art collection in general and specifically to the painting of the (oedipal) sick prince. See Roberts, *The Indirections of Desire: “Hamlet” in Goethe’s “Wilhelm Meister”* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1980). We will have reason to consider both Strack’s and Robert’s insights in the following two chapters.

conspicuous inattention to neoclassical unity and closure. Not long before the acting troupe and he leave the count's residence, Wilhelm bares his soul to Jarno about the effect that his reading of Shakespeare has had on him: "Die wenigen Blicke, die ich in Shakespeares Welt getan, reizen mich mehr als irgend etwas anderes, in der wirklichen Welt schnellere Fortschritte zu tun" (192). ["The few glances that I have cast into Shakespeare's world have impelled me more than anything else to take more resolute steps into the real world" (EAB 113).] Even if he still speaks the language of destiny, his estimation of the **real** world contrasts sharply with the "great world" ("große Welt") of the court and neoclassical drama, that until then had turned his head. In other words, Wilhelm is starting to experience a shift in his Weltanschauung.

#### *Wilhelm's Aesthetic Self-Consciousness*

The problem of fitting Shakespeare's world into the theater will occupy Wilhelm for much of Books Four and Five. It might even be said that Shakespeare sends the theater up in flames; whereupon the **disillusioned** Wilhelm will approach the Tower and its practical wisdom. As a preface to his initiation ceremony, Wilhelm will have another conversation with Jarno and learn something about the Tower's views on *Bildung*:

"Es ist gut, daß der Mensch, der erst in die Welt tritt, viel von sich halte, daß er sich viele Vorzüge zu erwerben denke, daß er alles möglich zu machen suche; aber wenn seine Bildung auf einem gewissen Grade steht, dann ist es vorteilhaft, wenn er sich in einer größern Masse verlieren lernt, wenn er lernt, um anderer willen zu leben und seiner selbst in einer pflichtmäßigen Tätigkeit zu vergessen" (493).

["When a man makes his first entry into the world, it is good that he have a high opinion of himself, believes he can acquire many excellent qualities, and therefore endeavors to do everything; but when his development has reached a certain stage, it is advantageous for him to lose himself in a larger whole, learn to live for others, and forget himself in dutiful activity for others" (EAB 301).]

More might be said of the pedagogy of the Tower, scattered as it is throughout the last two books of the novel, but that is not our interest at this juncture. What Jarno articulates here is the value placed on an initial **preoccupation with and attention to one's self**. This might be said to be the first stage of personal development as it is depicted in the novel.

From the larger standpoint of the novel, such attention to one's self is not to be confused with narrow selfishness or with the greedy pursuit of pleasure or wealth. We have only to recall the aunt of Serlo and Aurelie, the step-mother of Therese, or even Wilhelm's old friend Werner: all of whose narrow self-interest leads to compulsive behaviors and to an unattractive person and personality. What they lack is an aesthetic self-consciousness that might organize and lend coherence to their person and personality. The example of Werner even shows up late in novel, as though to make just that point. Skinny, bald and pale, Werner is described as "ein arbeitsamer Hypochondrist", what we today would call a workaholic (499). Wilhelm, on the other hand—even if his self-confidence has taken a beating since he met the impressive Lothario and his impressive friends—elicits words of admiration from his always busy and profit-driven friend: "Deine Augen sind tiefer, deine Stirne ist breiter, deine Nase feiner und dein Mund liebevoller geworden. Seht nur einmal, wie er steht! wie das alles paßt und zusammenhängt! Wie doch das Faulenzen gedeihet!" (Ibid.). ["Your eyes are more deep set, your forehead is broader, your nose is more delicate and your mouth is much more pleasant. Look at how you stand! How well everything fits together! Indolence makes one prosper" (EAB 306, my italics).] Given that activity or *Tätigkeit* is the superlative value of the Tower, Wilhelm despairs more than once over his meager accomplishments and qualifications. The reader, identifying as expected with the hero, may at times share that confusion and despair for his sake. But the opening chapter of Book Eight stands as a reminder that, despite the trail of errors that Wilhelm has made and will make even to the closing lines of the novel—he has developed **beautifully**; for in the course his theatrical apprenticeship, he has acquired an aesthetic self-consciousness. Friedrich's closing comparison of Wilhelm to the biblical Saul, who looking for a donkey found a kingdom, refers not just to Wilhelm's seraphic bride, Natalie. Wilhelm had mistakenly set out to become an actor, but in the course of his error he received an aesthetic education.

The proximity of Wilhelm's aesthetic development to Schiller's *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen (Of the Aesthetic Education of Man)* should come as no surprise. Goethe undertook the revision and completion of his old *Wilhelm Meister* fragment during the early years of his friendship and collaboration with Schiller, and



while the latter composed his Kantian treatise on art as the tutor of civilization: before they revolt, let them read Shake(-spear)! As with other passing references to Schiller thus far, we must defer their fuller exposition to the following chapters. Nor should this be taken to suggest that Goethe's novel fulfilled the program of—or was, for that matter, fully transparent to—his philosophizing friend. My argument is, rather, that Wilhelm, even as he trips over his own flawed ideas and stumbles from one alien social circle into another, has the good (and by no means typical) fortune to realize an aesthetic self-consciousness, or in other words a healthy, harmonious personality: the seed of which was there all along, and was (to paraphrase Aurelie) stimulated and formed by the aesthetic influence of art. And just in the nick of time. As Nicholas Boyle reminds us, the violent disorder of the French Revolution, the experience of which haunted Goethe, loomed menacingly in the background as he composed the novel.<sup>34</sup> Even if politics and the state are virtually absent in the novel, Wilhelm's near demise at the hands of bandits, as well as the chaos and poverty into which the travelling actors are thrown by the marauders, may be read as a metaphor of the Revolution and the threat it posed to the humanist enterprise of Weimar and Jena.<sup>35</sup>

The obstacles that threaten to derail Wilhelm's *Bildung*, however, are numerous and begin much closer to home than the troubles in Paris, which find no place in the novel. The first and perhaps greatest threats lie in Wilhelm himself. His poetic idealism and his no less poetic love for Mariane, the perceived betrayal of which undermines his health,

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<sup>34</sup>While Boyle does not relate the French Revolution to the content of the *Lehrjahre*, the eleventh chapter of his Goethe-biography stresses the political worries that preoccupied Goethe as he undertook the revision of his "old novel". See Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age*, Vol. II: Revolution and Renunciation (1790-1803) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 185-252.

<sup>35</sup>On the silence regarding **government** in the novel, Stefan Blessin observes: "Es gibt keine Institutionen, keine Bürokratie und keinen Staat. Mit Ausnahme polizeilicher Organe, die sich frühzeitig blamieren, ist der Roman ein ausgedehnter Schauplatz für jede Art von privater Existenz" (*Goethes Romane: Aufbruch in die Moderne*, 88). ["There are no institutions, no bureaucracy and no state. With the exception of the police, that makes a poor showing in the beginning, the novel is a broad showcase of every form of private life."] As for my suggestion of a link between the robbery and the Revolution, the disaster is preceded by the republican experiment of the troupe, for they are determined to parade the superior merits of the burgher as they leave the residence. I must finally concur with Blessin's observation, that even the rare hints of the state, as also every big solution proposed to social problems, fail across the board. Blessin's insights into the social economy of the novel will have bearing on the following two chapters of this study.

place him close to the tragic trajectory of Goethe's melancholic Werther. Blessin recognizes the similarities that link the two protagonists but underscores their very different fates. The difference, he notes, lies partly in Wilhelm's character: he is "der durchschnittliche Fall eines jungen Mannes" ["an instance of the average young man"], whereas Werther had been infected with, and finally succumbed to a virulent germ of genius (92). But it also lies in the world of the novel and in the author's intent. Blessin points out that *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* had exhibited all the fatalism or, in the language of the Abbé, the **necessity** of drama. Wilhelm and Serlo similarly decide that drama is governed by fate or *Schicksal*, but then they acknowledge, "daß man dem Zufall im Roman gar wohl sein Spiel erlauben könne" (308). ["that in the novel Chance might well be given free play" (EAB 186).] In Book One the Abbé describes chance (*Zufall*) as the malleable stuff of life, from which man's reason can influence the shape to his existence. Wilhelm himself, however, never realizes such godlike sovereignty in the novel. So the world of the novel must prepare him.

Blessin analyzes the way that chance and confusion (*Verwechslung*) make it possible for Wilhelm to pursue his own ends, even with a mistaken understanding of the world, and achieve satisfaction, even if the outcome is not in fact what he intended: "Das Verständnis, das Wilhelm ausbildet und in dem er sich in erster Linie immer selbst auslegt, mag noch so sehr an den Realitäten vorbeigehen, – es behält seinen eigenen Wert, büßt nicht an Gewicht und Bedeutung ein" ["Wilhelm's developing understanding, that is primarily an interpretation of himself, can be ever so mistaken about reality, – it retains its own value, lacks neither substance nor meaning"] (102). The world of the novel is conveniently loose enough in its causal hinges for the hero to arrive at his goal, although his judgments were mistaken, his choices misguided. This is not to say that what goes up does not come down; mistakes in the *Lehrjahre* have their consequences. While he asserts that no one else shares responsibility for the deaths of Mignon, the *Harfner* and Aurelie ("[sie] haben sich ganz von innen aufgezehrt"; "[they] devoured themselves from within"), Blessin acknowledges Wilhelm's guilt with regard to Mariane (90). But for various reasons, the most significant being Werner, Wilhelm does not learn the truth about her until late in the novel; and by then both external circumstances and changes in

Wilhelm's character shield him from the conscience that once might have crippled him for life.

The source and substance of Wilhelm's "vaccination" against tragedy, I will claim, are largely the reason that *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* occupies such a peculiar nook in the literary hall of fame. For now we return to Blessin's insight, that Wilhelm's *Weltanschauung* is in fact his interpretation of himself projected onto the world. This sounds a lot like the *schöne Seele* and her "Verwechslung des Subjektiven und Objektiven" ["confusion of the subjective and objective"]. The parallel has its thematic significance in the novel, as we already have noted. The difference is that Wilhelm's "fate" confronts his poetic perspective with **lived experience**, as opposed to the spiritual solitude of the canoness. The empirical contexts of nature and society, as well as Wilhelm's need for human contact, prevent his personal development from ending in the sort of epistemological solipsism that makes the *schöne Seele* the psychic equivalent of an ingrown toenail. But in spite of his organic vitality and fondness of company, Wilhelm might not have succeeded at all, had not the chance circumstances of the novel worked out to his advantage, and that just barely. He does, after all, suffer physically from disappointed love. He might easily have died of his head wound.<sup>36</sup> But Wilhelm is, all in all, a healthy and optimistic individual, inclined whenever possible to interpret matters in his favor. He is not self-destructive, then, like Aurelie or the *Harfner*, nor at all like Werther: "[Goethes] Roman braucht einen Helden, der möglichst unbelastet in die Zukunft schaut" ["(Goethe's) novel requires a hero who looks to the future as unburdened as possible"] (Blessin 90). That optimism is one reason that his experience retains, in Blessin's words, "seinen eigenen Wert" ["its own value"], even if it is not exactly what he had set out for. The novel is a Bildungsroman after all, then, for Wilhelm's "Erfahrungen des Herzens und Geistes", like the aunt's apostate Pietism, result in an aesthetic consciousness of his self. Wilhelm's personality is formed by his experience of art, because he learns, or is in the process of learning, to treat his own life like a work of art.

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<sup>36</sup>Blessin: "Die Verwundbarkeit des Menschen ist ein zentrales weiterführendes Motiv. Darin wird dem Zufall stattgegeben—nicht dem zum Verhängnis gewordenen Zufall, sondern dem Zufall, der jeden glücklicher- oder unglücklicherweise treffen kann" (88). ["Human vulnerability to injury is a central, continuous motif. It concedes a role to chance—not chance turned fateful, but rather the sort of accident, good luck or bad luck, that can happen to anyone."]

Even so, that Wilhelm Meister's apprenticeship should engender a new literary sub-genre most certainly was not Goethe's hope or expectation. Wilhelm himself just barely fit through a narrow window of opportunity. After all, his successful father could afford the higher price that he anticipated for his son's tuition in life and in the family trade.<sup>37</sup> The all but total silence of his family during the months of his prodigal's progress is almost inexplicable, unless one assumes what simply cannot be discounted altogether: that the Abbé and other associates of the Tower, who pop up at various junctures in the novel, and with whom Meister senior had conducted business on at least one occasion, are indeed emissaries: who either are acting at the behest of Wilhelm's father (though only consistent with the Abbé's own principles), or even just doing a favor for an old business associate. Clarity regarding the source of the Abbé's interest in Wilhelm gets lost amid the smoke and mirrors, the "Maschinen" that troubled Schiller.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the spirit of post-Napoleonic, Biedermeier conservatism would permeate every chapter of the *Wanderjahre*, with its fragmented, anthology-like organization—and with a subtitle (*die Entsagenden*) that reflects a society far less conducive to individual desires and development. All of this suggests that the Bildungsroman as a genre was doomed to be an anachronism, hardly more than the caricature of a genre, almost before it was born. But for the machinations of the Tower, clearing the way for his *felix culpa*, or happy error, and Wilhelm Meister might have turned out another Tristram Shandy, his "fine" nose bent out of shape by the closing window of history.

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<sup>37</sup>Comparing his son to that of his friend and partner, the elder Werner, Wilhelm's father observes the following: "Ihr Sohn ist von seiner Expedition so glücklich zurückgekommen, hat seine Geschäfte so gut zu machen gewußt, daß ich recht neugierig bin, wie sich der meinige beträgt; ich fürchte, er wird mehr Lehrgeld geben als der Ihrige" (41). ["Your son profited so much from his expedition and conducted his affairs so well, that I am curious to see how my son makes out, but I fear he will need more money than yours did" (EAB 21).] The German, "mehr Lehrgeld", actually suggests that Wilhelm's tuition in life and the trade will be **costlier**, in both the personal and the financial sense.

<sup>38</sup> See letter to Goethe of July 8, 1796 (HA VII, 640).

## CHAPTER II

### THE WORLD OF THE TOWER SOCIETY

#### Critical Response to the Society of the Tower

In the self-conscious history of modern literature, few novels are as famously obscure as *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. On the one hand, it is hard to imagine such a thing as a Bildungsroman without a maturer Goethe's answer to his Storm and Stress success, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*. Even if we bracket out the importance of the *Lehrjahre* in relation to that subgenre, it cannot be denied that Goethe's novel not only set a standard and remains a point of reference for the German novel, but that it likewise influenced several important novelists in nineteenth-century Europe, including Stendhal, Flaubert, and George Eliot.<sup>39</sup> That being said, one is unlikely to find *Wilhelm Meister's Apprentice Years* on the Great Books or required-reading list of any undergraduate program in the United States. Goethe's name looms larger in the American academy than the content of his opus; and the "current invisibility of *Faust* in this country" that Jane Brown regrets is still truer of the *Lehrjahre*.<sup>40</sup> Whereas the aspiring actor Wilhelm assumes a pseudonym to hide the disparity between his masterly surname and his amateur accomplishments, more than one Goethe scholar has tried to bridge the gap between the Olympian poet and the footnote fame of the novel by making immodest claims about its greatness.

Almost from its earliest development, the *Lehrjahre* met with a mixed response. Friedrich Schiller, who followed the progress of the novel with interest and enthusiasm, was also the first critic of what he referred to as the "Kunstgriff" ["artifice" or "slight of

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<sup>39</sup> In his study *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), Marc Redmond both illuminates and calls into question novels of Goethe, Flaubert, and Eliot, insofar as they are considered to be representative of the Bildungsroman. While Redmond professes his allegiance to DeManian literary theory and even acknowledges the dependence of the latter on what it deconstructs, his argument frequently overlooks relevant details in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* and the *Wanderjahre*: both such as might bolster his theoretical claims, as well as those that present problems for his tendentious reading of Goethe's novels.

<sup>40</sup> See by Brown, *Faust: The German Tragedy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 8.

hand”] in Book Eight: the “Maschinerie” of the Tower Society—a *deus ex machina* of sorts that delivers the happy end.<sup>41</sup> Specifically, Schiller was worried that Goethe’s reader might fail to recognize the “poetische Notwendigkeit” [“poetic necessity”] of the Tower: the necessity of its interventions in Wilhelm’s development. The response of Novalis was several degrees cooler. After dismissing the *Lehrjahre* as “ein fatales, albernes Buch” [“a fatal, foolish book”], Novalis voices his aversion to the Abbé and the Tower and concludes, “Wilhelm Meister ist eigentlich ein ‘Candide’, gegen die Poesie gerichtet [. . .].” [“Wilhelm Meister is actually a ‘Candide’ aimed at poetry (. . .).”]<sup>42</sup> In light of this, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* may be read as a Romantic objection to the deaths of Mignon and the Harpist, who personify lyrical *Poesie* in Goethe’s novel. And in the study of Nietzsche scholar Karl Schlechta, which Kittler describes as “die schönste und traurigste Deutung, die Goethes Roman wiederfuhr” [“the most beautiful and saddest interpretation that Goethe’s novel has met with”], Schlechta echoes Schiller when he observes: “dieser Roman trägt den Namen eines Helden, aber er hat keinen Helden [. . .].” [“this novel bears the name of a hero, but it has no hero (. . .).”]<sup>43</sup> As for the Abbé and his friends (“Er kann alles, weil er an nichts wesensmäßig beteiligt ist”), Schlechta downright vilifies the Tower for alienating Wilhelm from the self and world of his youth.<sup>44</sup>

Whether a critic has designated the *Lehrjahre* an *Erziehungsroman*, a *Bildungsroman*, or an *Entwicklungsroman*, has depended largely on the degree of influence over

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<sup>41</sup>Letter to Goethe July 8, 1796 (HA VII, 640); the suggested translations are my own. Concerning the “deus ex machina” of the Tower, I since have learned that Nicholas Boyle uses more or less the same expression to describe the fortuitous resolution of Wilhelm’s developmental uncertainty. Boyle calls Natalie a “*dea ex machina*” that is inserted at the end of the narrative as a sort of *ad hoc telos* for Wilhelm’s *Bildung*. See Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age*, vol. II, p. 422. Indeed, hers is a distinctly secular saintliness. Her superabundant capacity to compensate for any and every deficiency qualifies her as a sort of transcendental supplement, just as she herself calls individual principles “nur ein Supplement zu unsern Existenzen” (565). [“merely supplements to our existence” (EAB 346).]

<sup>42</sup>From “Fragmenten und Studien, 1799-1800”, in: HA VII, p. 685.

<sup>43</sup>Slechta, *Goethes Wilhelm Meister* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1953), pp. 11-12. For Kittler’s remarks, see “Über die Sozialisation Wilhelm Meisters”, p. 87; in Gerhard Kaiser and same, *Dichtung als Sozialisationsspiel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978).

<sup>44</sup>Parentetical citation from Schlechta, p. 49: “He can do everything, because his nature commits to nothing.” For his fuller analysis of the Tower Society, see pp. 46-75.

Wilhelm that he has attributed to the Tower.<sup>45</sup> But the society of the Tower presents a greater problem still. Marc Redmond contends that Schiller’s anxiety over the Tower—the danger that its interventions might be judged by readers to be **artificial** rather than natural and necessary—points to the shadow that follows not only the *Lehrjahre* as a “classic”, but likewise the Bildungsroman as a genre. According to Redmond, *Wilhelm Meister* and other Bildungsromane are self-obligated to realize the Kantian *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck* [“purposefulness without purpose”] that Schiller called for in his *Ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*: an unintended yet ideal outcome of the hero’s development that only the planned accidents of popular fiction make possible. Whereas Wilhelm must learn to distinguish between the aesthetically deficient painting of the king’s sick son and art that is worthy of the name, Redmond argues that the *Lehrjahre* and the tradition it inspired risk being read as sentimental kitsch.<sup>46</sup> It will be the interest of this study to investigate whether the **experience** central to Wilhelm’s *Bildung* manifests such symptoms of artificiality. That is, does Wilhelm’s experience inhere as a necessary moment of human consciousness, or is it realized only within a reflexive, self-affirming ideology?

We recall that, in a conversation between Wilhelm and the Abbé, the pedagogue and the pupil disagree over the substance of the latter’s involvement with his theater company. Wilhelm regrets that he had wasted his time—in other words, that his theatrical adventures were void of real experience. The Abbé disagrees. He insists that all experiences contribute to one’s character formation or *Bildung*. Nonetheless, the Abbé counsels him not to dwell on the past: “Das Sicherste bleibt immer, nur das Nächste zu tun, was vor uns liegt” (422). [“The safest thing remains to concentrate on what lies

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<sup>45</sup>The three terms suggest respectively a novel of education, of self-cultivation, or of development. The first term indicates a more or less direct pedagogical influence, while the last of the three suggests a more natural, even indeterminate development. *Bildung* hovers somewhere between the two. In lieu of the more literal “formation”, I prefer Blackall’s translation of *Bildung* as “self-cultivation”, which in my view highlights the role of the will and choices in the hero’s personal development—however compromised, even unsuccessful Wilhelm’s may prove to be. Be that as it may, scholars cannot avoid accounting in some way for the Society of the Tower and its role in Wilhelm’s story. In other words, whichever of the three terms a critic has applied to Goethe’s novel has often depended on the degree of influence that she has attributed to the Tower in Wilhelm Meister’s personal plot.

<sup>46</sup>See *Phantom Formations*, pp. 75-77; elsewhere Redmond recalls Hegel’s (*Ästhetik*) ironic comparison of the “hero” of the contemporary German novel in his day to any other ambitious philistine (39).

immediately ahead” (EAB 258).] Once earlier, having received news of his father’s death, Wilhelm likewise had entertained concerns about his lack of experience: “[. . .] er hatte Gelegenheit genug gehabt, zu bemerken, daß es ihm an Erfahrung fehle, und er legte daher auf die Erfahrung anderer und auf die Resultate, die sie daraus mit Überzeugung ableiteten, einen übermäßigen Wert und kam dadurch nur immer mehr in die Irre” (284-85). [“( . . . ) he had often realized that he lacked experience, placed too much trust in the experience of others and attached too much value to what other people derived from their own convictions. Hence he was increasingly at a loss” (EAB 171).] It becomes evident in this passage that Wilhelm, due in part to his acquaintance with Jarno, has come to understand experience as successful activity based on practical insight into the nature of the world. With a nagging conscience, Wilhelm will sign a theater contract with Serlo, in part to show backbone and make up his own mind. His later acquaintance with the persons of the Tower—with Lothario and the Abbé, even Therese and Natalie, with their busy, bewildering confidence—will further intimidate and disorient Wilhelm. In the end Wilhelm exchanges his trust in *Schicksal* [destiny], that has been the source of so much trouble, for the pragmatism of the Tower, as he gratefully accepts the hand of his Amazon. Even if he cannot discern what the future holds in store for him, it is safe to say that Wilhelm is prepared now to heed the counsel of the Abbé and avoid looking back. When in the closing lines of the novel Friedrich jests with Meister about their earlier rivalry over Philine, Wilhelm objects, “Erinnern Sie mich nicht in diesem Augenblicke des höchsten Glücks an jene Zeiten!” (610). [“Don’t remind me of those days at this happiest of all moments” (EAB 373).] It would appear from this that Wilhelm has acquired Lothario’s aversion to entanglements from the past.

### *The Modernity of the Tower*

Wilhelm’s **acquired** capacity to brush off past problems, even the death of loved ones, including Mariane, has been a cause of embarrassment for the earliest reviewers of the novel, as well as in some more recent scholarly criticism. While Schiller determined that the deaths of Aurelie, Mignon, and the harpist were essential to the “Idee des Ganzen” [“the idea of the whole”], he complained of Goethe’s poetic selfishness in regard to



Mariane: “da sie der Natur nach zu retten war” [“since she by nature might have been saved”].<sup>47</sup> Humboldt, however, was more concerned about Wilhelm’s (non)reaction to Mariane’s and Mignon’s deaths. He questions the unusual “Lauigkeit” or “Kälte” [“tepidness” or “coldness”] of Wilhelm’s sensibility, which alone might account for his composure in the face of such loss.<sup>48</sup> Still, Karl Schlechta’s 1953 study of the novel stands out among the secondary literature. Like a prophet in the critical wilderness, Schlechta decries the course of Wilhelm’s development or formation—Schlechta might say *deformation*—under the Tower’s tutelage, to which he largely attributes Wilhelm’s phlegm. Blind to the beauty of Wilhelm’s *Bildung*, Schlechta analyzes in painful detail how the Abbé and his society remake the aspiring artist and child of fate in their own modern, pragmatic image. Each of these readers worries that, in one respect or another, the last two books of the novel fail to align smoothly with the first five books and the assumptions they create about Wilhelm’s character.

A more recent generation of scholars, on the other hand, has recognized the irony that qualifies the younger Wilhelm’s convictions and aspirations. Whether their attention is focused on economic (Blessin), sociological (Kittler) or psychological (Roberts) issues in the novel, such scholars have diagnosed in Wilhelm atavistic or regressive inclinations that must be overcome before he can participate in healthy social relations.<sup>49</sup> Kittler’s monograph *Über die Sozialisation Wilhelm Meisters* analyzes modern social and family

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<sup>47</sup>Letter to Goethe, 2 July 1796 (HA VII, 631).

<sup>48</sup>Letter to Goethe, 24 Nov. 1796 (HA VII, 659).

<sup>49</sup>See Stefan Blessin, *Die Romane Goethes* (Königstein/Ts: Athenäum, 1979), pp. 11-58. The section on the *Lehrjahre*, with the exception of the last chapter (“Ästhetik des Marktes”), was published four years earlier by Blessin as an article titled, “Die radikal-liberale Konzeption von *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahren*”, *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift* 49(1975): 190-225. See also Friedrich A. Kittler, “Über die Sozialisation Wilhelm Meisters”, in Gerhard Kaiser and same: *Dichtung als Sozialisationsspiel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1978): 13-124; and David Roberts, *The Indirections of Desire: Hamlet in Goethe’s “Wilhelm Meister”* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1980). While Kittler explicitly denies that *Wilhelm Meister*’s transformation from *Theaterroman* to *Bildungsroman* may be attributed to “Atavismen” (83) in Wilhelm’s character, he is referring here to those critics who link Wilhelm’s love of dramatic representation to his admiration of the declining nobility and their socially representative role. However, even as I do not dismiss the relation between theater and the German *Adel* in the novel, I also find that Kittler’s own study calls attention to Wilhelm’s regressive character. It is, after all, an important implication of Kittler’s argument that Wilhelm clings to the theater as a locus of his primary (maternal) socialization, precisely because he **resists** secondary socialization. This will prove important later in our analysis.

structures in the *Lehrjahre*, as it compares the novel with the fragment *Wilhelm Meisters theatralische Sendung*. In the earlier fragment, an unfaithful and neglectful mother introduces instability into the Meister household, which the child Wilhelm escapes by immersing himself in the imaginary pathos of puppet shows and theater. His adventures lead him to the professional stage where, as both poet and actor, he experiences success, affirmation, and integration. Kittler argues that Goethe's overhaul of Wilhelm's childhood on the way to the *Lehrjahre* reflects the fundamental domestic structures of the ascendent *Bürgertum*. As opposed to the unstable family relations of the *Theatralische Sendung*, in the *Lehrjahre* a strong father now embodies patriarchal authority; a nurturing, indulgent mother raises her son through identification with him: these, Kittler stresses, are the oedipal relations within which the nineteenth century would socialize its children.<sup>50</sup>

Kittler rejects Schlechta's analysis of the Tower Society. Whereas Schlechta insists that the Tower uproots Wilhelm "vom Mutterboden seines bisherigen Seins" ["from the maternal soil of his life heretofore"], Kittler recognizes "Kontinuität im Funktionellen" ["functional continuity"].<sup>51</sup> Rather than tearing Wilhelm from the arms of Mother Earth, Kittler assures us, the Tower weans him, more or less gently, from Mother's milk and completes the socialization that had started in the nursery. But less "eine Phänomenologie des Geistes avant la lettre", as Kittler claims (87), the Abbé stands closer to the tutor of Rousseau's *Emile*.<sup>52</sup> Except that Goethe has made the mother a

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<sup>50</sup>From *Über die Sozialisation Wilhelm Meisters*: "Die Mutter nahe und der Vater randständig, die Mutter voll 'Liebe und Vorsorge', der Vater borniert-ökonomisch, die Mutter der Phantasie, dem Theater, dem Wunsch offen, der Vater den Theateraufführungen und -besuchen feind -: die Umschrift von Wilhelm Meisters Herkunftsfamilie erfüllt formal alle Kriterien einer Ödipalisierung. Die numerisch reduzierte Familie wird zum kernfamilialen Dreieck, die zwei einzigen Bezugs-personen des Kindes figurieren die mythischen Mächte *des Wunsches* und *der Untersagung*. Dem triangulierten Kind ist die Mutter der erste Andere und der Vater ein Dritter, der nachträglich und vergebens eingreift, wenn der Mutterbezug dem Kind schon längst eingeschrieben ist" (25). ["Mother close and father at the margin, the father rigidly economic, the mother open to fantasy, theater and wishes; the father opposed to theater performances and attendance -: the reinscription of Wilhelm Meister's familial origin fulfills all of the criteria of an oedipalization. His numerically reduced family becomes a triangular nuclear family, and the only two people to whom he stands in any relation figure as the mythic powers of *desire* and *denial*. For the triangulated child the mother is the first Other and the father but a third that intervenes late and without success, after the maternal relation has long since been inscribed."]

<sup>51</sup>Compare Schlechta p. 97, and Kittler, p. 88.

<sup>52</sup>David Roberts, reversing the logic of Jürgen Jacobs—who has seen in Hegel's *Phänomenologie*

partner in pedagogy. Rousseau's wet nurse now has her Elementary Ed degree and has been entrusted with childhood of her child. After all, the tutor has grown ambitious. Rather than making his pupil a man **or** a citizen, a choice Rousseau had insisted on, the Abbé wants both.<sup>53</sup> Wilhelm shall become first a human, a personality—"ein Persönchen", as Werner puts it—and then a citizen: a productive member of the modern social economy, on whose duties Lothario gives Werner a lecture in Book Eight.<sup>54</sup>

Novalis was quick to notice and criticize the importance of economics in the novel. Given his own decidedly anti-modern convictions, one must treat **von** Hardenberg's reading of the *Lehrjahre* with caution. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that his antipathy toward ambitious burgher values heightened his critical sensitivity and perception with regard to modern developments, even if his romantic idealism is suspect. Referring in his notes to the later chapters of the *Lehrjahre*, where error, accident and manipulation play an important role, Novalis wrote: "Hinten wird alles Farce. Die ökonomische Natur ist die wahre—übrigbleibende." Then, echoing Schiller, he adds: "Poetische Maschinerie."<sup>55</sup> The words "ökonomisch" and "Ökonomie" appear more than once in Novalis' sketchy commentary on Goethe and his novel. While these words overlap with what we mean today by economics, they are not reducible to money and the marketplace. The terms also resemble our metaphorical usage, such as when we speak of the economy of a text; that is: a dynamic, self-contained order.

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*des Geistes* "ein ins Philosophische transponierter Bildungsroman" ["a Bildungsroman rendered as philosophy"]—characterizes the Bildungsroman as a "phenomenology of the subject." See Roberts, p. 15; also Jacobs, *Wilhelm Meister und seine Brüder: Untersuchungen zum deutschen Bildungsroman* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1972), p. 19.

<sup>53</sup>See *Emile: or On Education*, trans. Allen Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p. 39.

<sup>54</sup>See pp. 507-508, where Lothario attributes to the good citizen a genuine concern for the welfare of the state: "'Nun', sagte Lothario [zu Werner], 'ich hoffe Sie noch zum guten Patrioten zu machen; denn wie der nur ein guter Vater ist, der bei Tische erst seinen Kindern vorlegt, so ist der nur ein guter Bürger, der vor allen andern Ausgaben das, was er dem Staate zu entrichten hat, zurücklegt.'" (508). ["'Well,' said Lothario, 'I hope to be able to make a good patriot out of you. A good father is one who at mealtimes serves his children first; and a good citizen is one who pays what he owes the state before dealing with everything else'" (EAB 311).] Lothario had done his apprenticeship as patriot in the American Revolution, but he is content to share his laurels won in battle with every happy taxpayer.

<sup>55</sup>From the "Fragmenten und Studien" 1799-1800 (HA VII, 685). ["Toward the end it is all farce. The economy is the true—and only remaining—nature."]

Moreover, economics marks the boundary between two worlds.<sup>56</sup> On the one side (deep inside, as it were) is a world to which the Wilhelm of first half of the novel is drawn. It is the world of imagination or *Einbildung*, in which nature has a voice; where destiny or *Schicksal* may be recognized and followed; and where love and human relations are essential, definitive, binding.<sup>57</sup> It is interesting to note that “Schicksal”, Wilhelm’s personal deity, and which the Abbé dismisses as “ein vornehmer, aber teurer Hofmeister” [“a distinguished but costly tutor”], stands in semantic proximity to the last word of the earlier title, *Wilhelm Meisters theatralische Sendung* (121; EAB 68). Typically translated as “calling” or “mission”, both of which imply a purpose determined by a superior authority, *Sendung* defines the world of the fragment, where even the barriers, bumps, and bruises—the often painful experiences of life—prepare Wilhelm for his calling in Serlo’s theater.

But on the economic side of the boundary lies the nature of reality in the *Lehrjahre*. Of “that peculiar man” Goethe and the world of his novel, Novalis remarked:

Auch hier ist der sonderbare Mann der Natur auf die Spur gekommen und hat ihr einen artigen Kunstgriff [Schiller!] abgemerkt. Das gewöhnliche Leben ist voll ähnlicher Zufälle. Sie machen ein Spiel aus, das, wie alles Spiel, auf Überraschung und Täuschung hinausläuft (HA VII, 681).

[Here, too, the peculiar man has tracked down nature and learned from her an artful slight of hand. Normal life is full of similar accidents. They make up a game that, like any game, is all about surprise and trickery.]

Novalis objects in particular to the sheer **physicality** of the natural world in the *Lehrjahre*. He calls its author “der Physiker Goethe”, even “der erste Physiker seiner Zeit” [“the foremost physicist of his day”] (HA VII, 682ff.). What Novalis maligns is the fact that Goethe was on the cutting edge of his day as a scientific materialist; that the natural world

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<sup>56</sup>Karl Schlechta is to be credited for recognizing in the *Lehrjahre* the coexistence of several social “Sphären”. In fact, his analysis of the novel is organized into separate but related discussions of these spheres. My own identification of competing worlds in the novel, while differing for the most part from Schlechta’s spheres, may have been influenced—and was certainly illuminated—by Schlechta’s study.

<sup>57</sup>I would note again that the word “Einbildungskraft” appears seven times in the opening chapters of the *Lehrjahre*, often coming from Wilhelm’s own mouth; whereas the third-person omniscient narrator of the *Theatric Mission* scarcely mentions the imagination at all. In this context the word signifies its importance to the eighteenth century with respect to both its epistemological necessity and what Foucault describes as its dangerous inclination to madness.

in his novel is void of a spiritual or any other metaphysical dimension.<sup>58</sup> In the world of the Abbé, sovereign *Schicksal* is exposed as learning by experience; it's what happens when naive error meets with painful reality, i.e. the "school of hard knocks". What is more, its lessons can embitter the soul, as Melina and his circumstances demonstrate.

That is why the Abbé prefers good sense to faith in providence. Of the latter he declares:

“Mit diesen Gesinnungen könnte kein Mädchen ihre Tugend, niemand sein Geld im Beutel behalten; denn es gibt Anlässe genug, beides loszuwerden. Ich kann mich nur über den Menschen freuen, der weiß, was ihm und andern nütze ist, und seine Willkür zu beschränken arbeitet. Jeder hat sein eigen Glück unter den Händen, wie der Künstler eine rohe Materie, die er zu einer Gestalt umbilden will. Aber es ist mit dieser Kunst wie mit allen; nur die Fähigkeit dazu wird uns angeboren, sie will gelernt und sorgfältig ausgeübt sein” (72).

[“With such opinions no girl would keep her virtue and no man his money, for there are enough opportunities to lose them both. But I can be really happy only with the person who knows what is useful to him and others, and works at controlling his own arbitrariness. Everyone holds his fortune in his own hands, like a sculptor the raw material he will fashion into a figure. But it's the same with that type of artistic activity as with all others. Only the ability to do it, only the capability, is inborn in us, it must be learned and attentively cultivated” (EAB 39).]

Little wonder then that, in what he calls “ein fatales, albernes Buch” [“fatal, foolish book”], Novalis refers to the Abbé as “ein fataler Kerl” [“a fatal guy”] (HA VII, 685). Albeit in an oblique and pejorative sense, he is right about one thing: no other character in the *Lehrjahre* embodies the spirit of the novel as fully as does the Abbé. It is a world where mature reason navigates between necessity and accident; where nature, understood as natural resource, can be deciphered and mastered; and where relationships are negotiable—a point we shall illuminate in due course.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>I do not mean to suggest that Goethe was a philosophical atheist. I merely acknowledge that Goethe had given notice to Christian Providence and theistic design in nature and history. Nor did he have any use for deism or any other systematic theology. For an interpretation of *Faust* in light of Goethe's theological indeterminacy, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Faust the Theologian* (New Haven: Yale, 1995).

<sup>59</sup>The Abbé: “Das Gewebe dieser Welt ist aus Notwendigkeit und Zufall gebildet; die Vernunft des Menschen stellt sich zwischen beide und weiß sie zu beherrschen; sie behandelt das Notwendige als den Grund ihres Daseins; das Zufällige weiß sie zu lenken, zu leiten und zu nutzen, und nur, indem sie fest und unerschütterlich steht, verdient der Mensch ein Gott der Erde genannt zu werden” (71). [“The texture of this world is made up of necessity and chance. Human reason holds the balance between them, treating necessity as the basis of existence, but manipulating and directing chance, and using it. Only if our reason is unshakeable, does man

We already have seen that the “theatrical calling” turns out in the *Lehrjahre* to be just the product of Wilhelm’s imagination, lacking its foundation in the objective world. Likewise, Wilhelm’s disappointment has been shared by readers who, schooled by traditional aesthetics, have identified with the hero’s outlook and ambition. That the particular dislike of critics like Novalis and Schlechta has been reserved for the Abbé, follows from the **resistance** that he and his Tower present to Wilhelm’s outlook and intentions. Their pedagogy prohibits any explicit intervention in the usual sense—although Jarno and Natalie differ with their master on that point. Even so, both Jarno and the Abbé (or his brother) do try to correct Wilhelm’s naive trust in fate, on the one hand, and his questionable choice of friends, especially Mignon and the Harpist (*Harfner*). But Wilhelm’s early encounters with the Abbé (and/or his brother) and with Jarno find him unreceptive to their guidance; with the exception of Jarno’s tip about Shakespeare, their advice falls on more or less deaf ears—and even what Wilhelm gets, he gets wrong. He aspires to a production of *Hamlet* rather than to a life of productive activity. To the very end of the novel Wilhelm would not seem to have learned much of anything from the Tower; his admiration for Lothario, Therese and Natalie more than once leaves him intimidated and discouraged, certainly; anything but enlightened. Is Wilhelm a poor student? Or is the Abbé an ineffective teacher?

To understand and appreciate the place and function of the Tower in Wilhelm’s apprenticeship, we first must bracket out Wilhelm. That may seem paradoxical, given that he is the title character of this Bildungsroman. But the Tower was not organized for Wilhelm or for any other prosperous, “unbefiederten Kaufmannssohn” [“unfledged merchant’s son”] (10; EAB 2). Rather than school the successful burgher in the representative forms of nobility, inscribing on his bourgeois heart, as it were, the “von” to which he aspired, the Tower Society has undertaken to reform the *Adel*, so that one such as Lothario might free himself from the restraints of feudal representation and become a *Mensch* or human in the modern sense: free from ideological and class restraints—free,

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deserve to be called a god of the earth” (EAB 38).] It is little wonder that Schiller saw in the Abbé the character most suited to articulate explicitly the “Idee” of the novel, which idea Schiller worried might be lost on the reader, whose attention would be occupied solving riddles (“Rätsel aufzulösen”). See letter of July 8, 1796 (HA VII, 641).

autonomous, and productive. Lothario's early interest in firearms reflects the origin of the nobility.<sup>60</sup> But as a volunteer in the revolution of the American colonies, he becomes acquainted with modern men who have reshaped a wilderness for human society. It is what the Abbé's pedagogy had been all about. We see how well the pupils have learned their lessons, when Lothario lectures Werner on the merits of sales tax (507); or when Jarno declares in the *Wanderjahre* that the present age is “die Zeit der Einseitigkeiten” [“the age of onesidedness”] and himself specializes in geology (HA VIII, 37; DWH).

How the Tower Society comes to take such an interest in Wilhelm, is not immediately clear. Accident, common business, and genuine concern combine to supply one of the “Rätsel” or riddles of the novel that worried Schiller.<sup>61</sup> Yet it is precisely this mystery that attracts Wilhelm to the Tower as to a higher, guiding authority. During the initiation ceremony he addresses the unseen Abbé and his associates as “Ihr sonderbaren und weisen Menschen, deren Blick in so viele Geheimnisse dringt” (497). [“O ye remarkable and wise men, whose sight penetrates so many secrets” (DWH).] Only later does he learn from Jarno that the ritual and *Lehrbrief* that so impress and mystify Wilhelm are really just relics of earlier years and their youthful fascination with secrets and ceremonies. For Lothario and Jarno such mysteries had made their early education palatable, but they since have advanced to personal autonomy and mature interests. For others, Jarno observes, the rituals were their terminal degree:

“Nicht allen Menschen ist es eigentlich um ihre Bildung zu tun; viele wünschen nur so ein Hausmittel zum Wohlbefinden, Rezepte zum Reichtum und zu jeder Art von Glückseligkeit. Alle diese, die nicht auf ihre Füße gestellt sein wollten, wurden mit Mystifikationen und anderem Hokuspokus teils aufgehalten, teils beiseite gebracht” (549).

[“Not all are equally concerned with their self-cultivation—many want merely panaceas for contentment, or recipes for wealth and happiness.

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<sup>60</sup>His aunt, the *schöne Seele*, writes of the boy Lothario: “der Kleine hatte nicht eher Ruhe, bis ich ihm ein Paar Pistolen und eine Jagdflinte schenkte” (417). [“the little boy would not rest until I had given him a brace of pistols and a hunting piece” (EAB 254).]

<sup>61</sup>In his letter of July 8, 1796, Schiller expresses concern about the conclusion of the novel: “Es kann geschehen, daß das Interesse des Lesers sich konsumiert, Rätsel aufzulösen, da es auf den innern Geist konzentriert bleiben sollte” (HA VII, 641). [“It might be that the reader's interest is exhausted solving riddles, when he should concentrate on the inherent spirit (or deeper idea)”.]

Those who did not want to be set on their feet, were obstructed or deflected by mystifications and all sorts of hocus-pocus” (EAB 336).]

More than once in Book Eight our hero suspects that he too is getting the run-around. In one conversation with Jarno he begs for clarity and demands to know ““was Sie von mir erwarten, und wie und auf welche Weise Sie mich aufopfern wollen”” (553). [““what you expect of me, and how or in what way you intend to sacrifice me”” (DWH).] We see that Wilhelm has transferred onto the Tower his need to recognize and submit to fate, in spite of the Abbé’s efforts to talk him out of any such trust. For all Jarno’s vague assurances to the contrary, Wilhelm will suspect such dark designs on the part of the Tower, that Natalie’s unexpected return of (compliance to?) his affections will seem to him a godsend—even if his Hermes is none other than Natalie’s Bacchic brother, Friedrich.

#### The Abbé as a Tutor of Modern Humanity

Although the Abbé has only good intentions regarding Wilhelm, the latter is hardly the pedagogue’s best or favorite student. What with the society’s plans for global expansion, Wilhelm’s happiness is not this pastor’s foremost concern. Wilhelm wants an authority like the Tower to determine his destiny for good or ill; the Tower wants him to make his own choice, and they will help where they can. Jarno assures him: ““Es ist Ihre Sache, zu prüfen und zu wählen, und die unsere, Ihnen beizustehen”” (553). [““Your job is to test and to choose; ours is to assist you”” (EAB 339).] As we undertake a fuller and more precise understanding of both the Society of the Tower and its spiritual father, we recall an appearance of the Abbé (or of his rumored twin brother) earlier in the novel. After the newly assembled theater troupe meet a man of the cloth during an outing, Laertes and Wilhelm both comment that the stranger looks familiar to them. Although the reader later learns that Wilhelm has in fact encountered the Abbé (or his twin) at least twice before, Philine insists that her friends are mistaken. She explains why the clergyman might make such an impression: ““Dieser Mann hat eigentlich nur das falsche Ansehen eines Bekannten, weil er aussieht wie ein Mensch und nicht wie Hans oder Kunz”” (123). [““This man gives one the impression of being someone familiar because he looks like a real person (human), not just anyone”” (EAB 69, my insertion).] Whereas Wilhelm, in spite of his Candide-like disposition (Novalis!), never gets past reverent



suspicion in his regard for the Abbé, Philine's *mot* is at once sympathetic and accurate. The ease and faithfulness with which the stranger sustained his *rôle* during the group's collective charade demonstrates that his personality is not limited to a narrow, one-sided self. He is not "Hans oder Kunz" or even Pastor So-and-so: he is a *Mensch*, a man, a model specimen of the human. We hear something of that sense in the now-familiar Yiddish idiom.

Michel Foucault has pointed to the end of the eighteenth century as a watershed for the idea of the "human" or "man" (*l'homme*). In *The Order of Things* Foucault argues that man—in the sense that human being has been understood since—emerged only at the end of what he refers to as the Classical Age: "Before the end of the eighteenth-century, *man* did not exist."<sup>62</sup> Looking behind Foucault's provocative assertion and the often impressionistic language, we recognize a picture of the early 1800's that bears a striking resemblance to the post-Kantian period that Gadamer describes in *Wahrheit und Methode*. At the same time that Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm von Humboldt pioneered efforts to establish a methodology for the *Geisteswissenschaften*, the specific positivity of the *sciences humaines* was also emerging. By the human sciences, Foucault means collectively the fields of knowledge that analyze labor, life, and language, and which were constituted by the modern *episteme*.<sup>63</sup> Now, Foucault's particular portrait of modernity depends heavily on the chronologically specific character and the respective contents of these three sciences, which by no means correspond precisely to the essentially historical *Geisteswissenschaften* that Gadamer discusses. Yet both groups of disciplines, the French and the German, are concerned exclusively with man (*der Mensch, l'homme*) as that being whose unique truth might not be determined or expressed by the method and terminology of the natural sciences alone (though that was attempted in both countries), nor by the mathematics on which those sciences relied, but called for a fundamentally distinct epistemology, even as it evaded the grasp of rationalism or the scientific method.

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<sup>62</sup>*The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, English trans. of *Les mots et les choses*, Vintage Books Edition (New York: Random House, 1994), p. 308.

<sup>63</sup>Today we speak of **economics**, **biology**, and **linguistics**, although Foucault points out that the sciences of our own day evoke different assumptions and, consequently, imply a very different sort of content.

In addition to their interests in art and pedagogy, the Abbé and his Tower constitute a secret society, suggestive of the Freemasons and *Illuminaten* and of the middle-class ambition to have an influence on government and society. Yet given the secrecy that surrounds Abbé and everything he does, it is virtually impossible to determine the full range of interests and activities of the cleric and his wide connections. It is clear, however, that the Tower shares the same interest in the nature and life of *humanity* that can be seen in the fields of knowledge of interest to either Gadamer or Foucault. Art, history and the social sciences, however, cannot shed much light on *Mensch* as it comes from Philine's generous lips. Her representative human implies neither the *Geisteswissenschaften* in Germany nor the *sciences humaines* in France, at least not in any conscious or specific way. For a fuller appreciation of *Mensch* in this context—as an ideal, that is, rather than a generic classification—we look to the social milieu to which the Abbé belongs: the people of the Tower.

In the first chapter of Book Eight, the reunited friends, Werner and Wilhelm, converse in private about Lothario, the Abbé, and their immediate circle. The man of business is skeptical, having heard rumors about his brother-in-law and the dubious company he keeps. “Wilhelm,” however, “rühmte seine Lage und das Glück seiner Aufnahme unter *so treffliche Menschen*” (500, my italics). [“Wilhelm was full of praise for his present situation and his good fortune at being received into the company of such excellent persons (exemplary humans)” (EAB 306, my insertion).] Wilhelm's estimation of his new friends is significant, not only because he calls them “Menschen”—an otherwise neutral word in this instance—but also due to the adjective he chooses to describe them. We learn that *trefflich* implies more than good quality or even excellence; it generally distinguishes the noun it modifies as an exemplary instance or specimen. Moreover, Grimm notes that the word “in der neuesten zeit” (Age of You-Know-Who!) had come to connote “reich[e] entfaltung im bereich des menschen” [“full development in the domain of humanity”]; that it implied “concrete leistungen und fähigkeiten” [“concrete achievements and abilities”] rather than class prestige or eminence.<sup>64</sup> It suggests that an

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<sup>64</sup>See “trefflich”, *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm*, vol. 21 (Munich: DTV, 1984), pp. 1694-95.

individual is ideally suited to his or her activity, a particular agent to his active purpose or “*zweckmäßige Tätigkeit*”.<sup>65</sup> Little wonder, then, that a word used sparingly in the first six books of the *Lehrjahre* finally finds its home when the Tower moves to the center of the narrative. “[T]reffliche Person” (the aunt, aka. “schöne Seele”); “trefflicher Mann”, “trefflich[er] Freund” (Lothario); “trefflich[e] Schwester”, “trefflich[es] Mädchen”, “trefflich[es] Frauenzimmer” (Natalie); “treffliche Weiberseelen”, “treffliche Wesen”, “trefflich[er] Kreis von Menschen”: at the risk of sounding repetitious, the narrator makes it clear that the Society of the Tower, its men and women, is a locus of ideal humans. It is what this Candide has been seeking all along. In fact, the bride he finds in the El Dorado of the Tower makes him forget all about his ill-fated Cunéconde, Mariane. The Tower represents what Wilhelm mistakenly had sought on stage or in the enchanted castle of his countess. It is the New Eden of the *Reformadel* (Lothario: “Hier oder nirgend ist Herrnhut!”<sup>66</sup>): a modern aristocracy that pursues personal worth, not in its pedigree or privileges, but in the liberal market and the opportunities it affords for productive, rewarding activity.

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<sup>65</sup>As Wilhelm imagines a marriage with the productive Therese, he contrasts her accomplishments with his own life, turning in particular to his biography or *Lehrjahre* composed by the Tower: “Wilhelm beschäftigte sich nunmehr, indem alle Umstände durch dies Manuskript in sein Gedächtnis zurückkamen, die Geschichte seines Lebens für Theresen aufzusetzen, und er schämte sich fast, daß er gegen ihre großen Tugenden nichts aufzustellen hatte, was eine zweckmäßige Tätigkeit beweisen konnte” (505). [“As the manuscript recalled every detail of Wilhelm’s life, he began to compose in his mind his story for Therese, feeling almost ashamed at having nothing that testified to any active purpose in his life” (EAB 309).] Here Wilhelm identifies what it is that is missing in his own life, as he compares himself to Therese, Lothario, and their comrades. That the purpose is stressed rather than the product can be attributed to Wilhelm’s and the novel’s emphasis on *Bildung*. The product itself, in other words, is not what matters most; the product is important chiefly as the material evidence of **personal** progress.

<sup>66</sup>See p. 432. The context of Lothario’s exclamation is the mention of his sister, Wilhelm’s countess, whose husband had converted to Pietism upon mistaking the sight of Wilhelm in his (the Count’s) own boudoir and bed-clothes for a vision of himself. The presumed omen of his own impending death prompts the count to join the *Herrnhuter* Moravians and even to assume the charismatic role of their long since *selig* superintendent, the Count von Zinzendorf.. Lothario’s words express the certitude that self-worth and happiness lie, not in where one lives—or, for that matter, in one’s convictions—but in a productive life.

## *Economic Liberalism in the Lehrjahre*

We saw that Novalis was the first critic to characterize the world of the novel in terms of economics. More recently, however, a study by Stefan Blessin demonstrates just how right the retrograde romantic had been. Rejecting the once common view that the Tower Society more or less manages Wilhelm's education—a premise favored by those who have read the *Lehrjahre* as an *Erziehungsroman* or, for that matter, as a *Bildungsroman*—Blessin stresses “[d]ie dominierende Rolle des Zufalls” [“the dominant role of chance”] in the novel.<sup>67</sup> So ubiquitous is chance, he argues (“Der Zufall ist überall im Spiel”), that no individual or higher will can be said to arrange the developments or outcome. In this, again, he would seem to agree with Novalis. Novalis, however, had criticized Goethe's fascination with accidents as a “fatal” flaw of the novel. And we recall Marc Redmond, who argued that the fortunate accidents of this and other *Bildungsromane* suggest a disreputable kinship with popular fiction. Indeed, Blessin likewise recalls Schiller's worry, “daß das Interesse des Lesers sich konsumiert, Rätsel aufzulösen” [“that the reader's interest will be exhausted solving riddles”] (HA VII, 641), and acknowledges that the *Lehrjahre* shares the fate of popular novels: “sie sind aus der Mode” [“it's out of style”] (55). Blessin contrasts Goethe's unfashionable novel with the realist novel of disillusionment (“Desillusionsroman”), a standard of timeless literature. But in Blessin's view the accidents in the *Lehrjahre* are more than machinery employed in the interest of a happy outcome. Within the liberal economy, says Blessin, accidents make possible a social order that cannot be managed by any social, political or individual will.

As have others, Blessin recognizes atavism in Wilhelm's attraction to theatric and aristocratic representation. But not in Wilhelm alone. Just as the older Meister accumulated frozen assets (German: *Immobilien*) in emulation of the outdated “Repräsentationsstil des Adels” [“representational manner of the nobility”], Blessin argues that the successful burgher felt a regressive attraction to the “feudalistische Lebenshaltung” [“feudalistic lifestyle”] (18ff.). In this respect, the wish of Meister *père* that Meister *fils* inherit his estate and follow in Father's footsteps is, as Blessin puts it,

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<sup>67</sup>*Die Romane Goethes*, p. 11.

“ein dysfunktionales Moment” [“a dysfunctional aspect”] in the lifestyle of the German *Kaufmann*. By stressing inheritance of an estate rather than of liquid assets, Blessin contends, the wealthy bourgeois denied his origin and nature, even the social conditions that made possible his prosperity. Still, accident or chance returned the lost sheep to the economic fold: “Der Zufall bedeutet in der vollentfalteten Marktgesellschaft *nicht das Chaos*, sondern in ihm wird positiv anerkannt, daß der eine über den anderen keine absolute Macht hat, vielmehr ihn nehmen muß, wie er ist.” [“In a fully developed market society, chance does *not mean chaos*; instead, it means positively that no one has absolute power over another, but must accept him as he is.”] (24, my italics). Again: “Der Zufall ist der Inbegriff des Marktes und aller Institutionen der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft. In dieser Funktion wird er zu einem unablässig *tätigen und schöpferischen Element*.” [“Chance is the very essence of the market and of all institutions in middle-class society. In this function it becomes a perpetually active and creative element.”] (24, my italics).

Blessin is referring to chance as more than possibility or disruption, i.e. that it may come out of nowhere and upset the apple cart, so to speak. Rather, he means the unintended order that emerges amid the competing interests of the marketplace: what Adam Smith had compared to an invisible hand. According to Blessin, it is money as a means of exchange that engenders order amid random competition:

Als ein für den einzelnen Inkommensurables wird der Zufall im ganzen der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft gesteuert durch eine in soziologischen Kategorien beschreibbaren Bewegung an der Basis gesellschaftlicher Verhältnisse. Das Geld entfaltet auf diese Weise im 2. Buch der *Lehrjahre* eine handlungsbestimmende Dynamik (25).

[What is incommensurable for the individual, operates as chance within the whole of burgher society in terms of a movement that is grounded in social relations, and that is defined within sociological categories. In Book Two of the *Lehrjahre*, money develops in this way a plot-structuring dynamic.]

In the liberal view, Blessin observes, the competing interests of individuals, in life so dissimilar, are rendered equivalent when they are **liquidated**—that is, when they assume their market or monetary value. Whereas the feudal society to which Wilhelm is attracted requires that everyone recognize and adhere to a pre-established order, lest it descend into disorder, Blessin argues that the liberal social economy in the *Lehrjahre* does not depend on the individual’s awareness or conformity. “Es gilt [. . .] als obere Begrenzung für die

Reflexivität [der *Lehrjahre*] wie aller seiner Figuren, daß die Vernunft des Marktes sich nicht überbieten läßt” [“It signifies (. . .) the limit of reflexivity [of the *Lehrjahre*], as well as of all characters within it, that the rationality of the market cannot be superseded”] (Blessin 42). The liberal economy, then, irreducible to any social institution or ideology, is treated in the novel as **a function of nature**.<sup>68</sup> Wilhelm rejects the market in favor of *Schicksal* and its prescriptions; it is this misunderstanding of social and natural reality that the Abbé will endeavor to correct.

Blessin virtually reduces the *raison d'être* of the Tower Society to a market rationale when, referring to the Tower, he asserts: “Deren Ziel ist, die Warenzirkulation auszuweiten und gegen eine Revolution zu sichern” [“Their aim is to expand the circulation of goods and guard it against the event of a revolution”] (28). Other scholars have objected, however, to Blessin’s attribution of economic motives to the Abbé & Co. Michael Neumann counters that Blessin’s “national-ökonomische Homologie” fails to account for Wilhelm’s friend Werner, who personifies the narrow self-interest of the capitalist. Of Wilhelm’s “Regression auf eine vorbürgerliche Entwicklungsstufe” [“regression to a pre-burgher developmental level”] (Blessin 18), Neumann contends: “[Blessin] übersieht dabei, daß eben diese Abweichung vom ‘bürgerlichen’ Schema Wilhelm davor bewahrt, eine kümmerliche Figur vom Schlage Werners zu werden.” [“[Blessin] overlooks that precisely this deviation from the ‘burgher’ model preserves Wilhelm from becoming a meager character of Werner’s sort.”]<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the explicit contrast offered by Werner himself on the reunion with his wayfaring friend seriously risks being taken for the moral of the story. As he admires Wilhelm:

“Nein! nein!” rief [Werner] aus, “so was ist mir noch nicht vorgekommen, und doch weiß ich wohl, daß ich mich nicht betriege. Deine Augen sind tiefer, deine Stirn ist breiter, Deine Nase feiner und Dein Mund liebevoller geworden. Seht nur einmal, wie er steht! wie das alles paßt und zusammenhängt! Wie doch das Faulenzen gedeihet! Ich armer Teufel

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<sup>68</sup>In this respect Blessin’s use of the word “Chaos”, to describe what chance and the economy in the novel **are not**, lags behind newer developments in Chaos Theory into the nature of orderly disorder.

<sup>69</sup>See footnote on p. 27 of Neumann, *Roman und Ritus: Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (Frankfurt a/M: Vittorio Klostermann, 1992).

dagegen” – er besah sich im Spiegel – “wenn ich diese Zeit her nicht recht viel Geld gewonnen hätte, so wäre doch auch gar nichts an mir” (499).

[“(No! No!) I’ve never seen anything like this,” said Werner, “and yet I know I am not deceiving myself. Your eyes are more deep set, your forehead is broader, your nose is more delicate and your mouth is much more pleasant. Look at how you stand! How well everything fits together! Indolence makes one prosper, whereas I, poor wretch,” he said, looking at himself in the mirror, “if I had not spent my time earning a mint of money, there wouldn’t be anything to say for me” (EAB 306, my insertion).]

The profit-maker by trade, who has lived only for money and the amusement it can buy, has no authentic self. Like a phoenix risen from the ashes, Wilhelm’s boyhood allegory of Trade and Poetry, which he earlier had committed to the flames, is played out in reality; but this time the competing goddesses reappear as a work-(and play)-aholic versus a human pulsing with life and love. It is an aesthetic comparison that will enter into the stock of popular novel and melodrama.

We recall a similar conversation of the friends early in the novel, where the allegorical poem becomes the subject of debate. At that time Wilhelm and Werner assumed contrary positions like two lawyers in litigation: Werner defended the dignity of Trade, presented as a “zusammengeschrumpften, erbärmlichen Sybille” [“shrunken, miserable sibyl”] in his friend’s poem; whereas Wilhelm had advocated Poetry (37; DWH). When the apostle of “doppelte Buchhaltung” [“double bookkeeping”] praises the order, beauty, and grandeur of the market, Wilhelm accuses him of mistaking the *form* of life for its substance (“das eigentliche Fazit des Lebens”). Werner answers that the form and the thing are the same in business. Just as he years earlier had profited as the supplier for Wilhelm’s and the other children’s theatrical projects, Werner continues to profit with little scruple from other people’s interests, even from their misfortunes. His only interests are money and the amusements that it can buy; the structures and dynamic of the marketplace are his world. Werner’s failure to take a particular interest in life leaves him devoid of real personality; he is no “Persönchen”. His inner poverty manifests itself in his diminished appearance. Werner complicates the economic dimension in the *Lehrjahre*. While that is no cause to dismiss Blessin’s insights, it does point out a blind spot in his analysis of the novel. The pedagogical interest of the Abbé and his Society is, after all, undeniable; the economic aims that Blessin ascribes to them do not exhaust the Abbé’s

interests and motives. The economic turn is, rather, a later development, not the original purpose of the society.

### *Humanism and the Societies of the Tower*

In a study that explicates both the pedagogical and the social interests of the Tower, Rosemarie Haas analyzes the *Lehrjahre* in relation to the *Geheimbundroman*, a continental cousin of the gothic novel, in which the errant hero finds love and enlightenment in a secret brotherhood: into which he is drawn not least of all by the chaste attractions of the *Bundestochter*, typically the daughter (biological or adopted) of a priestly-patriarchal figure.<sup>70</sup> One may compare the literary sub-genre to Schickaneder's masonic opera, the *Zauberflöte*, embalmed with the timeless strains of Mozart, for it has all the elements of the phallogentric romance to which it is related. Demonstrating the numerous parallels, some unmistakable, between the *Lehrjahre* and contemporary *Bundesromane*, Haas nevertheless highlights the irony with which Goethe distances his novel from its models. She points out that the Society of the Tower never attempt to manipulate the decisions that Wilhelm makes. Haas demonstrates, rather, that they appear at crises or other crucial junctures of his life and limit their intervention to **interpretations** of his experience.<sup>71</sup> Even then it is only in his initiation ceremony that Wilhelm is made to see the relation between his various encounters with emissaries of the Tower; as a consequence he likewise begins to see a wholeness in his own life. Once again, however, it is a hermeneutic rather than a causal wholeness. Even as Wilhelm perceives for the first time the part that accidents have played—"Und das, was wir Schicksal nennen, sollte es bloß Zufall sein?" ["Is what we call 'fate,' really only chance?"] (494; EAB 302)—he

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<sup>70</sup>See Haas, *Die Turmgesellschaft in Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahren. Zur Geschichte der Geheimbundromane und der Romantheorie im 18. Jahrhundert*. (Bern: Lang, 1975).

<sup>71</sup>The word "interpretation" comes on my account. Nevertheless, Haas asserts regarding Jarno, "Als Organ des Augenblicks qualifiziert er sich, wie *Hermes*, zum Boten." ["As the mouthpiece of the moment he qualifies as a messenger like *Hermes*."] (59, my italics). And of the Abbé she insists, "daß er nicht als anschauliche handelnde Figur, sondern als *Ideenträger* in den Roman eingeführt ist: um die Art, wie Wilhelm sich irrend bildet, als theoretisches Prinzip zu vertreten und zu legitimieren" ["that he is introduced into the novel not as a visible actor, but as *bearer of ideas*: so as to represent and legitimize, as a theoretical principle, the way that Wilhelm cultivates himself even as he errs"] (Ibid., my italics).



recognizes the unifying interpretation that his misdirected life receives in his *Lehrbrief*, the parchment of his life that has found its home in the Tower:

Er fand die umständliche Geschichte seines Lebens in großen, scharfen Zügen geschildert; weder einzelne Begebenheiten, noch beschränkte Empfindungen verwirrten seinen Blick, allgemeine liebevolle Betrachtungen gaben ihm Fingerzeige, ohne ihn zu beschämen, und er sah zum erstenmal sein Bild außer sich, zwar nicht, wie im Spiegel, ein zweites Selbst, sondern wie im Porträt ein anderes Selbst: man bekennt sich zwar nicht zu allen Zügen, aber man freut sich, daß ein denkender Geist uns so hat fassen, ein großes Talent uns so hat darstellen wollen [. . .] (505).

[The account of his life was related in every detail and with great incisiveness. His attention was not distracted by the report of individual events or momentary emotions, sympathetic comments enlightened him without embarrassing him, and he saw a picture of himself, not like a second self in a mirror, but a different self, one outside of him, as in a painting. One never approves of everything in a portrait, but one is always glad that a thoughtful mind has seen us thus and a superior talent enjoyed portraying us in such a way (. . .) (EAB 309).]

Just as the painter, rather than the subject, is the source of aesthetic coherence in a portrait, the Tower takes Wilhelm's life, with all its ups and downs and detours, and presents it in the linear causality of biography.

Haas recognizes in the Tower the "Verkörperung seiner [Wilhelms] Entelechie oder Bildungsidee" ["embodiment of (Wilhelm's) entelechy or idea of self-cultivation"] (56). What she means is that the Tower comes to assume the role that Wilhelm had attributed to *Schicksal*; but rather than direct his life as would fate, its emissaries make visible the results of a natural growth and development by shining the selective light of its outcome onto what was otherwise a more or less arbitrary succession of choices and occurrences.<sup>72</sup> In a sense, then, the Tower is the narrator of Wilhelm's biography. Even if

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<sup>72</sup>Haas provides what is in my opinion an essential insight into the theory of the novel that is presented (as the consensus of Wilhelm and Serlo) in Book Five, inasmuch as it is relevant to the *Lehrjahre* (See pp. 307-8). She sees in the retarding function of Wilhelm's mistaken views and values (*Gesinnungen*) the very condition that makes possible his personal growth and development: "Aber während in den dort als Beispiel herangezogenen englischen Romanen diese Retardation, die sich aus dem Konflikt der Grundsätze Grandisons, Clarisses etc. mit den Zufällen ergibt, nur von Zeit zu Zeit den Fluß der Handlung mechanisch staut, ist sie im Wilhelm Meister identisch mit dem Gesetz organischen Wachstums, das die geschilderte Entwicklung erst ermöglicht" ["But while in the English novels given as examples this retarding arises from the conflict of the principles of Grandison, Clarissa, etc. with the chance events, and only blocks now and again the flow of developments, it is in Wilhelm Meister identical with the law of organic growth, which makes possible in the first place the development that is portrayed"] (53).

he misses in his own life the concrete, visible results that he admires in Lothario and others, there is one result that not only he, but even the capitalist Werner can admire: Wilhelm's own beautiful self, reflected in, and legitimized by, the biographical "portrait" rendered by the pedagogues of the Tower. Contrasting the Tower, then, with secret societies of the eighteenth century, such as the *Illuminati*, that schooled their charge in the art of government—the interest, incidentally, of early *Erziehungsromane* such as Fénelon's *Télémaque*—Haas identifies as the interest of the Tower "die Ausbildung eines Individuums" ["the formation of an individual"] (82).

Haas distinguishes sharply between the earlier pedagogical interests of the Tower and those of the corporate body (*Sozietät*) that it is in the process of becoming by the end of the novel. The passage to which this refers is brief and is worth quoting. Jarno announces to Natalie and Wilhelm:

“[. . .] aus unserm alten Turm soll eine Sozietät ausgehen, die sich in alle Teile der Welt ausbreiten, in die man aus jedem Teile der Welt eintreten kann. Wir assekurieren uns untereinander unsere Existenz, auf den einzigen Fall, daß eine Staatsrevolution den einen oder den andern von seinen Besitztümern völlig vertriebe” (564).

[“( . . . ) our old Tower is to become a (corporate) society that will extend into all parts of the world, and that one might join in any part of the world. We will secure one another's material existence in the event that a national revolution rob the one or other entirely of his possessions” (DWH).]

Jarno has just advised Wilhelm on the risk one faces having one's capital limited to a single property or investment. He then adds that he is emigrating to America and the Abbé to Russia, while Lothario is staying behind in good ole Deutschland. Haas sees in the corporate society (the *Sozietät*, as opposed to the earlier *Gesellschaft*) the expansion of the Tower's influence from the individual to the nation: “Die Sozietät wird als Führerin der Nation konzipiert. Sie übernimmt damit die Aufgabe, für die zunächst das Nationaltheater ausersehen war.” [“The (corporate) society is conceived to lead the nation. It assumes the role that earlier had been intended (by Wilhelm) for a national theater.”] (63, my insertion). Whereas the Abbé had been at the center of the pedagogical endeavors, she argues that the insurance/cooperative enterprise revolve around Lothario.

In this respect, then, Haas attributes to the *Sozietät* the leadership capacity that Aurelie had come to expect from Lothario.<sup>73</sup>

The broader and, in a fundamental sense, **political** function that Haas ascribes to the *Sozietät* is perhaps the most questionable assertion in her otherwise solid analysis. The co-op has all the features of a transnational private network, rather than a national enterprise with political ambitions. Even if Lothario exhibits all the virtues of a loyal citizen and taxpayer, the new undertaking is motivated by the vulnerability of the state since the French Revolution, and its attempt to bypass the imperilled *polis* reflects middle-class confidence in the private transactions of the liberal market. Moreover, its approach to managing capital through diversification and decentralization is opposed the control mechanisms of the state.<sup>74</sup> Be that as it may, Haas provides us with a key to understanding the Tower. Its pedagogy, for all its attention to the particular talents and desires of its pupils, is oriented toward its vision of modern society. That is, the kind of individual that its pedagogy produced at once presumes and results in an essentially modern reconfiguration of social and even personal relations. In order to assess the role of the Tower in Wilhelm's *Bildung*, be it active or symbolic, we must trace the course of Wilhelm's development through the stations or crises that Haas has identified, and at which he encounters the emissaries of the Tower.

While any statements at this point about the role of the Tower Society in Wilhelm's life must remain tentative, critical and scholarly readings do point to some essential features. The Abbé and his Tower are interested in breaking with religious and social traditions that stand in the way of free and active human enterprise. Their modern interpretation of the human species envisions a new society in which those individuals

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<sup>73</sup>She says of Lothario, “Ich freute mich, einen Anführer [der Nation] gefunden zu haben” (264). [“I was glad to have found a leader”] (EAB 157).] The context makes it clear that the leader she is happy to have found is one for Germany, as well as for herself. What Aurelie does not know is that her aristocratic beau had learned in America to love the private, productive life of the free citizen, rather than the representative role in society to which his noble lineage and tradition had qualified him. Haas pinpoints what both attracts Aurelie and makes Lothario an attractive leader: “an [Lothario interessiert] nur die eindrucksvolle Persönlichkeit” [“what interests others about (Lothario) is his impressive personality”] (62).

<sup>74</sup>While the sense of *Nation*, with its ethnic connotation, is not identical with the political state, Haas overlooks entirely the essentially private logic of the *Sozietät* or corporate body that the Tower becomes.

who possess sufficient ability and ambition can cultivate their selfhood on their own terms, rather than conform to the customary roles of feudalism. The Tower resists Wilhelm's fatalistic outlook and theatric ambitions precisely because they recognize no design or destiny in nature: no pre-written role for him to memorize and perform. There is a world made up of certain natural laws that at the same time leave considerable room for chance and, with it, creative activity. If natural law represents the ground rules common to all, the Tower recognizes in **chance** the malleable stuff of life from which the autonomous human can make his own, original mark as a self in the modern social economy. Blessin in particular has shown us that the ethos of liberalism saturates the world of Goethe's novel. He points out that liberal society thrives on accidents or chance as the necessary condition for social relations that subject no one to another's purpose or intentions—social relations that permit each person to pursue freely his or her own ends without threatening the order of society.

Wilhelm's fatalism not only tends away from his own respectable burgher milieu; more important to the Abbé and Tower is that the agreeable young fatalist is unprepared for life in the real world and real society. Even more important, however, is the fact that Wilhelm's erroneous views in no way void the value of his often mistaken approach to life heretofore. The Abbé's aesthetic pedagogy still can award him an honorary degree in the name of Nature: a biography that retouches his life to give it the **form** of personal wholeness that he has been looking for. Even if he is not prepared to assume the whole responsibility for his own life, the Abbé announces to Wilhelm, "[D]eine Lehrjahre sind vorüber; die Natur hat dich losgesprochen" (497). ["Your apprenticeship is completed, Nature has given you your freedom"] (EAB 304). We have seen that even after his initiation ceremony, Wilhelm still looks for someone to give him a role in life. He has not yet fully absorbed the idea of freedom that the Society encourages him to assume and use in a productive way. In the following chapter we will learn the reasons for this. We will see lengths to which the Tower will go to help Nature teach him its lesson for life.

## CHAPTER III

### SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE: THE PERIL AND THE PRIZE

#### Wilhelm Meister's Aesthetic Apprenticeship

We have seen that Schlechta holds the Tower accountable for alienating Wilhelm from his original world (105), as well as for a “Verrat am Menschen Wilhelm”: a betrayal of his humanity in which it spares no effort to implicate Wilhelm himself (63).

Slechta's standard of authenticity is the Wilhelm of Book One and his relationship with Mariane, for whose death and erasure from Wilhelm's story even Schiller had scolded the author. Schlechta sees in their love of Book One the climax of the novel, and in the following seven books one long denouement: “In der Begegnung mit Mariane hatte Wilhelm, begnadet wie er war, das Äußerste des ihm Möglichen erreicht; er hatte—begnadet wie er war—das Menschenmögliche erfahren. Von hier ab gibt es nur Abstieg.” [“In his encounter with Mariane Wilhelm enjoyed the grace to achieve the highest of which he was capable; he was graced to experience what was humanly possible. From here on there is only descent.”] (106). Schlechta's gloomy forecast for Wilhelm's development is no doubt influenced by his Nietzschean hermeneutic. We too had called attention to Wilhelm's early faith in the theater as a locus of social communion, described in language that intersects with Nietzsche's category of the Dionysian.<sup>75</sup>

Slechta's negative assessment of the Tower and its influence takes at face value Wilhelm's own understanding of his relationship with Mariane. Wilhelm compares the pleasure of their future, theater-going *Publikum* to his own erotic bliss: “[. . .] so gewiß mir an Deinem Busen Freuden gewährt waren, die immer himmlisch genennt werden müssen, weil wir uns in jenen Augenblicken aus uns selbst gerückt, über uns selbst

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<sup>75</sup> This is really not all that surprising, as I noted in the last chapter. Schiller's essays on aesthetics, especially his treatise *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*—written at the same time that Goethe was at work on the *Lehrjahre*, and while the two poets engaged in fruitful dialogue—articulate two experiences of beauty that bear a distinct resemblance to Nietzsche's categories of the Dionysian and Apollonian. A *schmelzende Schönheit* [melting or relaxing beauty] and an *anspannende Schönheit* [tensing or rigidifying beauty], characterized by either inclination or duty, are finally reconciled only in the ideal of human beauty, the outline of which fits precisely Wilhelm's beautiful Amazon, Natalie.

erhaben fühlen” (67). [“because the joys of being with you were always heavenly delights, because we were lifted beyond ourselves, and felt above ourselves” (EAB 36).] Wilhelm writes that the experience of the theater, like that of love, transcends the boundaries of one’s individual life and initiates the participant into an originary oneness with others. Schlechta likewise sees this oneness in Wilhelm’s relationship with Mariane, which he compares to the Christmas puppet show that made such a mighty impression on Wilhelm as a child: “Wie in der kindlichen Welt Außen und Innen eins sind—weshalb denn alle Dinge die Sprache des Herzens reden und der unschuldige Geist noch den Flitter der Marionetten beseelt, *so sprengt nun die Liebe die Schranken des engen Selbst.*” [“As in the child’s world the inner and outer are one—which is why all things speak the language of the heart and the innocent mind can still give life to the illusion of the marionettes, *so does love shatter the narrow boundaries of the self.*”] (106, my italics). But is this Dionysian characterization of Wilhelm’s love accurate? Does it even fit, for that matter, his earlier experience of the puppet theater?

Much like Haas, Schlechta recognizes that the Tower stresses and cultivates “ein petrifiziertes Individuum” [“a petrified individual”] (72)—even as it advises that same individual to lose himself, in Jarno’s words, “in einer größern Masse” [“in a greater crowd”]: a busy network of active and productive people (493; DWH).<sup>76</sup> Schlechta, on the other hand, advocates an existence pulsing with life that is ecstatically open to passion (as both pleasure and suffering) and to the interrelatedness of being that it implies. But as much as Schlechta prefers Wilhelm’s Dionysian dream to the global networking of the

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<sup>76</sup>Based on the counsel of Jarno and the Abbé, as well as on Wilhelm’s *Lehrbrief* or letter of graduation—which Schlechta characterizes as a “Katechismus klassizistischer Ästhetik” (64)—Schlechta caricatures the Weltanschauung of the Tower as follows: “lerne, dich in Tätigkeit verlieren; begreife, daß du kein Ganzes bist, kein Ganzes sein kannst, daß du nur als genauer Teil an einem ideellen Ganzen, an der Menschheit mitzuwirken vermagst. Das ist das Thema der großen Entsagung. Gib *dein* Leben auf!” [“learn to lose yourself in activity; understand that you neither are nor can be a whole, that you can act only as one part of an ideal whole, of humanity. That is the theme of the great renunciation. Give up *your* life!”] (62). His wholly negative analysis, however, itself never resolves the characteristically modern problem of the *Bildungsroman*: how to preserve the integrity of the individual and at the same time realize his (and by the latter half of the nineteenth century, **her**) belated integration into society. Even as he sympathizes with Wilhelm’s early Dionysian outlook and experience, Schlechta advocates the integrity of an individual that he sees threatened by the social program of the Tower. Hence his analysis presents a paradox, for the resolution of which his Nietzschean background offers scant promise.

Tower, closer scrutiny of the former reveals that the substance of his early theatric and erotic experience **does not at all align with his own interpretation of the same**. In the first chapter we saw that Wilhelm's subjective "Erfahrungen des Herzens und Geistes" ["experiences of heart and mind"] exercised his emotional faculties and imagination, promoting the development of his individual self-consciousness (266; EAB 159). The *Lehrjahre* attributes a formative value to Wilhelm's early aesthetic experience of the theater, just as the country pastor he recognizes in Book Seven assures him that all experiences contribute to one's *Bildung*. The Abbé sees a problem, however, in the fatalism of Wilhelm's theatric Weltanschauung, which permits him to make choices, trusting the desire that motivated them, yet giving no thought to the consequences. It is this failure to assume responsibility for his life that Wilhelm must learn to correct.

In the first chapter of this study, we discovered that Wilhelm's theatric experience and its role-playing, far from transcending or even blurring the boundaries of the self, amount to what Strack has termed *Innerlichkeitserfahrung* [experience of innerness]: what in Goethean terms might be described as an experience of one's own entelechy—experience, in other words, that constitutes the boundaries and substance of the subject. Wilhelm had recognized, we remember, that his childhood dabbling in puppet shows and theater, rather than fostering mastery of the art, found satisfaction "in der Erfindung und in der Beschäftigung der Einbildungskraft" (24). ["in the invention and the exercise of my imagination" (DWH).] We already have noted the perils to which the eighteenth-century imagination found itself exposed. Wilhelm's imagination, it would seem, is the very thing that stands in the way of experience and the knowledge of objects it affords. From the pragmatic, even utilitarian point of view of the Tower, the subjective images that a runaway imagination creates, as well as the mistaken ideas of reality to which they give rise, are the **errors** that its empirical pedagogy was designed to correct—naturally. Be that as it may, even an imagination that is overly subservient to the subject has a positive function in the novel, for it is an expression of the self-defining impetus of the subject. When a broken-hearted Wilhelm feeds his fragmentary poetic creation to the flames, because they are void of genius, their earlier critic Werner now comes to their defense. He reasons as follows: "[E]s sei nicht vernünftig, ein Talent, zu dem man nur

einigermaßen Neigung und Geschick habe, des wegen, weil man es niemals in der größten Vollkommenheit ausüben werde, ganz aufzugeben” (82). [“Werner insisted that it was ridiculous to abandon a talent he had exercised with pleasure and some skill, simply because he would never achieve perfection through it” (EAB 44).] The suggestion is typical of Werner; he sees in Wilhelm’s decided passion and mediocre gift for poetry all the makings of a hobby: a source, in other words, of private amusement. Wilhelm’s romantic vision of the poet, that favorite on whom Nature had bestowed creative genius, is typical of a popular version of the artist as Kant had conceived him. Actually, the human inclination to mimicry that Wilhelm describes, to try out any activity that one has seen another do well, is an accurate portrayal of the dilettante.

But Wilhelm’s condemnation of his early poetry overlooks its role in his own *Bildung* within the larger thematic context of the novel. As a result of his introduction into “die große Welt” [“the great world”] of the court, Wilhelm resumes his theatric avocation, this time with an eye to quality. Unlike the “hämisch[e] Kritik” [“scathing criticism”] that had consigned the “geistlose Nachahmung” [“spiritless imitation”] of his amateur verses to the ash pile, a productive criticism elevates the quality of his work and taste in a way that will prepare him for his brief career on the professional stage (78). Even then, however, rather than playing Hamlet as would a professional actor, whom Goethe portrays in Serlo as a master of mimicry and imitation: Wilhelm, it is demonstrated, plays himself.<sup>77</sup> The fact that he enjoys reasonable success in the theater—for which Jarno insists, to Wilhelm’s chagrin, that he has ““doch einmal kein Talent””

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<sup>77</sup>Of his successful opening night performance we read: “[E]r vergaß, so wie die Zuschauer, darüber des Geistes und *erschrak wirklich*, als Horatio ausrief: ‘Seht her, es kommt!’ Er fuhr mit Heftigkeit herum, und die edle große Gestalt, der leise, unhörbare Tritt, die leichte Bewegung in der schwerscheinenden Rüstung machten einen so starken Eindruck auf ihn, daß er wie versteinert dastand und nur mit halber Stimme: ‘Ihr Engel und himmlischen Geister, beschützt uns!’ ausrufen konnte. Er starrte ihn an, holte einigemal Atem und brachte die Anrede an den Geist so verwirrt, zerstückt und gezwungen vor, *daß die größte Kunst sie nicht so trefflich hätte ausdrücken können*” (321, my italics). [“(L)ike the spectators, he forgot about the Ghost, and was therefore *quite* (really) *terrified* when Horatio said: ‘Look, my lord, it comes!’ He turned around sharply, and the tall noble figure with its soft silent tread in the seeming heavy armor made such a strong effect on him that he stood there petrified and could only murmur the words: ‘Angels and ministers of grace defend us!’ He stared at the figure, took a few deep breaths, and delivered his address to the Ghost in such a distraught, broken and compulsive manner *that the greatest artist of artists (greatest art) could not have done better*” (EAB 194, my italics and insertions).] The use of the subjunctive mood makes it clear that Wilhelm is not performing at all; it is not art but lived experience that makes a riveting impression on both the actor and audience.



(469) [“no talent after all” (DWH)]—only shows how well suited his poetic and dramatic hobbyhorse is, for a time, to the growth of his personality. In Schiller’s terminology, the *Spieltrieb* [instinct for play] expressed in Wilhelm’s poetic and theatric activity, cultivates his subjective consciousness. Moreover, as he then progresses through ever more elevated arenas of social and theatric representation, his human *Formtrieb* [instinct for form] culminates in what we have termed an aesthetic self-consciousness: a personal dignity trained by the sense of what is consistent with human beauty. This is to be distinguished from the **productive** self-consciousness of Lothario and Jarno, to which Wilhelm has not yet advanced; but it has afforded him the well-formed personality that Jarno lacks, and that makes our hero attractive and interesting to others. After all, who is the chosen subject of this Bildungsroman: Wilhelm or Jarno? Case closed.

Schiller’s letters are full of praise for Goethe’s conception and portrayal of the Tower, that “verborgen wirkender höherer Verstand” [“hidden influence of a higher understanding”] that accompanies Wilhelm through the course of his development, “ohne die Natur in ihrem freien Gange zu stören” [“without interrupting the course of Nature”].<sup>78</sup> His only anxiety is that the “Idee” of Goethe’s novel might be lost on the average reader, and he urges his friend to let one of the characters voice the idea more clearly. “Der Abbé scheint mir diesen Auftrag recht gut besorgen zu können” [“The Abbé, it seems to me, can manage the job quite well”] (HA VII, 641). It is only “natural” that Schiller should identify with the Abbé and with his pedagogical aims. Schiller sees in Wilhelm’s theatric aspirations and brief stage career “bloß den Irrtum” [“only an error”] (642); it is essentially the same error of which the Abbé speaks in the ceremony, as Wilhelm reflects:

“Von welchem Irrtum kann der Mann sprechen”, sagte [Wilhelm] zu sich selbst, “als von dem, der mich mein ganzes Leben verfolgt hat, daß ich da [im Theater] Bildung suchte, wo keine zu finden war, daß ich mir einbildete, ein Talent erwerben zu können, zu dem ich nicht die geringste Anlage hatte!” (495).

[“What error can the man be referring to, ” (Wilhelm) asked himself, “except that which has dogged me all my life: seeking cultivation where none was to be found, imaging [*sic.*] I could acquire a talent to which I had no propensity” (EAB 302).]

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<sup>78</sup>Letter to Goethe of July 8, 1796 (HA VII, 640).

Schiller interprets Wilhelm's apprenticeship ("den Begriff der Lehrjahre"; "concept of apprenticeship") as making mistakes until one realizes that they were mistakes; and mastery as "die Überzeugung von der Irrigkeit jenes Suchens, von der Notwendigkeit des eigenen Hervorbringens usw." ["the conviction that such a search is in error, that it is necessary to be productive, etc."] (HA VII, 642). In Schiller's assessment, then, Books One through Five were just one big, albeit delightful mistake preceding the step to autonomy. Schiller's reading, however, is strongly colored by his own agenda outlined in his *Ästhetische Erziehung*, which placed a social-ethical value on Kant's aesthetic category of play, seeing in the same a tutelage toward socially responsible autonomy. That Goethe chose to pass over Schiller's advice respecting the Abbé; that he ironically **undermines** the authority of the same at the close of the novel, leaving the resolution of tension to Bacchus-Friedrich rather than to the cleric's behind-closed-door designs: Goethe brackets off the Tower and its program as only part of the equation that is reality in the novel.<sup>79</sup>

In the above I have suggested something, the demonstration of which lies outside the limits and interest of this study: that the pedagogical program of the Tower, to which the novel undoubtedly ascribes a certain interpretive authority within the narrative, stands in close proximity to the theory of aesthetic education that Schiller outlines in his *Ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*.<sup>80</sup> Sufficient for now is the observation that the Tower enjoys a unique legitimacy in the novel that is nevertheless subordinate to the highest and only credible authority in the world of the *Lehrjahre*: Nature. It is a hierarchy that nature's priest in the Abbé freely recognizes, when he announces to Wilhelm just

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<sup>79</sup>Goethe sidesteps Schiller's recommendation, ascribing the philosophical inconsistency of the novel to his own "realistischen Tick" (643). I take this to mean, if nothing else, at least that all theories and authorities in the novel are denied the last word. This is likewise evident in the closing lines of the novel and the irony they imply.

<sup>80</sup>It is worth noting that the master of the Tower and all that is associated with it, the Abbé, is a religious figure who, aside from his title, is so ambiguous as to his confession that Wilhelm at first takes him "für einen lutherischen Geistlichen" ["for a Lutheran minister"] (421). For that matter, his Catholicism is so fluid that the only hagiography that bears his imprimatur is the Confessions of the pseudo-protestant *Stiftsdame*; and the funeral he presides over professes a decided and exclusive concern for this world, turning the Christian *Memento mori* into a cheery "Gedenke zu leben" ["remember to live"] (540). All of this suggests the sort of embalmed and cosmetic religion that Schiller had in mind, when he called Christianity "die einzig ästhetische Religion" ["the only aesthetic religion"]. See letter to Goethe of August 17, 1795 (HA VII, 626ff.).

what authorizes his rite of passage: “Heil dir, junger Mann! deine Lehrjahre sind vorüber; *die Natur hat dich losgesprochen*” (497, my italics). [“Hail to you, young man. Your apprenticeship is completed, *Nature has given you your freedom*” (EAB 304, my italics).] It is the superior authority of Nature that Michael Neumann has in mind when he enumerates the ritual situations of death and initiation that Wilhelm experiences at important junctures throughout the novel, of which the initiation of the Tower is only a formal imitation.<sup>81</sup> Comparing the *Lehrjahre* to Goethe’s *Lehrgedichte* on the metamorphosis of plants and animals, Neumann’s anthropological reading traces Wilhelm’s development through initiatory stations of knowledge (read: *gnosis*), by which he metamorphoses “aus einem Naturwesen in ein Kulturwesen” [“from a natural being into a cultural being”] (119).

That metamorphosis in man penetrates consciousness, is the very thing that sets human *Bildung* apart, in the world of Goethe, from the merely physical developments in the lower forms of life. We have seen that Wilhelm eventually becomes aware that self-cultivation is his real aim; his earlier Dionysian view of the theater had been precisely at odds with this purpose, as it envisioned a primal oneness rather than the differentiation of individuals. His aristocratic or representative grasp of personality, which he hopes to realize as an actor, may misconceive the real conditions of both the nobility and the theater, but it mediates nonetheless his progress toward an aesthetic self-consciousness. Wilhelm’s natural rite of passage that Neumann describes, through theater and the aristocracy to the Tower, prepares Wilhelm to grasp the higher call to individual productivity—the mode of human being most suitable to the liberal social economy. According to Neumann, it is a necessary step made imperative by the Enlightenment: “Der Mensch, so Kant, erfüllt die Bestimmung seiner Natur erst, wenn er den Mut faßt, alle fremde Leitung abzuwerfen und sich seines eigenen Verstandes zu bedienen” [“According to Kant, man fulfills the purpose of his nature, when he musters the courage to abandon the direction of others and make use of his own understanding”] (Ibid.). Even if Wilhelm has not fully arrived at such intellectual maturity, his aesthetic education—so natural that

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<sup>81</sup> See Neumann, *Roman und Ritus: Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (Frankfurt a/M: Vittorio Klostermann, 1992).

the Abbé foregoes any overt intervention à la *Emile*—represents the preparatory step that Schiller recognized in art on the way to Kantian *Mündigkeit* [self-governance]: a development to be continued in *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*. Wilhelm is prepared, that is, to become a modern human. Recalling Goethe’s poems on the metamorphoses of plants and animals, Neumann concludes, “Die Metamorphose des Menschen hat Goethe nicht als Lehrgedicht, sondern als Bildungsroman geschrieben” [“Goethe wrote the metamorphosis of man not as a didactic poem, but as a Bildungsroman”] (Ibid.).

Our analysis of the Tower within the history of its critical and scholarly reception has confirmed that it has a negative function in the novel in relation to Wilhelm’s consciousness. Unsympathetic to his fatalistic *Weltanschauung*, the Abbé and the other associates of the Tower encourage Wilhelm’s awakening interest in his own development (as self-cultivation) and advocate a vision of independent, self-reliant citizens of an international, even global economy. Skeptics such as Novalis and Schlechta actually agree with Schiller, Meister’s godfather as it were, with respect to the Tower; namely, that the latter resists the tendency of Wilhelm’s understanding and intentions. Novalis and Schlechta dismiss the Tower, because they identify in one way or another with Wilhelm’s early outlook. Yet Schiller, who favored the Abbé, dismisses Wilhelm’s theatrical ambitions and faith in destiny as the error that he must come to recognize as such. Even so, life does not wait for the Abbé to begin a lesson that it is perfectly competent to teach on its own. Given Wilhelm’s lack of practical wisdom, he is **destined** to the painful experience of his error—of his stubborn devotion to the subjective world of his imagination. Ulrich Schödlbauer explains that experience as *disillusionment* is the price Wilhelm must pay for his lack of experience: “Erfahrung als Korrekturzwang, als schmerzlicher Vollzug der Einsicht in die Widerständigkeit des Außen, erweist sich als bestimmend für den Romanheld.” [“Experience as forced correction, as painful insight into the recalcitrance of the outside world proves definitive of the protagonist in novels.”]<sup>82</sup> Wilhelm’s devotion to *Schicksal* marks his consciousness as passive in its relation to the outside world. By contrast, the *treffliche Menschen* of the Tower, including

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<sup>82</sup>See by the same, *Kunsterfahrung als Weltverstehen: Die ästhetische Form von “Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre”* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1983), p. 117ff.

their materialist catechist, the Abbé, stand for self-determined activity. It is activity that takes into account what cannot be changed (necessity), so as to shape more efficiently and masterfully whatever can be subjected to human will and skill (chance circumstances). Schödlbauer contrasts Wilhelm's trust in fate with the practical wisdom of one such as Jarno: "Dagegen ist Klugheit das wirksame Instrument der Lebensführung. Ihr Vertreter ist Jarno." ["Prudence, on the other hand, is the effective means of conducting one's life. Its representative is Jarno."] (118).

Wilhelm's passive foray in the face of resistant reality, to which the Tower but gives a voice, falls under the heading of the *Roman* as Wilhelm and Serlo distinguish it from drama: "Der Roman muß langsam gehen, und die Gesinnungen der Hauptfigur müssen, es sei auf welche Weise es wolle, das Vordringen des Ganzen zur Entwicklung aufhalten" (307). ["The novel must move slowly and the sentiments (views) of the main personage must, in some way or another, hold up the progression of the whole toward its resolution" (EAB 185, my insertion).] According to this theory it is the "Gesinnungen" or views of the heroes of novels, described as "retardierende Personen" ["retarding characters"], that resist the course of nature (308). Resistance is futile, of course; they **will** be assimilated, as their attitudes adapt to (or are hammered into shape by) rock-hard reality. But as Haas observes, the retarding mentality has a positive effect as well: "diese Retardation [. . .] ist [. . .] im Wilhelm Meister identisch mit dem Gesetz organischen Wachstums" ["this retarding (. . .) is (. . .) in Wilhelm Meister identical to the law of organic growth"] (53). In other words, while the hero of drama actively confronts reality and in tragedy is broken by the same, the more passive hero of the novel experiences correction, by which his character assumes its true form. The Abbé understands that. He may be most pleased "über den Menschen [. . .], der weiß, was ihm und andern nütze ist, und seine Willkür zu beschränken arbeitet" (72); but he enjoys the reassuring certainty that "alles trägt unmerklich zu unserer Bildung bei" (422).<sup>83</sup> In fact, if a smart person like

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<sup>83</sup>The first quote is taken from Wilhelm's first encounter with the Abbé or his brother, who asserts that he "can be really happy with a person who knows what is useful to him and others" (EAB 39); the second is from a conversation with the Abbé (or his brother) at the beginning of Book Seven. When Wilhelm reflects that nothing good came of his travels with his first theater troupe, his teacher of the cloth counters that "everything contributes imperceptibly to our development" (EAB 257).

Jarno or Werner (as different as they are in other respects) shuns error and loss more than anything, he may avoid disappointment (read: dis-illusionment); but he may likewise acquire a misanthropic streak that will stunt the growth of his personality and, along with it, his personal appeal. Werner grows prematurely old; Jarno neither can nor wishes to attach a woman to himself emotionally, choosing to wed Lydie without her consent and only for the sake of convenience.

What Haas fails to notice is that the theory of the novel she illuminates conceives the genre as a whole in terms of the Bildungsroman. Little wonder, then, that the definition of the latter, as it has been applied outside the German tradition, would seem at times to remake all novels in its image. The infectious germ originates in the middle of Goethe's prototype of the genre, with its developmental counterweight to tragedy. We will analyze other implications of the Tower's aesthetic humanism in the following chapters. For the present we want to focus on the problem that Wilhelm faces upon his introduction to the Tower. Schlechta is right when he asserts that Wilhelm's childhood and childlike mind perceive his self and the world as one. That is the essence of his fatalism. Yet the personal autonomy of the Tower is rooted in an essentially different perception: that everyone is responsible for **one's** own life, to make of it what **one** will within self-determined limits.<sup>84</sup> Schiller terms this mastery of life *Lebensgebrauch* [use of life].<sup>85</sup> His language corresponds to that of the Abbé, who had referred to human fortune ("Glück") as "eine rohe Materie" that the individual, like an artist, "zu einer Gestalt umbilden will" (72). ["a raw material" that the individual "wants shape into a form" (DWH).] This **aesthetic** philosophy of life asserts an autonomy for which Wilhelm is not in any sense prepared. His admiration for Lothario and his comrades—"friends" seems a little old-fashioned for the progressive relations of the Tower—turns repeatedly into despair

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<sup>84</sup>It is Jarno who announces to a despairing Wilhelm this principle, taken straight from Goethe's morphological conception of human development. When Wilhelm demands to know the fate that the Tower has chosen for him, Jarno declares the fact and the conditions of human autonomy: "Es ist Ihre Sache, zu prüfen und wählen, und die unsere, Ihnen beizustehen. Der Mensch ist nicht eher glücklich, als bis sein unbedingtes Streben sich selbst seine Begrenzung bestimmt" (553). ["Your job is to test and to choose; ours to assist you. No one is ever happy until his unlimited striving has set itself a limitation" (EAB 339).]

<sup>85</sup>See letter to Goethe of July 9, 1796 (HA VII, 644).

over his own misguided existence. An **objective** outlook on life—so unfamiliar to Wilhelm that he appears in this respect less advanced than the child Felix—has even by the end of the novel won few concessions from his overweening subjectivity. This subjectivity, essential though it was to his early individuation, is the illness of the sick adult Wilhelm, who has identified his own life with his grandfather's aesthetically deficient painting (and Wilhelm's favorite) of the king's sick son.

Wilhelm's preference for the kitschy painting is an interpretive touchstone for what remains to date the most illuminating study of the novel in the light of psychoanalytic theory. Like Kittler, David Roberts recognizes the essentially oedipal relations in the Meister household. But what is for Kittler and his Foucauldian archeology a sociohistorical artifact, to be isolated and placed in context—period—is for Roberts the origin of a problem. From the interiority of the subject, nurtured primarily by the mother by stimulating the imagination, and within the space of consciousness it measures off; from the steamy depths of Wilhelm's subjectivity springs a **desire** for personal wholeness that, grounded as it is in sexuality, is inclined to a "short-circuit" expressed in the symbolism of incest.<sup>86</sup> While incestuous desire proper is noticeably absent in Wilhelm's family relations, Roberts points to its representation in the juxtaposition of symbols in the novel. Certainly incest (in its both literal and attenuated forms) is present in the narrative in Mignon, the daughter of the *Harfner* and his half-sister Sperata; also with the sick son's longing for the young bride of his father, the king. And there is Lothario's earlier affair with his fiancée Therese's presumed mother, a misunderstanding that finally is resolved.

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<sup>86</sup>See *The Indirections of Desire: Hamlet in Goethe's "Wilhelm Meister"*, pp. 12-14. Even as Roberts addresses at some length the sublimation ("Aufhebung") of incestuous desire in the novel, he never addresses the fact that such desire has no factual locus whatsoever in the Meister household. Wilhelm runs repeatedly into—indeed, he seems **attracted** to persons, situations, and symbols associated with incest in the narrative; but **why** Wilhelm should be attracted to such is never accounted for, except for a questionable origin in the sale of his grandfather's art collection (including the painting of the king's sick son) and the subsequent move into a larger, more magnificent house where Wilhelm is never quite at home. But that Wilhelm's longing for a lost home and for personal wholeness should be associated with incestuous desire, is a tenuous and troubling connection. Even so, Roberts can be credited for his analysis, because the symbolic relation is certainly there. The anxiety that surrounds the taboo at the end of the eighteenth century, however, seems to be a product of modern, middle-class ideology; one that sees in a pathological rarity—and I mean here the desire of a young man for his mother or sister—a sort of social pandemic, not unlike cannibalism in the early modern accounts of explorers. Incest, that is, represents symbolically a fatal attraction that the modern subject must struggle to avoid, if it is to achieve the wholeness and autonomy of self essential to a healthy personality.

Roberts's exposition details how the taboo-burdened relation to which Wilhelm is attracted reflect his longing for his grandfather's art collection: the inheritance that his father had sold to finance a new house that Wilhelm will not claim as his own. His insatiable longing for an aesthetic idyll of childhood seeks comfort in the imaginary worlds of poetry and the stage; but this retreat into the self, Roberts argues, retards his development to manhood.<sup>87</sup> "The genesis of the genius in the *Sendung* is transformed into the study of the seductive dangers of subjectivity" (Roberts 43). Wilhelm's way through the theater in the role of Hamlet is, in Roberts's assessment, the way of therapy. Through Wilhelm's identification with the title character, the play becomes in the novel "the objectification of the psychology of Wilhelm" (221). It is the playing out of this objectification to its very end that finally releases Wilhelm from a fatalism to which he had, until then, surrendered himself.

#### Wilhelm's Theatric Therapy

We have already noted that Wilhelm wants to transfer his fatalistic submission onto the Tower and its Abbé. The latter or his twin, significantly, plays the ghost of Hamlet's father in what Roberts identifies as the reflection of Wilhelm's psyche. The disappearance of benevolent *Schicksal* from Wilhelm's world, and the ensuing refusal of the Tower to assume its function lead, amid one shock after another, to nothing less than an existential crisis in our protagonist: "Wilhelm war durch die heftigsten Leidenschaften bewegt und zerrüttet, die unvermuteten und schreckhaften Anfälle hatten sein Innerstes ganz aus aller Fassung gebracht" (605). ["Wilhelm was moved and rattled by the most violent passions, the unforeseen and frightening events had upset his innermost being" (DWH).] His perception that life has no preordained lot for him; that he should take his son and go his own way—no way in particular, that is, with no predetermined goal—arouses a dread that is entirely new to him, a prospect new and dreadful. The "Wunder" that pairs

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<sup>87</sup>Roberts: "'Der kranke Königssohn' [king's sick son] is thus the emblem of the thwarting of growth, of the natural inheritance of the son, of the kingdom to be attained, which casts its shadow (and promise) over Wilhelm's theatrical mission" (52); and again: "*Die Lehrjahre* presents this fixation to the past, the blocking and stunting of growth as the tragic mirror to the natural dynamic of development, which frustrated, turns inwards with self-destructive force" (61).



him with Natalie is another accident, dependent as it is on her supplementary character, and is in no sense **meaningful**—it is an answer, that is, to no question. Friedrich’s comparison of Wilhelm to Saul indicates, rather, that what Wilhelm **finds** in the end has no bearing on what he had **sought**. Having obtained Natalie, Wilhelm is reborn, as her name suggests; his apprenticeship is over. What Roberts calls the “tragic hold of past experience over [Wilhelm]” is broken (33). “Erinnern Sie mich nicht in diesem Augenblick des höchsten Glücks an jene Zeiten!” [“Don’t remind me of those days at this happiest of all moments(!)”] he says to Friedrich (610; EAB 373, my insertion). Henceforth, no shame or regret, no loss or guilt will encumber this modern pilgrim’s progress. Nor will there be any settling down, any domestic bliss for Wilhelm; for his pedagogical peregrination will continue in the *Wanderjahre*. It will be his education in autonomous productivity. Only when he has settled on a vocation—understood as a **career**, however, not as a calling—only then will he be released from the burden of constant relocation, a strict requirement of the Tower for his journeyman years.

That Wilhelm’s transition to a life lived in the objective world should prove so painful and difficult follows from the depth of his immersion in his own subjectivity. Were it not for the prize of Natalie, and Wilhelm might have suffered a crippling, even fatal case of the bends, so to speak. Friedrich challenges the doctor to name Wilhelm’s illness; then Friedrich himself applies the cure in the form of his sister, the patient’s bride-to-be. The real remedy, however, is the interest of a study by Hans-Jürgen Schings that addresses the relevance of Spinoza to the world of the *Lehrjahre*.<sup>88</sup> Schings points out the importance of Goethe’s Spinoza studies in his thinking at the end of the eighteenth century, and in his revision of the old *Theatralische Sendung* in particular. Schings characterizes Spinoza’s *Ethics* as “ein Remedium gegen die Melancholie der sich untergrabenden Subjektivität” [“a remedy for the melancholy of a self-destructive subjectivity”], a self-destructive subjectivity that Goethe had carried to its tragic conclusion in his *Leiden des jungen Werther* (57). The *Lehrjahre*, by contrast, “ist

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<sup>88</sup>See Schings, “Goethes ‘Wilhelm Meister’ und Spinoza”, in: *Verantwortung und Utopie: Zur Literatur der Goethezeit; ein Symposium*, ed. Wolfgang Wittkowski (Tübingen: Neimeyer, 1988), pp. 57-66.

deshalb auch der Roman einer Heilung, der beharrlich Front macht gegen alle Formen einer hypochondrieverdächtigen Innerlichkeit” [“is also for this reason a novel of healing that is directed forcefully against all forms of a suspiciously hypochondriac innerness”] (58).

Goethe may present in the *Lehrjahre* a theory of the novel that resists tragedy, but we cannot forget that his first novel was a tragedy. The tragedy of Werther does not, however, arise out of a malicious disposition of gods or the world, but out of a consciousness, mothered by the imagination, that either cannot or will not live in a natural world that does not love it back. Spinoza had mixed deism with realism to concoct a pantheism that later disciples would apply as a vaccination against Rousseauian sensibility: which, having spread through Europe with viral fury, reached its apex in the now legendary suicides of so many Werthers and Lottes. That is the sobering sermon of Spinoza for modern men who would be gods: godhood lay in assuming full responsibility for one’s own life and happiness, and good humans helped others achieve that same autonomy. The latter term describes the wares- and wedding-broker Natalie, in whom Goethe embodies “die christliche Religion in ihrem reinsten Sinne” [“the christian religion in its purest sense”].<sup>89</sup> That vision of nature and ethics stamps the lesson that the Abbé tries to offer an unreceptive Wilhelm immediately preceding his supposed betrayal by Mariane, and not least of all by fate. Spinoza’s *Ethics* found its social equivalent in the liberal national economy of Adam Smith, the essence of which Novalis had smelled, and Blessin has illuminated in the *Lehrjahre*. Spinoza’s rigorous pantheism had found in Goethe, recently returned from classical Italy, a ready convert. Goethe could not rewrite *Werther*, but he could apply the philosophical cure to his fragment, the *Theatralische Sendung*. Its fatalistic title must have sounded like a cry for help!

So in a sense Schlechta and Kittler are both right. The Tower does what it can (within self-imposed limits) to turn the Wilhelm of Book One away from what is in its view a self-destructive course. In this sense it does alienate Wilhelm from a conception of himself that is alien to what it judges to be worthy of humanity. The smooth continuity,

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<sup>89</sup>See Goethe’s letter to Schiller of August 18, 1796 (HA VII, 627).

then, that Kittler observes as Wilhelm passes from primary to secondary socialization—from the nurturing of his mother, that is, to the manly tutelage of the Tower—might appear to be a theoretical construct, a product of his Foucauldian paradigm. But that is not necessarily the case. We must bear in mind that Kittler is describing, not a particular, coherent vision of how boys **ought** to be brought up, but rather how they **were** in fact socialized, inconsistencies and discontinuities notwithstanding. The modern subject that was born in the burgher nursery acquired, under the mother hen's protective wings, an imagination that perceived the world in terms of its wishes and fantasy.

The secondary socialization that was required to reform this ready-made consumer, making him fit for productive autonomy, could prove so bewildering and painful that philosophy was required in some cases to numb the pains of a wailing desire. Goethe found Spinoza soothing; Schiller took comfort in Kant. A younger nineteenth century, for whom the classical world had become catechism, would turn for relief to the historical holism of Hegel. Nevertheless, for all his idealism and his need to frame his experience in abstract generalizations, Wilhelm never rises to the soothing heights of mature philosophy. Schiller, who noticed this, poses a question to Goethe that the former himself goes on to answer: “[W]oher mag es kommen, daß Sie einen Menschen haben erziehen und fertig machen können, ohne auf Bedürfnisse zu stoßen, denen die Philosophie nur begegnen kann? Ich bin überzeugt, daß dieses bloß der *ästhetischen Richtung* zuzuschreiben ist, die Sie in dem ganzen Romane genommen.” [“How did you manage to tutor and refine a human, without bumping into needs that only philosophy can satisfy? I am convinced that it is due to the *aesthetic direction* that you followed throughout the novel.”] (HA VII, 646, original stress). Following Roberts we can say that the aesthetic cure that Goethe prescribes for his protagonist amounts to an elaborate type of gestalt-therapy, by which the consciousness of the autistic subject, with its deficient relation to the objective world, is treated on its own terms.

Since it has become oblivious to objective perception, the subject is incapable of an empirical relation to the world; just as Wilhelm in each case either is unreceptive to the counsel the Tower or utterly misconstrues it. Yet through his representation of and identification with Hamlet in a theatric performance, Wilhelm's oedipal or narcissistic

subconscious is **played out** aesthetically. The burden of his father's expectation, that Wilhelm step into his shoes; his oedipal attachment to the world of the imagination; his fatalistic resignation to fate or authority: all of these (related) pathological *Gesinnungen* [views] find their equivalent in the burdens that weigh on and paralyze Hamlet. Hamlet is crushed and destroyed under the pressure; Wilhelm dies and is reborn: "Die vier fürstlichen Leichen sprangen behend in die Höhe und umarmten sich vor Freuden" (323). ["The four noble corpses jumped up and embraced each other joyfully" (EAB 196).] An essential condition of healing, however, is that Wilhelm really **experiences** what is represented. That this is so, is clear from the language with which the narrator characterizes Wilhelm's supposed acting:

Mit Verlangen und Neugierde *sah Wilhelm* sogleich zwischen das niedergelassene Visier hinein, konnte aber nur tiefliegende Augen neben einer wohlgebildeten Nase erblicken. *Furchtsam ausspähend* stand er vor ihm; allein als die ersten Töne aus dem Helme hervordrang, als eine wohlklingende, nur ein wenig rauhe Stimme sich in den Worten hören ließ: "Ich bin der Geist deines Vaters", trat Wilhelm einige Schritte schaudernd zurück, und das ganze Publikum schauderte. Die Stimme schien jedermann bekannt, und *Wilhelm glaubte eine Ähnlichkeit mit der Stimme seines Vaters zu bemerken* (322, my italics).

[*Wilhelm peered* eagerly into the shut visor but all he could see were deepset eyes and a well-shaped nose. He stood before him, *timid and observing*; but when the first sounds emerged from beneath the helmet, uttered in a pleasing but somewhat rough voice, out came the words: "I am thy father's spirit," Wilhelm stepped back shuddering, and the whole audience shuddered. The voice seemed familiar to everyone, and *Wilhelm thought it sounded like that of his own father* (EAB 195, my italics).]

The language that we have highlighted indicates that Wilhelm is not just play-acting; the narrator makes it clear that **it is Wilhelm**, rather than Hamlet, **who is thinking, feeling, and acting**. In this respect, Wilhelm really experiences the drama that is represented. By virtue of the unique combination of aesthetic distance **and** aesthetic identification, the elaborate performance becomes for Wilhelm a therapeutic experience—on that makes possible his recovery from a tyrannical subjectivity.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>According to Blessin, the science of psychology or psycho-pathology in this sense coincided with, and was dependent on, the emergence of fictional literature as an independent field of interest: "Die Literatur räumt von Hause aus der Innenwelt einen Platz ein, den diese nirgendwo anders gefunden hätte." ["Literature by nature clears a space for the inner world, that the latter might have found nowhere else."] Blessin continues: "Die Psychologie hat sich im Laufe des 19.

## *Personality and its Pathology*

Under the earlier patronage of the *Oheim*, the Abbé's education of Lothario and his siblings, whose parents had died while they were children, stood as an enlightened attempt to raise a New Adam: a race of humans, free from the guilt and errors introduced by irrational social and religious institutions; a race born from the head of Zeus or in this instance, the mind of the *Oheim*. Post-war literary criticism has not lavished on Lothario and Natalie the praise that the latter had reaped from Schiller, Körner, and other contemporaries of Goethe. In spite of Goethe's effort to give Lothario some depth, the characters associated with the Tower (the women in particular) have proven too pale and two-dimensional for twentieth-century and post-modern tastes. This may be attributed not least of all to the ideal they personify, peculiar to high modernity: the ideal of perfect self-identity. Distancing itself from the aristocratic personality, the value of which was derived from the social position that an individual occupied—the burgher ideal of self-worth would not (because it might not) have anything to do with such childish role-playing. Nor, however, would the ideal be reduced, as its artisan ancestors had been, to the wares it produced. Rather, productivity was but a fruit, as sweet and rich as the capital it produced, of an autonomous and self-contained person: whose modern personality was fully and beautifully transparent because thoroughly homogeneous and consistent with itself.

Autonomous man was always to be on the watch, however, against a force that threatened to wreak havoc on his inner equilibrium: desire. It is the same desire that Roberts sees leading Wilhelm through its dark labyrinth, until its enactment in the theater

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Jahrhunderts zu einer Wissenschaft entwickelt und in der Psychoanalyse von Freud ihre prominenteste Gestalt erhalten, – entstanden ist sie aber im 18. Jahrhundert in der Literatur.” [“In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century psychology developed into a science and assumed in Freud's psychoanalysis its most prominent form, – but it arose in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and in literature.”] See: *Goethes Romane: Aufbruch in die Moderne*, p. 40ff. Blessin goes on to credit Goethe, with his array of pathological psyches, as the chief forerunner of modern psychoanalysis: “Unter die Autoren, die der Psychoanalyse vorgearbeitet haben, zählt in erster Linie Goethe.” [“Among the authors who prepared the way for psychoanalysis, Goethe ranks in the first place.”] (42). In this respect the world of the modern imagination and its discontents, exemplified in the *Lehrjahre* in Wilhelm, identifies literature itself as something of a disease; the socially systematic healing of which is depicted in *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*: with its frame narrative of Wilhelm's education as a surgeon, and its subplots of psychic disease (as desire) and recovery. In this sense it is the exemplary or prototypical **last novel**.

provides the conditions necessary for a cure. Desire is represented in Wilhelm's favorite image, the sentimental-kitschy painting of the king's sick son, who pines after his father's young bride. The aesthetics of the Tower, by contrast, bleaches out the dark and bloody stains of passion to produce its bright and cheerful art. It is not by chance that the images Wilhelm sees in the Hall of the Past—with its inversion of the Christian *memento mori* (“Gedenke zu leben”)—portray men and women in the common activities of life.<sup>91</sup>

Productive *Tätigkeit* or activity was the burgher's panacea against either the ache of desire or dark thoughts of death:

Wilhelms Augen schweiften auf unzählige Bilder umher. Vom ersten frohen *Triebe* der Kindheit, jedes Glied im Spiele nur zu brauchen und zu üben, bis zum ruhigen abgeschiedenen Ernste des Weisen konnte man in schöner, lebendiger Folge sehen, wie der Mensch keine *angeborene Neigung* und Fähigkeit besitzt, ohne sie zu brauchen und zu nutzen (541, my italics).

[Wilhelm's eyes wandered from one picture to another. In a splendid sequence of vivid representations, ranging from the first childish *impulses* (instinct) to employ all one's limbs in play, to the calm, grave detachment of wise old age, showing that there is no *inclination* or faculty *innate* in man that he does not need or use (EAB 331, my italics).]

Behind this naturalistic vision of society is an understanding of desire as a socially distorted form of otherwise natural instincts and inclinations, which find their normal expression, not in fantasies and wishful thinking, but in their practical application to the tasks of daily life. The words “heiter” and “Heiterkeit” are employed no fewer than three times in the paragraph treating Wilhelm's first impressions of the art in the upbeat, life-affirming crypt. The representation of human happiness functions, as will also Mignon's exequies, to divert the mind from obsessive desire or depressing thoughts of death, returning its activity to the “natural” business of living.

It is only natural, too, that the *Harfner* Augustin's treatment lies for the most part in various tasks that divert him from the artist's genius centered in his imagination. He is

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<sup>91</sup>Schiller celebrates the **triumph** of this inversion in his letter to Goethe of July 3, 1796: “Die Inschrift ‘Gedenke zu leben!’ ist trefflich und wird es noch viel mehr, da sie an das *verwünschte* ‘Memento mori’ erinnert und so schön darüber triumphiert” [“The engraved words ‘Remember to live!’ are perfect and are even more so, as they recall the *accursed* ‘Memento mori’ and triumph over them so beautifully”] (HA VII, 634; my italics).

even shaved and divested of his bohemian attire. His therapist, yet another worldly cleric, explains:

“[. . .] die Mittel, vom Wahnsinne zu heilen, [sind] sehr einfach. Es sind ebendieselben, wodurch man gesunde Menschen hindert, wahnsinnig zu werden. Man erzeuge ihre Selbsttätigkeit, man gewöhne sie an Ordnung, man gebe ihnen einen Begriff, daß sie ihr Sein und Schicksal mit so vielen gemein haben, daß das außerordentliche Talent, das größte Glück und das höchste Unglück nur kleine Abweichungen von dem Gewöhnlichen sind, so wird kein Wahnsinn einschleichen, und, wenn er da ist, nach und nach wieder verschwinden” (346-47).

[“( . . .) I find the treatment (of madness) quite simple,” said the pastor. “Basically it is the same as one uses to prevent healthy people from going mad. One has to encourage them to occupy themselves, accustom them to the idea of order, give them the sense of having a common form of life and destiny with many others, and show them that unusual talent, extreme good fortune and excessive misfortune are merely minor deviations from what is normal. Then no madness will ensue, or if it is already there, it will gradually disappear” (EAB 210, my insertion).]

The cleric goes on to enumerate the regular tasks to which his patient is assigned; these include giving music lessons, by which his heretofore “extraordinary talent”—lying **outside** the normal **order**, in other words, and thus inclined to disorder—is made submissive to the law of **averageness**. That Augustin has committed his enlightened lessons to memory, is made evident when his visitor Wilhelm interrupts the music lesson to which the erstwhile minstrel now devotes part of his carefully scheduled time. The patient says, most reasonably, “Sie sehen, daß ich in der Welt doch noch zu etwas nütze bin; Sie erlauben, daß ich fortfahre, denn die Stunden sind eingeteilt” (346). [“You see, I am still of some use in this world. Please allow me to go on with what I am doing, for my time is carefully organized” (EAB 210).] The closing rationale is a manifestation of the order to which his unhappy genius has been made to conform; he can even speak with semicolons! Moreover, the opening reflection is the basis for modern happiness: that for the sake of order is to lose its ancient, accidental character, and that the *Harfner* or minstrel at heart will struggle unsuccessfully to master.

His tragic nature, belonging as it does to a “Dark Age”, will be illuminated by his decidedly more enlightened brother, Marinelli. Mignon’s and her father’s histories thereby assume the character of case histories that, even if the subjects prove incurable,

will positively augment the medical archive of the medic-cleric.<sup>92</sup> The father will commit suicide; the child of incest will die of a broken heart. Shortly before she was submitted to the care of Natalie, Mignon had said that “die Vernunft ist grausam” [“Reason is cruel”] and concluded, “das Herz ist besser” [“the heart is better”] (489; EAB 299). When her modern *Erzieherin* scolds her for putting too much strain on her pulmonary organ, Mignon says of her soul’s center—lest we assume that they are referring to the same thing—: “Laß es brechen! [. . .] Es schlägt schon zu lange” (543). [“Let it break!” [. . .] It has been beating long enough!”] (EAB 333).] Moments later it breaks, and she dies. Whether she gives up the ghost or suffers a fatal cardiac arrest, depends on the world view of the interpreter. Since the Abbé and his circle are thoroughgoing moderns, there can be no question as to which diagnosis they will in favor. Every effort is made to divert Wilhelm’s mind from what he has just witnessed. It is not hard, though. His interest in Mignon had already changed from a feudal relation to that of benefactor and beneficiary, Wilhelm having entrusted his adoptive daughter to professional pedagogy.

In the world of the novel, the mystery that produces such tragic figures as the *Harfner* and Mignon is exposed as religious superstition, a perverse amputation of experience (as knowledge derived empirically) that spreads like a cancer through the imagination, producing monstrous perceptions and ideas.<sup>93</sup> In Schiller’s mind this exposition of the religious scandal that produces the tragedy of Augustin and Mignon is one of the highlights in the novel. He praises Goethe in the following terms:

Wie schön gedacht ist es, daß Sie das praktisch Ungeheure, das furchtbar Pathetische im Schicksal Mignons und des Harfenspielers von dem theoretisch Ungeheuern, von den Mißgeburten des Verstandes ableiten, so daß der reinen und gesunden Natur nichts dadurch aufgebürdet wird. Nur im Schoß des dummen Aberglaubens werden diese monstrosen Schicksale ausgeheckt, die Mignon und den Harfenspieler verfolgen.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup>For an insightful look into the Tower’s pathology of Mignon, see Robert Tobin, “The Medicinalization of Mignon”, in: *Goethe’s Mignon und ihre Schwestern: Interpretationen und Rezeption*, ed. Gerhart Hoffmeister (Frankfurt a/M: Lang, 1993): 43-60.

<sup>93</sup>Mignon’s doctor attributes Mignon’s decline to the “zerstörende Gewalt” [“destructive force”] of the imagination, that is best treated with the **real** presence of its “Gegenstand” [“object”] (525; DWH). This can be described as a sort of object therapy, in which the object is introduced so as to break the vicious circle of an ingrown and therefore self-destructive subjectivity.

<sup>94</sup>See letter to Goethe of July 2, 1796 (HA VII, 631).



[How beautifully conceived it is, that you trace the practically monstrous, the frightening pathos in the fate of Mignon and the harp player to theoretical monstrosity and misconceptions of the understanding, so that pure and healthy nature is in no way implicated. Such monstrous fates as haunt Mignon and the harp player are hatched only in the womb of ignorant superstition.]

Both the novel and its insider-reviewer ban pathos/suffering from the domain of nature. Darwin would eventually return that existential constant to his naturalistic equation. But the strained optimism of the Enlightenment was not yet prepared to include suffering within its category of the Necessary; and so it ascribed suffering to a pre-Enlightenment Christianity: a false Christianity that had enthroned suffering, in its Suffering Savior, as a human existentials effecting redemption.

The histories of the individuals of the Tower include few surprises or revelations, because there is really nothing to disclose. Their stories are as transparent as, because identical to, the persons themselves. The few revelations they do produce only serve to confirm that there can be no mystery in such enlightened lives. Lothario is not a heartless cad after all, because he never pretends (in either sense) to **love**. He turns out to be neither a deadbeat dad nor the lover of Therese's mother. One has only to open Lothario's closet, and the skeletons disappear. The same is true of the women. Natalie can only confirm Wilhelm's conjecture, that the "[d]er Gang [i]hres Lebens [. . .] ist wohl immer sehr gleich gewesen" (526). ["[t]he course of [her] life seems always to have been very even" (EAB 322).] And Therese is so perfectly unsentimental—never having been alienated from nature, according to Schiller's definition<sup>95</sup>—that she dismisses her single

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<sup>95</sup>We are assured that Therese, like Natalie, "blieb die wenigen Tage, die Wilhelm bei ihr verweilte, sich immer gleich" (460). ["was during the few days that Wilhelm spent with her always consistent always with herself" (DWH).] For Schiller's treatment of sentimental poetry, see *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung*. Although Goethe liked the fit of Schiller's characterization of his (Goethe's) poetry as naïve, the robust of Weimar's pantheonized pair was himself too fond of posturing to think himself simple or naïve. In fact, Goethe asserts in one letter that nature itself is fond of tricks and disguises, unlike the persons of the Tower. He defends his failure to make explicit the message of the novel by asserting a rigorous realism in his fiction: "Der Fehler, den Sie mit Recht bemerken, kommt aus meiner innersten Natur, aus einem gewissen realistischen Tick, durch den ich meine Existenz, meine Handlungen, meine Schriften den Menschen aus den Augen zu rücken behaglich finde. So werde ich immer gerne inkognito reisen, das geringere Kleid vor dem bessern wählen und in der Unterredung mit Fremden oder Halbbekanntem den unbedeutenden Gegenstand oder doch den weniger bedeutenden Ausdruck vorziehen, mich leichtsinniger betragen, als ich bin, und mich so – ich möchte sagen: – zwischen mich selbst und zwischen meine eigene Erscheinung stellen." ["The mistake that you rightly note comes from my innermost nature, from a certain realistic tic that makes me enjoy hiding my

tear as the result of a medical procedure; whereas Wilhelm, who can find no tear, believes that he can see through her eyes “bis auf den Grund ihrer Seele” (443). [“into the very depths of her soul” (EAB 271).] This transparency, once again, is a consequence of the ideal that they embody. The first novel of Wilhelm Meister thus ends in a utopia of ideal humans whose histories are entirely unsuitable to producing romances, which is why they can supply the apparent resolution of the tension necessary to end this one. Their ideas are perfectly adapted to the Nature of the *Lehrjahre*, so that there can be no more *Roman*—according to the definition of the genre in Book Five—once Wilhelm has become formally integrated into their society. The fuller integration of his consciousness into socioeconomic reality will provide the itself **unromantic** framing narrative of the *Wanderjahre*.

Thanks to Roberts the psychological dimension of the *Lehrjahre* has become undeniable. Of course, psychoanalytic theory can, like any other school of literary theory, subject just about any fictional text to its hermeneutic, whether or not the primary text suggests any immediate relevance of the theory. But that is not the point; rather, as Neumann has pointed out, the *Lehrjahre* is a novel that portrays human *Bildung* as a **cultural** process that is for that reason not any less a natural development. But the cultural dimension of such development complicates the matter considerably. Hence the Society of Tower in its earlier, pedagogical form, while not necessary in the way of natural law, is introduced as a cultural institution that undertakes the formation of modern humans with a mind to the larger social conditions. As such an institution it articulates and practices the science or *logos* of education as the cultivation of (modern) human consciousness. Roberts’s study shows that the *Lehrjahre* is a profoundly psychological text. This is not least of all due to the fact that humanistic education relied heavily on the science that arose to study and articulate the human psyche, in order to form it according

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existence, my actions and writings from the eyes of men. That is why I always like to travel incognito, to wear the lesser coat rather than the better one, and in conversation with strangers or mere acquaintances to prefer an insignificant subject or, still better, the less profound expression, to behave sillier than I am and so – I would say: – assume a position between myself and my appearance.”] See letter to Schiller of July 9, 1796 (HA VII, 643). This attribution of **theatrics** to nature itself would seem to run counter to the denigration that Wilhelm’s theatric Weltanschauung suffers among the straightforward, supposedly natural characters of the Tower.

to “natural law”. That the analysis of Roberts should prove so fruitful does not prove that Freud was right. It follows, rather, because Freud’s theory of the human psyche relied entirely on—accepted as a fact, in other words—the same burgher model of human nature that emerged fully by the outset of the nineteenth century.

Goethe’s opus, and not least of all *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, stands as a milestone, as a monument even, in this grand cultural movement within modernity. Like any monument, it is specific to the event it commemorates and, while standing ever in the present, points always to the past and thereby mediates the past with the present. The institutional character of both the Tower and Goethe’s novel, however, has long presented a problem with respect to the standing of the *Lehrjahre* within the canon of Western literature—as long as the texts belonging to the same were assumed to be in some sense timeless, or at the very least exemplary. Perhaps now that the canon has been so widened as to show even stretch marks and cellulite, the *Lehrjahre* can garner the special attention it deserves, as a masterful and monumental relic of the burgher era in modern Western history. For Goethe understood as did few others that a well-formed and stable personality required substantial assistance, if it were to be accessible to those who like Wilhelm, while by no means ungifted, lacked the peculiar (dis)advantages of the genius or hero. Not least of all it required capital, in which respect having a money-savvy brother-in-law in Werner was entirely to Wilhelm’s advantage.

The materialist psychology that soulless modern man invented, as a human science, to investigate and articulate his mind and personality, would move with remarkable speed from its original position within philosophy to the field of pathology and medicine. The *Harfner* is admitted to a sanatorium bearing a strong resemblance to the *hospitiaux* that, according to Foucault in *Madness and Civilization*, institutionalized unreason beginning at the close of the eighteenth century.<sup>96</sup> That is because the healthy personality would prove so illusive as to be anything but transparent or self-identical. The mask that Nietzsche prized was in reality so common as to be the landmark of the very

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<sup>96</sup> See Chapter II (“The Great Confinement”) of Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), pp. 38-64.

herd he loathed. So evasive was the burgher psyche—because alert to avoid the least slip and subsequent exposure—that Freud had to look to its dreams for the truth about its evasions. Only when the will presumed itself safe in sleep, might the secrets of the psyche be deciphered in the post-prophetic symbolism of the subconscious. So rare was the healthy personality, in fact, so altogether receptive to the feverous infections of desire, that the exponent of psychoanalysis (“Seelenzergliederung” [dissection of the soul]) in Thomas Mann’s *Zauberberg*, Dr Krokowski—himself something of a secular priest and confessor—would assert: ““Mir ist nämlich ein ganz gesunder Mensch noch nicht vorgekommen”” [“I have yet to encounter an entirely healthy human””].<sup>97</sup>

The emotional and physical breakdown that Wilhelm suffers when reality intrudes on his dream of love with Marianne, is not far removed from tragedy: “Der Streich hatte sein ganzes Dasein an der Wurzel getroffen” (77). [“The mishap had struck at the root of his whole being” (DWH).] The relish with which he renews the pain whenever it begins to abate, while typical of youthful disappointment, springs from a defeated idealism turned self-destructive. It is the same subjective idealism that Werther turned against himself in suicide. While not the only factor in his rescue, the Tower plays a central role in Wilhelm’s redemption from an entrapment in his own subjectivity. The children brought up by the Tower are preserved from the snare of an inwardness and imagination from which Wilhelm escapes only with their help. Hence Lothario and the others never know the longing that leads Wilhelm to retreat into his self, and that paralyzes this second

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<sup>97</sup>See Thomas Mann, *Der Zauberberg*, from the *große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe*, vol. 5.1, ed. Michael Neumann (Frankfurt a/M: S. Fischer, 2002), p. 31. It is Joachim Ziemßen who refers to Dr. Krokowski’s psychoanalysis as “Seelenzergliederung” (20). In the chapter titled “Analyse”, Krokowski’s lecture on love traces all illness to a common origin in desire. In the *Zauberberg* religion registers as a cultural phenomenon with a respectable reverence for death and its aesthetics, the latter of which amount to a Dionysian negation of individual (i.e. Apollonian) will. Not only does Krokowski’s professional attire bear a striking resemblance to the robe of the priest who administers the “Viatikum” to Barbara Hujus; but the narrator compares his gestures and invitation to therapy to the language and crucifixion of Jesus (198). That I invoke Mann’s novel against the context of Goethe’s, is no arbitrary choice. Mann called the *Zauberberg* his “Wilhelm Meisterchen” or “Willem Meisteriade”, such that “intertextuality” is a woefully inadequate way to describe how Mann’s novel stands in relation to *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. One might reasonably claim that the *Zauberberg* remains as yet one of the most penetrating and insightful responses to Goethe’s novel. That no study so far has addressed the full spectrum of that response, may have something to do with the fact that Mann’s novel stands, too, as a cultural and philosophical monument; as well as literary answer of late modernity to the modern prospectus that is the *Lehrjahre*.

Hamlet in the face of every call to action or productive *Tätigkeit*. At the same time, however, their utopian and exemplary character lacks the sort of flesh-and-blood personality that arouses **sympathy**, or shared pathos, in the reader of novels.

While Wilhelm fails, then, to take command of his life and experience in the manner of Lothario, the Tower nonetheless recognizes in Wilhelm a subject that, in spite of a mistaken grasp of reality, has all the advantages (thanks to paternal capital) and basic inclinations (due to his primary or maternal socialization) that are essential to become a fully formed self—even if he is not yet prepared to assume all of the responsibilities of a full-fledged citizen of the modern social economy. What makes the Tower necessary in the novel is the therapeutic “midwife” function that the Tower performs, to assist Wilhelm’s exit from the womb of *Innerlichkeitserfahrung* [experience of innerness] and his stressful passage into the objective world. In spite of modernity’s manly shame of the same, the experience of what Carolyn Steedman has called “interiority” was essential to the inception of his modern selfhood and, further, to the formation of his personality.<sup>98</sup> The pupils of the Tower represent the logical sketch of how human individuals might be created who were ideally suited to productive autonomy; and who never would have to undergo the hazardous exit from subjectivity, in which real, historical moderns were conceived and nursed.

If we consider in a more or less chronological succession the religious-ceremonial, aesthetic, pedagogical, economic, and social interests/functions of the Tower, the latter begins to appear as something of a symbolic representation of human progress through history, as the *Geisteswissenschaften* would come to conceive it. In this very sense Haas recognizes in Jarno’s characterization of youth, with its “Neigung [. . .] zum Geheimnis, zu Zeremonien und großen Worten” [“inclination . . . to secrets, to ceremonies and grand proverbs”], an equivalency of individual and wider social development (548; DWH). Haas concludes, “Wenn hier in der Tat das Lebensalter als Modell der Geschichtsepoche

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<sup>98</sup>See by the same, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930* (London: Virago Press, 1995). Steedman’s study identifies in Mignon of the *Lehrjahre* a representation the inner child of modern subjectivity. The meaning of Mignon in the biography of Wilhelm Meister, including what Steedman has to say about the same, will occupy us in the next chapters.

betrachtet werden darf, dann spiegelt sich im Übergang vom Turm zur Sozietät symbolisch der historische Prozeß der Aufklärung” [“If the age of life may be considered here as a model of the historical period, then the transition of the Tower into a society reflects symbolically the historical process of enlightenment”] (76). Enlightenment here refers specifically to Kant’s definition of the same in terms of human autonomy: man’s determination to leave behind his (religious and social) tutors and walk by the light of his own reason. Under the aegis of the Olympian *Oheim*, the Abbé essentially condensed this development into a pedagogy that took into account the developmental potential of each individual and allowed the same to graduate whenever he had become satisfied with his degree of personal growth. In addition, though, the Tower has an undoubtedly practical function, too, in the *Lehrjahre*: as a desirable means of assistance for the well-endowed but otherwise unremarkable individual.

Goethe must have recognized that the pedagogical Tower was already outdated when the novel appeared. The *Sozietät* it has become by the end of the novel can award Wilhelm only an honorary diploma; but its wide network of social connections can assist him in his search for a socially constructive occupation. Some kind of assistance and insurance must have seemed necessary at a time when the French Revolution sent tremors that threatened the intellectual and aesthetic idyll of Weimar: where Johann Wolfgang, the apple of his Frankfurt family’s eye, spent his own *Wanderjahre* or journeyman years in personal and social accomplishment. Help was essential for Wilhelm Meister, now that the portrait of the artist in the *Sendung* was to become the more typical tale of a young man who is just barely better than average. Wilhelm’s story, like that of Hans Castorp, interests more “um der Geschichte willen” [“for the sake of the story”] than due to his otherwise attractive personality.<sup>99</sup> Wilhelm’s Odysseus-like descent inward to the depths of his subjectivity was all the more perilous, now that the unheroic hero was, to quote Mann’s pedagogue Settembrini, “nicht Odysseus genug” [not Odysseus enough] to escape “ungestraft” [unpunished] its Circe-like enticements (Mann 375).<sup>100</sup> That Wilhelm does

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<sup>99</sup>See the prefacing “Vorsatz” of *Der Zauberberg*, p. 9.

<sup>100</sup>On meeting Hans Castorp for the first time and learning that he is but a visitor rather than a

not lose his aesthetic self-consciousness, won at such dear expense, to the swinish sensuality of Aurelie's aunt or Therese's evil stepmother, is not least of all due to the subtle cultivating influence of the Tower.

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patient, Settembrini already compares Hans to Odysseus: “Potztausend, Sie sind nicht von den Unsrigen? Sie sind gesund, Sie hospitieren hier nur, wie Odysseus im Schattenreich? Welche Kühnheit, hinab in die Tiefe zu steigen, wo Tote nichtig und sinnlos wohnen –” [“You are healthy, you come only for a visit, like Odysseus in the realm of shades? Such boldness to descend so deep, where the dead dwell without substance or sense –”] (90; DWH).

## CHAPTER IV

### EROS AND THE TEMPLE OF DIONYSOS

#### Aesthetic Religion

In the foregoing chapters we distinguished two types of experience in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, both of which are attributed to the word *Erfahrung*, and that weigh one opposite the other on the subject-object scale. In the eighteenth century the word already stood in a special relation to epistemology and in that respect referred in the educated mind to knowledge derived empirically: as opposed to book learning that pointed to authority in the scholastic tradition, personified in *Faust* by Wagner. Faust himself, on the other hand, had come away from the same empty handed. As for Wilhelm, the experience that he lacks is not to be found in practice of the natural sciences, either, but to be garnered in the course of attentive and practical activity within the real conditions of nature and society: activity, in other words, that must take those conditions into account. What Wilhelm **has** amassed is the experience, and with it both the certainty and creative capacity, of his own self: anxiety over which even Descartes' had failed to forestall.<sup>101</sup> It is the same experience that the *schöne Seele* at first attributes to her "unsichtbaren Freund[...]" ["Invisible Friend"], God (370; EAB 224). Yet in her maturity, which is marked by her introduction (one might say initiation) into the world of the *Oheim*, her personal pilgrimage arrives at an astonishingly **pantheistic** conclusion. As one family member after another dies, she recites her new creed: "Alle diese Zeiten sind dahin; was folget, wird auch dahin gehen, der Körper wird wie ein Kleid zerreißen, aber Ich, das wohlbekannte Ich, Ich bin" (415). ["These times were all gone by, and what was to come

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<sup>101</sup>Blessin, too, acknowledges the **formative** value of Wilhelm's experience, even in the absence of any concrete, practical knowledge: "Wilhelm macht wohl Erfahrungen, die der prallen Fülle seines Lebens unverwechselbare Konturen geben, weil es in dem Sinne nichts zu lernen gibt, daß irgendeine Erfahrung, auf den Begriff gebracht, sich mit praxisrelevanten Folgen wirklich verallgemeinern ließe." ["Wilhelm does have experiences that give the rich fullness of his life unmistakable contours, because there is in this sense nothing to learn that, related to a concept, might be generalized with practically relevant consequences."] See Blessin, *Die Romane Goethes* (Königstein/Ts: Athenäum, 1979), p. 27.



would also pass; the body will be rent like a garment, but I, the well-known I, I am“ (EAB 253).]

The deification of her self, signified in the German by the upper-case “I” and Jehovan pronouncement, acknowledges the true *telos* toward which her developing entelechy tends: she is a being whose end is itself. Her profession of faith follows an account of her father’s death. His last words, for all their Christian vocabulary, already point to the same star that his daughter has come to follow: “Ich habe einen gnädigen Gott, das Grab erweckt mir kein Grauen, ich habe *ein ewiges Leben*” (413, my italics). [“I have a merciful God, the grave evokes no fear in me, I have *an eternal life*” (DWH, my italics).] Even as he acknowledges the god that guarantees his hope, the explicit **singularity** of eternal life flies in the face of the “communion of the saints” that had defined heaven in the earliest Christian creed. It is little wonder, then, that the *Bekenntnisse einer schönen Seele* differ so strikingly in this respect from the thoroughly social life of their historical model, Susanna von Klettenberg. The increasing isolation of the cloisterless canoness that Becker-Cantarino derides belongs to the nature of *Bildung* in the novel. The modern discovery of, and ultimate reliance on one’s self depended historically on the primary (maternal) and secondary (patriarchal) socialization discerned in the novel by Kittler. Be that as it may, the pedagogy of the Tower recognizes in the mother’s care, with its indulgence of wishes and dreams, the looming danger of subjectivity: that an individual might become so attached to his dreams and desires as to become lost to, or at least helpless in, human society and the objective world. This is the same danger that the Abbé criticizes in the prevailing “zweideutige, zerstreute Erziehung” [“piecemeal, vague education”] of his time: “sie erregt Wünsche, statt Triebe zu beleben” (520). [“it arouses desires rather than active impulses (instincts)” (EAB 319, my insertion).] Hence his conviction “wenigstens eine Zeitlang” [“at least for a time”], that the child in his charge should be provided with the resources necessary for the immediate pursuit of his inclination (Ibid.; *ibid.*).<sup>102</sup> Success confirmed an instinct; failure or dissatisfaction proved its absence.

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<sup>102</sup>The *schöne Seele* provides us with the fullest account of the Abbé’s early educational program: “[W]enn man an der Erziehung des Menschen etwas tun wolle, müsse man sehen, wohin seine

It is left to a medic (*Arzt*) from the *Oheim*'s circle to lead the *schöne Seele* out of herself on little field trips in the objective world.<sup>103</sup> While he recognizes a value in her comforting certainty of self, the medic counsels her, “[d]iesem großen, erhabenen und tröstlichen Gefühle so wenig als nur möglich nachzuhängen” (415). [“to indulge this great, sublime and comforting feeling as little as possible” (DWH).] She recalls his reasoning: “er zeigte mir, wie sehr diese Empfindungen, wenn wir sie unabhängig von *äußern Gegenständen* in uns nähren, uns gewissermaßen aushöhlen und den Grund unseres Daseins untergraben” (416, my italics). [“he explained to me that such feelings, if nurtured without reference to *external things (objects)*, will drain us dry and undermine our existence” (EAB 253, my insertion and italics).] The experience of one's self is not a problem *per se*; we already have determined it is an essential part of personal development in the *Lehrjahre*. The medic points out, rather, that the meaning of the subject depends by nature on its relation to objects. As we find her outdoors for the first time in the Confessions, the medic points out to her, parroting her religious jargon, the “Gegenstände der Schöpfung” [“objects of creation”] that are to be found in nature (416; Ibid.). The joy she experiences in this objective “Paradiese” will find its Goethean *Spiegelung* or reflection in Wilhelm's guided tour in the green with Felix (498). Her delightful rediscovery of the world, however, comes too late to repair the break of the canonicity with human society. To her vexation the Abbé will all but proscribe her contact with her nieces and nephews. Other than that she seems to have few regrets about her perpetual solitude.

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Neigungen und Wünsche gehen, so dann müsse man ihn in die Lage versetzen, jene so bald als möglich zu befriedigen, diese so bald als möglich zu erreichen, damit der Mensch, wenn er sich geirrt habe, früh genug seinen Irrtum gewahr werde und, wenn er das getroffen hat, was für ihn paßt, desto eifriger daran halte und sich desto emsiger fortbilde” (419). [“(I)n order to promote a child's education (the education of a human), one must first find out where its desires and inclinations lie, and then enable it to satisfy those desires and further those inclinations as quickly as possible. If someone has chosen a wrong path, he can correct this before it is too late, and once he has found what suits him, stick to this firmly and develop more vigorously” (EAB 255, my insertion).]

<sup>103</sup>In order to establish her relation to the world outside herself, the medic has to start with her sickly body. That is because it is the only material object that still is of any relevance to her; and even then she has come to regard as just another garment to be discarded. Of her reintroduction to the objective world (her father, we remember, had shown her objects from nature) she writes: “so leitete [der Arzt] meine Aufmerksamkeit von der Kenntnis des menschlichen Körpers und der Spezereien auf die übrigen nachbarlichen *Gegenstände* der Schöpfung und führte mich wie im Paradiese umher” (416, my italics). [“he directed my attention away from the human body and various salves to the other *objects* of creation around me, so that I wandered around as if in paradise” (EAB 253, my italics).]

The origin of the aunt's isolation may be traced to her childhood illness and her lifelong precarious health; but Goethe does not leave it entirely to a biological determinism. Her personal development is the result, rather, of both instinct and personal choices, which from her perspective point to her invisible Friend: "es ist ein Trieb, der mich leitet und mich immer recht fñhret; ich folge mit Freiheit meinen Gesinnungen und weiß so wenig von Einschränkung als von Reue. Gott sei Dank, daß ich erkenne, wem ich dieses Glück schuldig bin" (420). ["I was always guided by impulse (instinct), freely following my own persuasion, and experiencing neither restriction nor regrets. Thanks be to God that I am fully aware to whom I owe my happiness" (EAB 256).] Her decisive devotion to God garnered her qualified praise from the *Oheim*, for she "weiß was [sie] will" ["knows what (she) wants"] (405; DWH), such that she pursues her goal with "Entschiedenheit und Folge" ["decisiveness and consequence"] (406; DWH).<sup>104</sup> The most important factor in human *Bildung*, in his view, is determination: the will to shape one's own life within inevitable limits. She had distanced herself from her fiancé, Narziss, because his social ambitions interfered with her inner sensitivity to the signals of her soul. These, again, she ascribes to God; but in the naturalistic world of the novel, it is the pulse of her entelechy that she really feels.

The *Oheim* can grant his niece's spiritual endeavour a limited sanction, because he recognizes in it an aesthetic value. He offers her the following interpretation of her life: "Sie haben Ihr sittliches Wesen, Ihre tiefste, liebevolle Natur mit sich selbst und mit dem höchsten Wesen übereinstimmend zu machen gesucht" (405). ["You (. . .) have striven to unite your moral self, your profoundly loving nature, within itself and with the Supreme Being" (EAB 246).] As we noted once before, the characterization of her nature as

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<sup>104</sup>That the *schöne Seele* carries out her decision and pulls it through even when faced with resistance, is what distinguishes her formation from the "pietistisch[er] Blut- und Wundenkult" ["pietistic cult of blood and wounds"] that Goethe parodies, in Strack's judgment, in the *Bekenntnisse* (59). Strack characterizes her Christian devotion as a "verkapptes Liebesverlangen" ["repressed erotic desire"] that derails an otherwise natural sexual awakening. This he sees exemplified in the naturalistic "Pietà" scene, where the reader witnesses a wounded Narziß bleeding in her *Schoß*. The word refers literally to her lap, but *Schoß* was also a euphemism for the female genitals (Strack 61). Certainly, the menstrual-sexual and sacramental symbolism that is strewn throughout the episode—including the sight of her own beautiful nudity as she changes clothing—marks this juncture as a (natural) rite of initiation like the others that Neumann identifies in Wilhelm's story. The subjective *uses* of faith that Goethe points to in the *Bekenntnisse* will be of interest to us later in our discussion.

“liebevoll” seems odd in light of how she distances herself from all binding relationships. He is right, however, when he singles out as her governing impulse the desire for unity with her self and with her ideal of personal perfection. In this respect her lifelong striving falls under the *Oheim*’s aesthetic, we might say, **masonic** dualism:

“Das ganze Weltwesen liegt vor uns wie ein großer Steinbruch vor dem Baumeister, der nur dann den Namen verdient, wenn er aus diesen zufälligen Naturmassen ein in seinem Geiste entsprungenes Urbild mit der größten Ökonomie, Zweckmäßigkeit und Festigkeit zusammenstellt. Alles außer uns ist nur Element, ja, ich darf wohl sagen, auch alles an uns; aber tief in uns liegt diese schöpferische Kraft, die das zu erschaffen vermag, was sein soll, und uns nicht ruhen und rasten läßt, bis wir es außer uns oder an uns auf eine oder die andere Weise dargestellt haben” (405).

[“The whole world is spread out before us like a stone quarry before a (master) builder, and no one deserves to be called a builder (by this name) unless he can transform these raw materials into something corresponding to the image in his mind, with the utmost economy, purposefulness and sureness. Everything outside us is just material, and I can well say the same about everything about us: but within us there lies the formative power which creates what is to be, and never lets us rest until we have accomplished this in one way or another in or outside ourselves” (EAB 246).]

The cross of her religious order that the *Oheim* presents to the canoness is his recognition that she has succeeded in the personal representation (*Darstellung*) of her formative ideal (411). Just as she saw the human potential for sin in the disgraceful surrender to desire (typified in the biblical King David), she finds in the cross of Christ a superabundance of strength, the “unsichtbare Hand” [“invisible hand”], that protects her from desire: the monster in (wo)man that could divide her from her ideal of self (392; EAB 238).

While her physical weakness predetermines her aversion to sensual experience, it is nonetheless a deliberate decision on her part that finally prefers Pietist sensibility to physical sensation. Hers is a singularly **modern** strain of Christianity, however: **one that grasps morality almost entirely in terms of self-control** rather than as an engaged love for, and reconciliation to others (and to the Other).<sup>105</sup> Even when the *Oheim* warns against

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<sup>105</sup>Blessin, too, registers the irrelevance of Christian love to the modern social relations of the novel: “[D]er Altruismus in seiner christlichen Gestalt [wird] als eine für die bürgerliche Gesellschaft *unzeitgemäße* Tugend disqualifiziert” [“Altruism in its Christian form is disqualified as an virtue unsuitable for the age”] (*Romane Goethes*, 32; my italics). That Christian love is understood as altruism, or **selfless** service of others, would certainly explain why it is absent in a novel that portrays personal development as a natural process of self-actuation. While I consider

a one-sided “sittlich[e] Bildung” [“moral cultivation”], the danger he anticipates is not estrangement from other people, but the enticements “einer regellosen Phantasie” [“unprincipled fantasy”]: the threat, that is, of vulgar kitsch (408; DWH). For the first time, the *schöne Seele* feels a little ashamed of . . . her egocentrism? Heavens no! She is embarrassed, rather, of the aesthetically deficient hymns and images that she used to find so edifying.<sup>106</sup> The moral universe of Christianity and of the *schöne Seele* undergo a subtle but thorough metamorphosis in the closing pages of the *Bekenntnisse*. The danger facing humankind is no longer estrangement from God and others, as the *Oheim* and his Abbé are beyond good and evil. Rather, the “Advocat des bösen Geistes” [“advocate of the evil spirit”] is now the fault-finding, Mephistophelian critic of ambitious humanity; and temptation is seen in any sensual (i.e. Dionysian) delight that undermines individual will and self-respect (404; DWH). As Wilhelm admires the murals in the Hall of the Past, a legacy of the *Oheim*, our protagonist exclaims, “So war alles und so wird alles sein! Nichts ist vergänglich, als der eine, der genießt und zuschaut” (541). [“This is how everything was, and this is how everything will be. Nothing perishes except him who observes and enjoys” (EAB 331).] Pleasure passes. Form is forever!

Until now we have addressed only Dionysian desire as the aesthetic principle to which Wilhelm is attracted early in the novel. With his (and the reader’s) introduction into the world of the *Oheim*, however, the other Nietzschean category of classical aesthetics becomes relevant. What Schiller calls the *Formtrieb* or formative instinct, that

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altruism to be a misconception of the love and reconciliation that Jesus advocates, the concept certainly has its place in traditional Christian ethics and as such would seem out of place in the modern understanding of nature: where selfish competition for limited, life-sustaining resources is understood as essential to progressive evolution of the species. Even if Goethe’s morphology is hardly comparable to natural selection in either its traditional Darwinian or Neo-Darwinist forms, we will see that they are not without remarkable structural similarities and lead to all but identical ethical paradigms.

<sup>106</sup>Following the *Oheim*’s discourse on moral development, the *schöne Seele* recalls: “Ich hatte ihn nicht im Verdacht, daß er auf mich ziele, aber ich fühlte mich getroffen, wenn ich zurückdachte, daß unter den Liedern, die mich erbauet hatten, manches abgeschmackte mochte gewesen sein, und daß die Bildchen, die sich an meine geistlichen Ideen anschlossen, wohl schwerlich vor den Augen des Oheims würden Gnade gefunden haben” (408-9). [“I never suspected that this was aimed at me, but I did feel affected when I thought back to certain rather insipid things in those hymns which had contributed to my edification. I also realized that the images which had attached themselves to my spiritual concepts would hardly have found favor in my uncle’s eyes” (EAB 248).]

is awakened by classical art, and which forms man for a liberal social existence, points to what Nietzsche would locate (and loathe) under the aegis of the **Apollonian**. We recall that Wilhelm in the first two books feels himself drawn to the theater as to a “Tempel” (87). There, he writes to Mariane, both actor and spectator experience “himmlische Genüsse”, heavenly pleasure that is in every sense an **ek-stasy**: “weil wir uns in jenen Augenblicken aus uns selbst gerückt, über uns selbst erhaben fühlen” (67). [“because we were lifted beyond ourselves, and felt above ourselves” (EAB 36).] We found that Wilhelm seeks in the theatre a refuge from the alienation he suffers under in bourgeois society. The sensuous disorder he finds in Mariane’s dressing room both attracts and repels the son of middle-class prosperity and propriety. Even the mess is personified so as to stand for a blessed state of **pre-** or **uncivilized** anarchy:

Musikrollen und Schuhe, Wäsche und italienische Blumen, Etuis, Haarnadeln, Schminktöpfchen und Bänder, Bücher und Strohhüte, *keines verschmähte die Nachbarschaft des andern, alle waren durch ein gemeinschaftliches Element, durch Puder und Staub, vereinigt* (59, my italics).

[Sheet music and shoes, underwear and artificial flowers, etuis, hairpins, makeup jars and ribbons, books and straw hats, *none of them shunned its neighbor, all were united by a common element, by powder and dust* (DWH, my italics).]

The word “vereinigt” (“united”) sums up the Dionysian condition toward which the theater tends in the *Lehrjahre*. The beautiful illusion of its representations is grounded in an elemental disorder into which the forms it conjures up descend again and again. In the theater, what goes up **must** come down again.

It was Nietzsche who first made explicit what is implied throughout the first five books of the *Lehrjahre*. The Dionysian principle that Nietzsche saw affirmed in the *mythos* of early Athenian tragedy reverberates in the **essential** egalitarianism of theatrical society in Goethe’s novel.<sup>107</sup> Above all, Dionysian antagonism to individual will and self-respect—to what we have seen culminate in an aesthetic self-consciousness—threaten

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<sup>107</sup>The short-lived “Republik” that the theater troupe form upon leaving the count’s residence leads almost immediately to a catastrophe, for which none of the equal **citizens** will acknowledge even partial responsibility. The spiteful accusations they hurl at Wilhelm belie the earlier expectation of Laertes, that the itinerant democracy of their theater troupe should produce “keine Grenzstreitigkeiten” [“border disputes”] (216; EAB 127).

throughout the first five books to derail the very *Bildung*/cultivation to which Wilhelm's interest in poetry and the theater had first contributed. To ease Wilhelm's weaning from the breast that feeds his imagination, Goethe gave him a subjective make-up altogether different from that of either the tragic exception, Werther, or the budding young artist in the *Theatralische Sendung*. Whereas Wilhelm himself is the poetic genius in the *Sendung*, this fateful gift is transferred onto another figure in the *Lehrjahre*. In the *Harfner* "das außerordentliche Talent" ["an extraordinary talent"] manifests itself as "das größte Unglück" ["the greatest misfortune"] (346; DWH).<sup>108</sup> The fate of the sentimental novice is crushed by his aging father's potency; Augustin's (!) passion for his own religious ideal turns physical when he falls in love with a Beatrice-figure who turns out to be his own sister, the fruit of a later passion that their father had concealed out of shame.

Throughout the novel the threat of incest is linked to narcissistic infatuation with one's own ideal: a psychic masturbation, as it were, involving the delights of the imagination. The fates of Augustin, his sister Sperata, and their child Mignon (Schiller: "diese monstrosen Schicksale" or "monstrous fates") return again and again to the malignant tendency of the imagination.<sup>109</sup> Mignon stands out as the subject that refuses to (because it cannot) adapt to life either in the natural world or in post-feudal society. Her arrested development is traced in the novel, much to the satisfaction and delight of

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<sup>108</sup>While Mignon's association with poetry (*Poesie*) is a commonplace of *Lehrjahre* criticism, Blessin is to my knowledge the first to notice that what was united in Werther is sorted and assigned to more than one character in Goethe's second novel. Blessin singles out Mignon as the figure who is allotted those traits of Werther that preclude the individual's full integration into society. The insight merits a lengthier quotation: "Das Zentrum, das Werther mit seiner Person mehr als ausgefüllt hat, wandert aus der Mitte heraus und verteilt sich auf zwei Pole, auf Wilhelm und Mignon, die sowohl einen Gegensatz als auch einen Zusammenhang bilden, wie im Bild der Ellipse anschaulich zu zeigen wäre. [. . .] Als durch Gegensätzlichkeit zusammengehaltenes Paar stehen Wilhelm und Mignon in der doppelten Mitte eines Figurenkreises, der mit Entfernung von dem einen oder anderen Pol entweder lebensstüchtige Existenzen hervorbringt oder solche, die in ihrem Dasein von Grund auf bedroht sind." ["The center that Werther personally more than filled, moves away from the middle and separates toward two poles, Wilhelm and Mignon, who constitute a contrast as well as a connection, such as the diagram of an ellipse might represent visually. (. . .) As a pair bound in opposition Wilhelm and Mignon stand in the doubled center of a circle of figures, one that produces beings who, depending on their proximity to either pole, are either fit for life or threatened at the base of their existence."] See: *Goethes Romane: Aufbruch in die Moderne*, p. 87. As valuable as Blessin's characterization is, it overlooks the *Harfner* as the other figure who, like Wilhelm, stands in an **inner relation** to Mignon. In that respect she is the center that binds both poles, Wilhelm and the *Harfner*.

<sup>109</sup>See letter to Goethe of July 2, 1796 (HA VII, 631).

Schiller, to religious superstition, “dem theoretisch Ungeheuren” [“theoretical monstrosity”], and to related “Mißgeburten des Verstandes [. . .], so daß der reinen und gesunden Natur nichts dadurch aufgebürdet wird” (Ibid.). [“deformities of the mind (. . .), so that pure and healthy nature bears no blame for it.”] What is natural, naive and classical is, after all, healthy; what is sentimental and romantic, is sick.<sup>110</sup> The particular grief of Augustin is, as his name suggests, an earlier or **original sin**, in this case incest: THE disease to which blue blood tended, at least according to the middle-class moralist. Sperata’s and Augustin’s fixation with their guilt supplies the seed of tragedy; but the problem is not the act itself so much as it is the guilty **conscience** that cannot summon the strength to throw off its burden. Augustin’s haunting song, “Wer nie sein Brot mit Tränen aß”, is such a compelling expression of existential guilt, that it arouses the identifying “Mitgefühl” [“empathy”] of even the presumably innocent Wilhelm—who as yet knows nothing of his part in Mariane’s horrific end (136ff.; DWH).

That most memorable of Mignon’s songs, “Kennst du das Land”, articulates a longing for the place of origin that resists, and thus tends away from, the progressive *telos* of natural development as *Bildung* (145). Boyle points out that the “hermaphrodite” lily that Mignon’s embalmed corpse clutches in Book Eight serves as the emblem of her abbreviated *Bildung*; whereas Wilhelm, whose introduction to the Tower coincides with his separation from Mignon, experiences ongoing, uninterrupted development and thus “has a longer and more complex story” than Mignon and her psychically (and sexually) stunted parents.<sup>111</sup> It is the Abbé who counsels Wilhelm regarding the danger of retrospection. Of past experience he says that it is “gefährlich, sich davon Rechenschaft geben zu wollen” [“dangerous to draw any conclusions from it”]; that dwelling on the past results in a distorted outlook on life; that the safest course is, “nur das Nächste zu tun, was vor uns liegt” [“to do only what lies immediately before us”] (422; DWH). While negative experience of the objective world has an empirical, corrective, and therefore

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<sup>110</sup>So goes Goethe’s well-known aphorism from the “Kunst und Künstler” section of *Maximen und Reflexionen*: “Klassisch ist das Gesunde, romantisch das Kranke” [“the Classical is healthy, the romantic is sick”]. See HA XII, ed. Trunz, p. 487.

<sup>111</sup>Nicholas Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age*. Vol. II, *Revolution and Renunciation, 1790-1803* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 414.



positive value, it always threatens to turn inward as negative experience of the self. As we shall see, the *Oheim's* and the Abbé's progressive, naturalistic views on human development see the greatest danger in **negative subjective experience** such as guilt, regret, concern, or self-doubt. In one way or another, these are **manipulated** in Wilhelm's theatric therapy, lest they strike a fatal, or even a deforming blow to his aesthetic *Bildung*. Be that as it may, the Tower itself is interested less in Wilhelm's personal happiness than in socializing this well-endowed fatalist, so that he too can become an autonomous and productive citizen of the liberal social economy.

### The Modern Subject: Autonomous . . . or Autistic?

In Christian cosmology those same negative subjective experiences had moral value as existentials of the human condition: of human alienation from God and others. These too, of course, were manipulated by church authority to accomplish its own dogmatic and sociopolitical ends. But even apart from that, negative psychic states **made sense**. In the aesthetic world of the *Lehrjahre*, where moralism is subordinated to naturalism and finally to liberal social ends, all such negative subjective experience falls within the domain of the Dionysian; as such it tends toward an elemental monotony that is antagonistic to individuals. We have seen that Wilhelm interprets the theater as a sacred space consecrated to Dionysian oneness, into which actors initiate the spectators. Even the narrator, while registering Wilhelm's uneasy fascination with the disorder in Mariane's dressing room, all the same confirms this view of the theater by noting the "gemeinschaftliches Element" ["common element"] that "vereinigt" ["unites"] everything that touches Mariane (59). That is, the force of the theater is essentially desire; and its Dionysian roots draw their life from the soil of sexuality.

For Wilhelm there is an equivalence in the theater curtains and those of Mariane's bed, the sanctuary where he was initiated into the mysteries of erotic love. The same linkage can be seen in the boy Wilhelm's desire to peek behind the curtains of the puppet theater, on the one hand, and the boys and girls of his adolescent theater company, who held hands "hinter den Theaterwänden" (backstage) (31). This fetishization of erotic desire turns all barriers and hidden delights into symbols of sexual desire, the pleasure of

which lies in peeking into what was hidden, breaking into a space that was locked off. The fetishization of sex makes a pleasure out of every phallic act of penetration, be it physical or psychological. That Wilhelm is vaguely aware of this, demonstrates that his consciousness is capable, as his surname suggests, of **mastering** the mystery: of internalizing it, that is, as a voyage of self discovery. The following passage displays his ability to grasp the *techné* of **gnostic pleasure**:

“Die Kinder haben”, fuhr Wilhelm fort, “in wohleingerichteten und geordneten Häusern eine Empfindung, wie ungefähr Ratten und Mäuse haben mögen: sie sind aufmerksam auf alle Ritzen und Löcher, wo sie zu einem verbotenen Naschwerk gelangen können; sie genießen es mit einer solchen verstohlenen wollüstigen Furcht, die einen großen Teil des kindischen Glücks ausmacht” (19).

“Children in well-established and well-organized homes feel rather like rats and mice: they seek out cracks and crannies to find their way to forbidden dainties. The furtive and intense fear with which they indulge in this search is one of the joys of childhood” (EAB 7).

The derivative nature of the pleasure that he attributes to childhood suggests that it is not just any childhood he describes but, more precisely, the childhood of the modern, middle-class human, whose prosperity is carefully catalogued and rationed. It is the childhood of fairy tales and Christmas trees, the childhood of Christmas presents bigger and better than last year, like the *Puppentheater* that defines the childhood of Wilhelm. It is the childhood that **Mariane does not have**, that she cannot narrate, because hers exemplifies no *Bildung*.<sup>112</sup> When Wilhelm insists that she tell him ““alles”” [everything] from her past, that she let him have ““teil an [ihr]em vergangenen Leben”” or, in other words, **share** her past, she is silent: “Mariane schaute mit einem traurigen Blick [. . .], den Wilhelm

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<sup>112</sup>To her astonishment Wilhelm asks Marianne, “[U]nter welchen Umständen bist du erzogen?” and, “Welche sind die ersten lebhaften Eindrücke, deren du dich erinnerst?” (25). [“(H)ow you were brought up and what (first vivid) impressions do you remember” (EAB 10, my insertion).] We are told that the questions would have caused Marianne embarrassment (“Verlegenheit”), had not Barbara stepped in to help. Her words exemplify her shrewdness or *Klugheit*: “Glauben Sie denn”, sagte das kluge Weib, ‘daß wir auf das, was uns früh begegnet, so aufmerksam sind, daß wir so artige Begebenheiten zu erzählen haben, und, wenn wir sie zu erzählen hätten, daß wir der Sache auch ein solches Geschick zu geben wüßten?’ (Ibid.). [“Do you really believe,’ she said sensibly (said the shrewd woman), ‘that we took so much notice of what happened to us earlier in life, that we have such pleasant things to tell as you have, and even if we did, that we could describe them so cleverly?’” (EAB 10ff., my insertion).] Barbara knows precisely just what sort of childhood he is recounting so **artfully**. It is the rich childhood of the burgher, of the “jungen, zärtlichen [. . .] Kaufmannssohn” [“young, lovesick, unfledged merchant’s son”], the class that spawned modern humans (10; EAB 2).

nicht bemerkte und in seiner Erzählung fortfuhr” (25ff.). [“Mariane looked (. . .) with a melancholy glance, but Wilhelm did not notice it and continued with his story” (EAB 11).] After a polite pause, he proceeds with his narrative. He is, after all, exercising his imagination in the art of autobiography, the *Dichtung of Wahrheit*. He cannot be interrupted!

I have suggested that Wilhelm’s experience of the theater is actually at odds with his Dionysian interpretation. We see in the above that even his **imagined** union with Mariane—the equal exchange that he implies when he insists, “Erzähle mir alles, ich will dir alles Erzählen” [“Tell me all about it and I will tell you about mine”]—is really an exercise of his emotional and cognitive faculties on the way to individual mastery (Ibid.; EAB 11). It is sex that, even with a partner, is a form of masturbation, for the imagination is essential to the pleasure. That being so, he fails to recognize in his biographical bliss that Mariane has no history, no *Lehrjahre* in the sense of the Tower’s scrolls; for theirs is the biography of *Bildung* (Ibid.). What attracts Wilhelm most in her is not the self that has suffered, that survives partly from the prostitution of feigned love, but the personality of stage representation. When we encounter the pair for the first time, it is “das weiße Atlaswestchen” [“white satin vest”] of her theater costume, rather than the scarred self of Mariane, that, in the narrator’s words, he presses to his breast (11; EAB 2). The wings of love that bear him, we are told, are really the “Flügel[] der Einbildungskraft” (14) [“wings of imagination” (EAB 4)]. His experience of love is not passion that the ego **suffers**, when it learns that it is not autonomous after all; it is, rather, a largely subjective experience, love as a feeling—what Faust means when he insists that “Gefühl ist alles” [“feeling is everything”] (HA III, v. 3456). As such, it is a love that **enlarges and empowers the godlike creative capacity of the self**.

So compelling, in fact, is this self-centred, self-constitutive love, that Mariane is ready to risk her future just for the chance to play the supporting role in one scene (one episode, to be more precise) in Wilhelm’s artfully staged, theatric biography.<sup>113</sup> None of

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<sup>113</sup>When Barbara warns that Mariane’s financially more dependable lover, Norbert, will arrive in two weeks, the actress counters, “Und wenn die Morgensonne meinen Freund rauben sollte, will ich mir’s verbergen. Vierzehn Tage! Welche Ewigkeit! In vierzehn Tagen, was kann da nicht vorfallen, was kann sich da nicht verändern” (11). [“The dawn may take my lover away, but I

this should be taken to suggest that Wilhelm intentionally deceives and uses Mariane for his selfish purposes. As we have seen, he entrusts himself entirely to his idea of their total erotic and theatric union. But as the bulk of Book One shows, their conversation is entirely one-sided and is in that sense no **conversation** or **dialogue** at all; Wilhelm writes Mariane a letter, but there is **no correspondence**. He is the child playing with dolls (in this instance with puppets), who tells his playmate what to do and say; who grabs his friend's wrist to move her doll where he would have it; and who is bored to tears if there is no one else to play with. He needs not so much a companion as puppets and an audience. In Mariane he has found his perfect playmate, in this respect ideally suited to the needs of his imagination; for she is adept at playing to the needs of a male lead between either the stage curtains or the bed sheets. That she herself wants to do it this time, even at grave personal risk, only testifies to the force of what Alwin Binder, in reference to Faust, has termed "inauthentic speech" ("uneigentliches Sprechen").<sup>114</sup> The subjugating power that Binder recognizes in Faust's conversational soliloquies is no less present in Wilhelm's language of love: "Am perversesten realisiert sich Sprache als Gewalt dort, wo es durch Beredsamkeit"—what Barbara calls Wilhelm's narrative "'Geschick'" ["skill"]—"gelingt, daß der durch Sprache Unterdrückte den Sprechenden zu lieben glaubt" ["Speech manifest itself as power most perversely when eloquence succeeds in making the one suppressed by speech believe that she loves the speaker.]" (Binder 224). That Wilhelm, too, believes in his love alters nothing. It only shows that he has not yet arrived at the mature understanding and aesthetic perfection unique to the illusion-free master of life.

Why Goethe chose to replace the street-wise Madame B with the loving and vulnerable Mariane, whose in every sense horrific fate is revealed in Book Seven, will be explored in due course, when we consider Wilhelm's "Lauigkeit" or "Kälte" (Humboldt) in the face of her tragedy.<sup>115</sup> We see its roots already, though, in the personal crisis he

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won't think about that now. Fourteen days! That's an eternity! Just think what can happen, what can change, in two weeks" (EAB 2).] We see from this that Mariane has adopted Wilhelm's faith in fate, albeit more in the sense of a careless creditor rather than the generous benefactor to whom Wilhelm entrusts his life.

<sup>114</sup>See Binder, "'Seiner Rede Zauberfluß': Uneigentliches Sprechen und Gewalt als Gegenstand der 'Faust'-Szene 'Wald und Höhle'"; in: *Goethe-Jahrbuch* 106(1989):211-29.

<sup>115</sup>See Humboldt's letter to Goethe of November 24, 1796 (HA VII, 659).

experiences following his discovery presumed of Mariane's infidelity. Book One ends with Norbert's note to Mariane, and Book Two begins with a brief but pointed summary of Wilhelm's **past** anguish. Curious, however, is the narrator's identification, not with the sufferer, but with the more or less **indifferent** witness or hearer of the outcome. The opening paragraph is singular enough to merit quotation in its entirety:

Jeder, der mit lebhaften Kräften vor unsern Augen eine Absicht zu erreichen strebt, kann, wir mögen seinen Zweck loben oder tadeln, sich unsre Teilnahme versprechen; sobald aber die Sache entschieden ist, wenden wir unser Auge sogleich von ihm weg; alles, was geendigt, was abgetan daliegt, *kann unsre Aufmerksamkeit keineswegs fesseln*, besonders wenn wir schon frühe der Unternehmung einen übeln Ausgang prophezeit haben (76, my italics).

[Anyone whom we observe striving with all his powers to attain some goal, can be assured of our sympathy, whether we approve of the goal or not. But once the matter is decided, we turn our attention elsewhere, for when something is completed or resolved our concern with it diminishes (*it cannot possibly keep our attention*), especially if we have, from the start, foreseen an unsatisfactory outcome (EAB 41, my insertion and italics).]

### **Why not?**

The observation that I have highlighted, asserted though it is in terms of general and unquestionable validity, contradicts centuries of enduring fascination with, as also the theatric exemplarity of Athenian tragedy. One can scarcely apply the narrator's truism to the momentum with which the tangled *mythos* of *Oedipus the King* grows ever tighter, only to break and unravel with fateful inevitability; or to the rivetting spectacle with which the drama concludes. The universal distaste, that the narrator affirms, for the tragic consequences of unyielding hubris is definitive, not of an ancient audience, but of modern humanism, and of its determined faith in human progress and achievement. The Charybdis into which Wilhelm descends, after his love crashes against the Scylla of Mariane's apparent faithlessness, is indeed a repetitive, "ewig wiederkehrend[er]" cycle of renewed hope and self-torment, the latter portrayed in terms of a potentially terminal illness: that tears away ("zerreißen") all the more at Wilhelm's organism, as its youthful vigour presents more order and beauty to destroy ("zerstören") (77).

Most curious, however, is the fact that he never once considers the pursuit or confrontation of the supposedly faithless Mariane. The endless drama of renewed hope

and despair occurs exclusively “in der Vorstellung”, in the subjective representation of his mind (Ibid.). While Werner does his part to portray Mariane as a caricature of infidelity, Wilhelm himself **plays** with the possibility of a misunderstanding. Nevertheless, he never once faces her or tries to determine the certainty of her faithlessness. His is the mounting exhaustion of a subject that has run out of material: the straw with which it had constructed its beloved house in the imagination. That Wilhelm turns his aggression against his other poetic productions, consigning them to the flames, only demonstrates that his love for Mariane was itself a product of his imagination—of the creative, formative capacity of the subject. Those flames are in a very real way an objectification of the **subjective experience of his disappointed love**, as the following metaphor of the narrator suggests:

Wie wenn von ungefähr unter der Zurüstung ein Feuerwerk in Brand gerät, und die künstlich gebohrten und gefüllten Hülsen, die, *nach einem gewissen Plane geordnet* und abgebrannt, prächtig abwechselnde Feuerbilder in die Luft zeichnen sollten, nunmehr *unordentlich und gefährlich durcheinander* zischen und sausen, so gingen auch jetzt in seinem Busen Glück und Hoffnung, Wollust und Freuden, Wirkliches und Geträumtes auf einmal scheiternd durcheinander (76, my italics).

[When a firework catches light unexpectedly and all those carefully shaped and filled rockets, which were intended to eject balls of colored fire in predetermined succession, suddenly start hissing and crackling, *ominously and without any pretense of order*, this was not unlike the tumult of disorder into which all his hopes and joys, all his dreams and realities collapsed (EAB 41, my italics).]

It is striking that Wilhelm’s love is compared to an artfully planned and organized spectacle, the creative force of which tends dangerously to disorder and destruction. That the firework show, with which Serlo celebrates the opening night success of *Hamlet*, is responsible for the fire that destroys the theater and the artful representations it houses, confirms that Wilhelm’s “erste Liebe” [“first love”], as “das Schönste, was ein Herz früher oder später empfinden kann” [“the best that any heart can experience early or late”] functions in the novel as an **aesthetic experience** (14; EAB 4). As such it contributes to the formation of his personality or aesthetic self-consciousness. As a subjective experience, that is, it has a value that is altogether distinct from its character as a relationship. The dangerous potential of Wilhelm’s love for disorder arises out of its

generally atavistic tendency to a trans- or pre-subjective oneness. This quality distinguishes erotic love at this point in the novel as a Dionysian experience that threatens the same individuality that it constitutes. Its individuating potential is only actuated, however, to the extent that it engages the emotional faculties of the self. “[S]o müssen wir unsern Helden dreifach glücklich preisen, daß ihm gegönnt ward, die Wonne dieser einzigen Augenblicke *in ihrem ganzen Umfange* zu geniessen. Nur wenig Menschen werden so vorzüglich begünstigt” (14, my italics). [“(O)ur hero must be considered thrice blest for being able to enjoy these supreme moments *in full measure*. Few of us are so favored (. . .)” (EAB 4, my italics).] The narrator assures us that it is granted Wilhelm to enjoy this rare happiness in its fullness. This can in no sense mean that he is able to realize his ideal of erotic oneness, for that never happens; its disappointment is the “Streich” that, according to the narrator, cuts at the very root of his existence (77). Rather, what he is “granted in its fullness” is the subjective experience that is conducive to his individual self. It is his quaintly old-fashioned ideal of **love as union** that he must learn to dispense with.

None of this should be taken to suggest that Wilhelm is incapable of love, or that he is disingenuous with Mariane. It points, however, to the significance of **love as a formative experience** in the *Lehrjahre*, rather than a binding, entangling relationship. After we see our hero return to life in society in Book Two, he has a decidedly jaded view of erotic love, avoiding it like one who has failed at his only chance. The personal reality of his love for Mariane is still too tender and painful to have been integrated fully into his subjectivity; it is in that sense open-ended, an experience cut short at its apex and as yet without the “closure” so important to us moderns. In accordance with his theatric, fatalistic Weltanschauung, he now sees himself as one of the ill-fated, such as those to whom the subtitle of the *Wanderjahre* refers: *die Entsagenden*. He must renounce and live with the emptiness of his unrealized personal ideal. He has internalized the pain, and it resurfaces as soon as he experiences sexual frustration, in this case respecting the sexually playful Philine. Wilhelm’s own pain finds expression in the *Harfner*’s song, “Wer nie sein Brot mit Tränen aß” [“Who never with hot tears ate his bread”], the lament of one cursed by the gods and burdened with guilt (136; EAB 77). Moved to tears,

Wilhelm envies the good fortune of the minstrel, whose music comforts him “in der Einsamkeit” [“in your solitude”], and who finds “in [s]einem Herzen die angenehmste Bekanntschaft” [his “dearest friend in (his) own heart”] (137; EAB 78, my italics). However, such words are so many red lights and sirens in light of Schings’s analysis; for Wilhelm’s words are a symptom of the same “hypochondrieverdächtig[e] Innerlichkeit” [“suspiciously hypochondriac innerness”], a “Remedium” for which Goethe recognized in Spinozan pantheism (Schings 57ff.).

Wilhelm had found in the theater a companion onto whom he could project his subjective ideal; and the erotic relationship, its ecstatic delight in an other, led him out of himself just a little, though not enough to release him from the grip of his egocentric imagination. The latter derived strength, rather, from an astonishing new intensity of Wilhelm’s own emotional and cognitive faculties. Still nursing his wound sustained from the bruising blow of fate (or as the Abbé would say, of **reality**), Wilhelm has retreated into his self even more than before. There he takes comfort in the sentimental relish of his own feelings: “Alle Schmerzen, die seine Seele drückten, lösten sich zu gleicher Zeit auf, er überließ sich ihnen ganz [. . .]. ‘Was hast du mir für Empfindungen rege gemacht, guter Alter!’ rief er aus: ‘alles, was in meinem Herzen stockte, hast du losgelöst’” (137). [“The sorrows oppressing his heart all came out into the open. He abandoned himself completely to them (. . .). ‘Oh what feelings you have aroused in me, good old man!’ he cried. ‘You have released everything that was hidden in my heart’” (EAB 78).] The sentimental landscape that Sterne and Rousseau had mapped out in astonishing detail had become by the latter third of the eighteenth century the congested Autobahn beside which Werther’s cross would be placed. It is this same subjective roadmap by which Wilhelm had charted a course for Mariane and himself. After she would appear to have hitched a ride with another, this solitary walker sets out with a knapsack of his own reveries.

While I sympathize, then, with much of his assessment of the Tower, I must ultimately disagree with Schlechta’s interpretation of Wilhelm and his love in Book One. As we saw, Schlechta subscribes to the romantic view of Wilhelm’s poetic interest as evidence that he is an “ungebrochen lebendig[er] Mensch”, a “Dichter im Urzustand”,



whose love “sprengt [. . .] die Schranken des engen Selbst” (105ff.).<sup>116</sup> We have seen, however, that poetry and the theater are for Wilhelm the playground of **subjective experience**, without which his modern individuality would be unthinkable. The latter is what Schlechta calls “ein petrefiziertes Individuum” (72). That is not **primarily** the work of the Tower, however. From the first page of the *Lehrjahre* to the last, the love Wilhelm feels for others, be it erotic, paternal, or friendly, remains a subjective rather than a trans-subjective experience. As such it neither guarantees nor so much as allows for shared experience that might blur or in any way compromise the boundaries of individual self-identity. All personal commitments are portrayed as feudal relations that have lost their actuality in the modern world. Blessin has observed that in the *Lehrjahre* no promise or personal commitment is made that is not broken; he elsewhere makes an observation that could supply the reason why this is so: “[S]tets bedeutet das personale Verhältnis eine Entselbstung, die mit den Verkehrsformen der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft unvereinbar ist.” [“(T)he personal relation always means a negation of the self that is incompatible with the forms of interaction in burgher society.”]<sup>117</sup>

The estimation of personal relations as antagonistic to the self can hold out only if the self in its development is granted, if not an unqualified priority, at the very least a **definitive primacy over any relation or dependency that is of a not only social but likewise existential nature**. So saying, I acknowledge that Books Seven and Eight never tire of stressing not only the necessity of accepting social conditions and norms, but even the duty of vigorously maintaining its liberal institutions—as opposed to the countless social, political, and personal anachronisms of the feudal order. The former distinguishes what the word *Bürger* means coming from Lothario’s manly mouth, as opposed to its

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<sup>116</sup>English: . . . that he is an “unbroken living human”, a “poet in the primal state”, whose love “shatters (. . .) the walls of the narrow self.”

<sup>117</sup>See *Die Romane Goethes*, p. 37. Elsewhere Blessin notes the consistent invalidity of promises made and personal commitments entered into in the *Lehrjahre*: “Es gibt keine Absicht, die in den *Lehrjahren* nicht unterlaufen, kein Versprechen, das nicht gebrochen, keinen Vertrag, der nicht außer Kraft gesetzt würde.” [“There is no intention in the *Lehrjahre* that is not undermined, no promise that is not broken, no contract that is not annulled.”] See *Goethes Romane: Aufbruch in die Moderne*, p. 88.

more philistine sense.<sup>118</sup> Both Blessin and Boyle point out that the French Revolution cast a long and ominous shadow over Goethe during the years that he revised and completed the *Lehrjahre*.<sup>119</sup> Blessin stresses that Goethe opted in the novel for a distinctively modern, middle-class social economy that, unlike the violent turmoil to the west, was identified in his mind with “Gewaltlosigkeit” or non-force: the liberal tradition.<sup>120</sup>

All of this makes perfect sense in light of the Spinozan *Sendung* that has been discerned in the novel. In the argument of Adam Smith, the liberal market enthrones self-interest as an indispensable condition of the wealth and happiness of a nation. Mandeville, too, had shown how altruism breaks down the beehive of society, whereas self-interest set free of moral restraint restores order and prosperity. Goethe’s own fascination with social and economic liberalism is evident not only in the paper money

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<sup>118</sup>Lothario preaches the gospel of modern patriotism, which he learned in the American Revolution, to the philistine Werner: “‘Nun’, sagte Lothario, ‘ich hoffe Sie noch zum guten Patrioten zu machen; denn wie der nur ein guter Vater ist, der bei Tische erst seinen Kindern vorlegt, so ist der nur *ein guter Bürger*, der vor allen andern Ausgaben das, was er dem Staate zu entrichten hat, zurücklegt’” (508, my italics). [“‘Well,’ said Lothario, ‘I hope to be able to make a good patriot out of you. A good father is one who at mealtimes serves his children first; and a good citizen is one who pays what he owes the State before dealing with everything else’” (EAB 311).] *Nota bene*: The state in Lothario’s analogy is no longer equated with the **father**, which the monarchist argument saw personified in the king. Perhaps the most memorable, though by no means strongest, example is Robert Filmer’s *Patriarcha*, the biblical bent of which Locke rendered ridiculous in the first of his *Two Treatises of Government*. Lothario, on the other hand, equates the state with the child. By this he seems to suggest that the state, like a child, is less important as an agent of present activity than as a guarantor of social continuity and future security. Blessin is apparently right then, when, noting the all but total absence of state and public institutions in the *Lehrjahre*, he calls Goethe’s novel “ein ausgedehnter Schauplatz für jede Art von privater Existenz” [“a broad arena for every kind of private life”]. See: *Goethes Romane: Aufbruch in die Moderne*, p. 88.

<sup>119</sup>See Blessin, *Die Romane Goethes*, p. 215; and Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age*, vol. II, *Revolution and Renunciation*, p. 234.

<sup>120</sup>Regarding the issue of social change, Blessin observes, “In dieser Frage hat sich Goethe für eine liberale Tradition entschieden, die das Marktprinzip mit Gewaltlosigkeit identifiziert.” [“In this matter Goethe opted for the liberal tradition, that identifies the market principle with freedom from force.”] See *Die Romane Goethes*, p. 33. Blessin observes that Goethe thereby vouched for an altogether anti-Hobbesian position, one that recognized in the private relations of the liberal market a socially constructive element of mutual consideration rooted in self-interest: “Die Objektivität des Marktes, der alle ihre Gleichheit untereinander verdanken, besteht nämlich darin, daß jeder nur so großen Vorteil aus den Handlungen anderer zieht wie diese anderen aus den seinen, bzw. daß niemand auf Kosten anderer reich wird, ohne diese auch zu bereichern” [“The objectivity of the market, to which everyone owes their equality among themselves, consists in the fact that each one profits from the actions of others only as much as those do from one’s own, or in other words, that no one gets rich at another’s expense without enriching the other as well”] (Ibid.).

fiasco of *Faust*, Part II, but likewise in the thematic significance of Shakespeare in the *Lehrjahre*. England was the heartland of the liberal market economy; its colonies in America were the training ground of Lothario and represent the promised land of Lenardo and his tribe of emigrants in the *Wanderjahre*. Moreover, as Roberts has shown us, *Hamlet* is the therapy that releases Wilhelm from his regressive attachment to the past—as also, Blessin would add, to the representative aesthetics of feudalism. Finally, Shakespeare’s greater opus entices Wilhelm with its heroic vision of a “brave new world” that points in both the *Lehrjahre* and the *Wanderjahre* to America: where mature individuals may shape an otherwise elemental wilderness. So grand is the aesthetic enterprise, in fact, that even modern technology—in Europe a growing monster that devours the jobs and bread of the laborer—may be seen as a **duty** in the elemental New World overseas.<sup>121</sup>

### Subjecting the Inner Child

Before Wilhelm can assume his place in modern society, he must be freed from his fatalist delusions and from the Dionysian bands of erotic love and theater. Following the traumatic break with his first love, Wilhelm’s retreat inward finds its objectification in his relation to Mignon. Blessin has shown that Mignon, even as Wilhelm’s opposite, stands in an essential “Zusammenhang” or connection with him, such that the tragic germ that destroyed Werther is transferred away from Wilhelm.<sup>122</sup> What he means is that the vital nature of Wilhelm is able to live on, because his self-destructive *Gesinnung* or outlook is

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<sup>121</sup>Susanne (“das nußbraune Mädchen”) of the *Wanderjahre* senses the looming and already growing unemployment crisis that industrialism has caused. Moreover, she insists that she “‘käme [sich] verächtlich vor” [“‘would scorn (her)self”], were she the agent who undertakes “‘selbst Maschinen zu errichten und die Nahrung der Menge an sich zu reißen.” [“‘to build machines (her)self and horde the bread of the masses.”] (HA VIII, 430; DWH). Still, as a modern *Mensch* she affirms the liberal principle of self-interest when she writes in her diary of the industrialist, “‘Ich kann nieman-den verdenken, daß er sich für seinen eigenen Nächsten hält.” [“‘I cannot blame anyone who thinks of himself first,”] (Ibid.). She finally sees the possibility of reconciling her social conscience and her modern, liberal values in the prospect of emigration and settlement in the American territories. Of industrialization in America she muses, “[W]ir sehnten uns (. . .) in solche Gegenden, wo dasjenige für Pflicht und Recht gelten könnte, was hier ein Verbrechen wäre.” [“(W)e longed (. . .) for such a country, where what here would be a crime might be a right and duty.”] (Ibid).

<sup>122</sup>See *Goethes Romane: Aufbruch in die Moderne*, p. 87.

projected onto a nature that is “in ihrem Dasein von Grund auf bedroht [. . .].”  
 [“threatened at the very root of her nature (. . .).”] (Ibid.).<sup>123</sup> In this respect Mignon  
 functions within the novel as a *tragos* or scapegoat for the acquired and in that sense alien  
 tragic tendency of Wilhelm, in whom Blessin recognizes a “lebenstüchtige Existenz[.]”  
 [“nature fit to live”] (Ibid.). Nowhere in the novel is Mignon’s Dionysian character as  
 explicit as at the celebration feast that follows the successful opening night of *Hamlet*.  
 There, we read, she together with Felix accompanies the songs of the *Harfner*. Having  
 been permitted to drink all the wine she wanted, “Mignon ward bis zur Wut lustig”  
 [“Mignon was mirthful to a passion”], while others try to calm her (326; DWH):

Aber wenig half das Zureden, denn nun sprang sie auf und raste, die  
 Schellentrommel in der Hand, um den Tisch herum. Ihre Haare flogen, und  
 indem sie den Kopf zurück und alle ihre Glieder gleichsam in die Luft  
 warf, schein sie *einer Mänade ähnlich, deren wilde und beinahe  
 unmögliche Stellungen uns auf alten Monumenten noch oft in Erstaunen  
 setzen* (326, my italics).

[But admonishing her seemed to have little effect, for she now began  
 hysterically to rush around the table, tambourine in hand, hair flying, head  
 thrown back and her body flung into the air *like one of those maenads  
 whose wild and well-nigh impossible postures delight (amaze) us on  
 ancient monuments* (EAB 198, my insertion and italics).]

Just as Wilhelm saw in the theater a temple of shared or trans-subjective experience,  
 Mignon’s Dionysian dance foreshadows both the consummation of Wilhelm’s and  
 Philine’s longstanding flirtation and the all but ritual destruction of the “temple” itself.

Wilhelm’s theatric triumph, assisted by the Tower’s contribution of the ghost,  
 figures symbolically as his psychic release from tragic fate. Roberts has demonstrated  
 that. Nevertheless, Wilhelm cannot escape the consequences of his theatric therapy: the  
 theater itself is reduced to ashes; and Wilhelm almost loses his son Felix to the madness of  
 the *Harfner*, turned patriarchal psychopath. Thanks to Mignon’s intervention, Wilhelm  
 rescues the boy, thus barely averting yet another tragedy. Wilhelm and his fateful family

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<sup>123</sup>According to Wilhelm and Serlo, both drama and the novel (*Roman*) portray “menschliche  
 Natur und Handlung” (307). Whereas in drama, however, the essential “Charakter der  
 Hauptfigur” rushes to its fate, the more accidental and alterable “Gesinnungen” make possible a  
 formative flexibility of the “Romanheld” (307ff.). We have already observed that this theory of  
 the novel or romance interprets the entire genre in terms of the Bildungsroman—even if Blessin has  
 noted that Goethe’s own first novel, “*Werther* tendiert zum Drama” [“*Werther* tends toward  
 drama”]. See: *Goethes Romane: Aufbruch in die Moderne*, 87.

would appear to have been saved. Yet by Book Eight, where Mignon dies of a sudden cardiac arrest, the tragic spell that has hung over Wilhelm since his loss of Mariane, for whose return he still into Book Seven retains a hope, has already been broken. Even if Natalie moves quickly to remove Wilhelm from the spectacle of her death and thus spare his feelings: the trouble is unnecessary; he seems oddly unaffected by the loss. It is this “Lauigkeit [. . .] der Empfindung” [“lukewarm sensibility”] that Humboldt found so incongruent. It behoves us to investigate the source of his **Apollonian** resistance to personal tragedy.

Mignon, whose embalmed form finds its way into the paintings of the painter in Book Two of the *Wanderjahre*, experienced multiple literary and theatric reincarnations that Carolyn Steedman has catalogued in her important study, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930*. It is significant that the figure of Mignon became a familiar literary type in English popular fiction, opera, and melodrama, while Wilhelm himself was relegated rather quickly in England to the cellar of literary esoterica—fine continental wine, as it were, for cultural highbrows. Steedman points to the smallness that Mignon’s name signifies, and to her character as a forlorn orphan that has suffered neglect and abuse, as the two constants that persisted amid the variety of her literary and stage permutations. The result was a figure evoked again and again to **move** the audience, even to tears. “Mignon *moves*: she promotes pity and tenderness in the beholder (in the reader as much as in Meister)” (Steedman 25). Schiller, too, wrote of Mignon: “dieses reine und poetische Wesen [. . .] kann zu der reinsten Wehmut und zu einer wahr menschlichen Trauer *bewegen*.” [“this pure and poetic being (. . .) can *move* one to the purest melancholy and to a truly human sorrow.”]<sup>124</sup> The emotional response of Goethe’s first readers was replicated in the response of both the other characters as well as the audience of English stage and opera. Steedman traces this pathos of her underdeveloped body and psyche to “the visceral sense of the smallness of the self” (9). In other words, the sentiment of vulnerability that would be evoked even in the name of political reform, had to do with the origin of the middle-class self in the wonderful past of a privileged and protected childhood; it was a selfhood that in this

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<sup>124</sup>Letter to Goethe of June 29, 1796 (HA VII, 632ff.), my italics.

specific sense was unavailable to those deprived, as are Mariane and Mignon, of a secure middle-class home.

According to Steedman, this little self was located deep in the past, in a childhood retained and sustained deep within the adult subconscious, and so made possible an idea of selfhood as what she terms **interiority**: an idea that overlaps with what Strack calls *Innerlichkeit* but has an added dimension. Steedman's analysis brings out the perception of the self as the vulnerable child within; as such it was associated with the sentiment that Schiller, referring to how Mignon affects the reader, more than once calls "Wehmut", which he distinguishes as "ein[e] wahr *menschlich*[e] Trauer" ["a truly *human* sorrow"] (Ibid., my italics). That he should regard this nostalgic melancholy as uniquely **human** bears out our sense that the modern self, incubated amid the motherly indulgences of childhood, found the transition of secondary socialization—that oven from which the mama's boy might (or might not) emerge firm and forged for manhood—painful and even treacherous. The figure of Mignon that Schiller finds so "*außerordentlich schön*" is *extraordinary*, literally out of order, because she represents the "Reinheit" or purity that would be, in his words, "bei jedem andern Individuum unstatthaft" (Ibid., my italics). It would be impermissible, "out of place" in every other individual, because such purity is not manly. Purity is characteristic, rather, of the not fully individuated and autonomous subject: the as yet immature subject that is not yet adapted (as are, by contrast, even the women of the Tower) to personal independence and productive activity in the modern social economy. The "reinst[e] Wehmut" ["purest melancholy"] that Mignon evokes is fundamentally related to the self-pity that Wilhelm feels when things don't turn out as he had hoped and expected. This is because he, too, is still an immature self longing for the fairy-tale ending that he, in the course of his primary socialization, had been conditioned to expect: yet a socialization without which, paradoxically, the modern, middle-class individual would be impossible. Hence, that "Wehmut" is a human sentiment that only those individuals may indulge without risk, whose secondary socialization is complete and lies at a safe distance in the past.

The parental pity that Wilhelm (or the reader) feels for the unfortunate Mignon corresponds to the childish and all but comical **self-pity** that Wilhelm succumbs to when

things don't go his way. I say this, because the tragic fate and voice of the *Harfner*, with whom the dejected Wilhelm identifies, presents in an incongruent light the **tragic frustration** of the latter—an expression as absurd as the sentiment itself—over not getting any from Philine: “In der verdrießlichen Unruhe, in der er sich befand, fiel ihm ein, den Alten aufzusuchen, durch dessen Harfe er die bösen Geister [!] zu verscheuchen hoffte” (136). [“Wilhelm was so restless and ill-tempered that he decided to look up the Harper in the hope that his music might dispel the evil spirits(!)” (EAB 77).] The first song he hears is that most private and personal of the tragic minstrel's laments, “Wer nie sein Brot mit Tränen aß”:

Die wehmütige, herzliche Klage drang tief in die Seele des Hörers. Es schien ihm, als ob der Alte manchmal von Tränen gehindert würde, fortzufahren, dann klangen die Saiten allein, bis sich wieder die Stimme leise in gebrochenen Lauten darein mischte. Wilhelm stand an dem Pfosten, seine Seele war tief gerührt, die Trauer des Unbekannten schloß sein beklommenes Herz; er widerstand nicht dem Mitgefühl und konnte und wollte die Tränen nicht zurückhalten, die des Alten herzliche Klage endlich auch aus seinen Augen hervorlockte (137).

[This mournful, heartfelt lament affected the listener deeply. It seemed to him as if the old man was at times prevented by tears from continuing to sing, and the strings of the harp resounded until the voice came in again, softly and with broken sounds. Wilhelm stood by the door, deeply moved, his own constricted heart opened up by the immense grief of the stranger. He was overcome by such fellow feeling that he did not, could not, restrain the tears brought to his eyes by the old man's bitter lamentation (EAB 78).]

The “heartfelt lament” or rather, complaint of the *Harfner* is aimed at the bitter, negative experience, the suffering that he has reaped in reality: a reality that resists not only the tendency of personal desire, but even the contours of the self. It is self-pity over and over. Be that as it may, in Wilhelm it qualifies as a “truly human” sentiment, because the pampered and not yet autonomous self, nurtured in the middle-class nursery, would wax elegiac whenever the hard realities of the liberal social economy made it long for the womb-like security of its maternal homeland.

Perhaps the most striking manifestation of the special relation in which Mignon stands to Wilhelm's selfhood is to be found in the closing chapter of Book Two. We already have seen the self-pity into which Wilhelm falls as the result of sexual frustration. Just as his manlier rival Norbert had robbed him of his Mariane, Friedrich and (more

significantly) the virile *Stallmeister* stand between him and the frolicking Philine. The rivalry between Wilhelm's rivals comes to a (for the *Stallmeister*) mock duel between the horseman and the furious Friedrich: for whom the fight is serious business, and with whom Wilhelm identifies. That is because Wilhelm sees in Friedrich's tantrum "sein eignes Innerstes, mit starken und übertriebenen Zügen dargestellt" (140). ["his innermost self represented with exaggerated strokes" (DWH).] The tumult rages silently in the better behaved Wilhelm, but we are assured that in his childish perception: "er hätte die Menschen, die nur zu seinem Verdrusse da zu sein schienen, vertilgen mögen" (140). ["He would gladly have obliterated everybody who seemed to be there just to exasperate him" (EAB 80).] This boy needs some quiet time! After he retreats into his room and voices his intention to leave town, Mignon approaches him, we are told, with "Liebe" and "Treue" ["love" and "loyalty"] for Wilhelm in her heart (142; DWH). She kneels before him and rests her head on his lap: "Er spielte mit ihren Haaren und war freundlich" (143). ["He played with her hair and was friendly" (DWH).] We then are told that Wilhelm "fühlte [. . .] an ihr eine Art Zucken, das ganz sachte anfing und sich, *durch alle Glieder wachsend, verbreitete*" (143, my italics). ["felt (. . .) a kind of twitching in her that began gently and spread, *growing through all members*" (DWH, my italics).] Her seizure climaxes with a scream that is accompanied "mit krampfhaften Bewegungen" ["convulsive movements"] (143; EAB 81). Wilhelm then takes her jerking body into his arms as Mignon dissolves into tears: "Ihre starren Glieder wurden gelinde, *es ergoß sich ihr Innerstes*" (Ibid., my italics). ["Her rigid limbs unfroze, *her whole inner self poured itself out*" (EAB 82, my italics).]

While I concur with Eisler's attribution of sexual significance to this scene, I would argue that his psychoanalytic interpretation of Mignon's seizure as a female orgasm largely misses its symbolic import, for it overlooks Mignon's symbolic relation to Wilhelm.<sup>125</sup> If we bear in mind this special relation, the language of the passage suggests that Mignon's fit functions as a representation, rather, of **masturbation**. Wilhelm's

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<sup>125</sup>Eisler: "In my opinion this episode admits of only one interpretation, namely, that it is a masterly description, realistic down to the smallest detail, of a girl having an orgasm." See K. R. Eisler, *Goethe: A Psychoanalytic Study, 1749-1832*, vol. II (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963), p. 761.



sincere sympathy with the mistreated waif reflects, in light of Steedman's insights, the pain suffered by his self (as the inner child) over his repeated failures in competition with mature and successful men for the sexually developed women, Mariane and Philine (both of whom become pregnant). In yet another recent study of Mignon and the long train of sexually ambiguous girls she inspired, Michael Wetzel identifies her type as the "Phallus-Mädchen" ["phallus-girl"] that, as the **child bride**, was required to sustain and signify the middle-class male identity.<sup>126</sup> I would stress, on the other hand, the provisional and supplemental nature of Mignon's relation to Wilhelm's immature sexuality. Wilhelm's attachment to Mignon, as a phallus-girl, is symptomatic of the not yet independent condition of his self. His always private need for, and delight in, Mignon follows from situations that overwhelm Wilhelm and expose his psychic impotency. The characteristic vice of the middle-class youth, that came to be associated with Rousseau, was the symptom of a self stuck in its subjectivity and unable to make the transition to manly autonomy. "Stop playing with yourself!" the burgher boy was told: "That's what whores (and actresses) are for!" That syphilis was far more likely to blind him, was beside the point. It was his self, his manhood that mattered! In the *Lehrjahre*, however, the still undifferentiated sexuality of Mignon, whom Jarno derides as a hermaphrodite, points to Wilhelm's personal immaturity, typified by his tendency to self-pity when things don't go his way.<sup>127</sup>

Only after Wilhelm has undergone theatric therapy and becomes better acquainted with the *treffliche Menschen* of the Tower; only then can he rise above self-pity and become capable of manly anger. This is not a trivial matter. Jarno praises Wilhelm for the anger he feels over the machinations of the Tower: "Sie sind verdriesslich und bitter",

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<sup>126</sup>See Wetzel, *Mignon: die Kindsbraut als Phantasma der Goethezeit* (Munich: Fink, 1999). Wetzel's lengthy study, which undoubtedly recognizes a problematic dimension of the modern subject, shares with many other Foucauldian analyses the tendency to mistake at times its own postmodern hermeneutic for the actual social artifact, so as to overlook such "archeological" evidence as might implicate postmodern thought, as a phenomenon of late modernity, in the larger world view from which it presumes to distinguish itself.

<sup>127</sup>In Book Three Jarno voices his "Ekel und Verdruss" ["disgust and vexation"] over Wilhelm's attachment to the *Harfner* and that "albernes, zwitterhaftes Geschöpf" ["foolish, hermaphroditic creature"], Mignon (193; DWH). Later, in Book Seven, Jarno contrasts Therese, "eine wahre Amazone" ["a true amazon"], with "artige Hermaphroditen" ["charming hermaphrodites"] such as Mignon (439; DWH).

sagte Jarno, ‘das ist recht schön und gut. Wenn Sie nur erst einmal recht böse werden, wird es noch besser sein’” (547). [“‘You’re ill-tempered and bitter,’ said Jarno. ‘That’s all well and good. But when you get angry, that will be still better’” (EAB 335).] Schiller underscores the importance of Wilhelm’s state of mind and the way he expresses it. Referring to Wilhelm’s anger and Jarno’s praise of the same, Schiller confesses to Goethe, “Ich gestehe, daß es mir ohne diesen Beweis von Selbstgefühl bei unserm Helden peinlich sein würde, ihn mir mit dieser Klasse so eng verbunden zu denken, wie nachher durch die Verbindung mit Natalien geschieht.” [“I admit that I would be embarrassed for our hero, were it not for this proof of his sense of self, to imagine him so closely associated with this class, as happens with his marriage to Natalie.”]<sup>128</sup> This “Selbstgefühl”, manifested likewise in Wilhelm’s new capacity for irony, is not another subjective experience of his self, in which the imagination plays a central role. It is, rather, a new sense of his own worth that becomes **indignant**, when he suspects that he is being treated like a child rather than as a man among men.

Little wonder, then, that Mignon dies only moments before Wilhelm voices those words. The immediate cause are the hug and kisses exchanged by Wilhelm and Therese—actually a misunderstanding. But the Wilhelm of Book Eight had earlier taken leave of his inner child, having entrusted the girl Mignon to the professional tutelage of Natalie. The latter, for her part, will make every effort to make Mignon dress like any other girl and learn her domestic duties, as the productive wife of a modern man. Wilhelm’s embrace of Therese, then, is less important as the forced and mechanical gesture of love that it tries to be, than as a sign that he has entered the world of the Tower and has embraced its grown-up, practical interests. His effort to love Therese arises from the sensible idea that one should choose a spouse with compatible interests, and who is well-suited to a modern lifestyle, rather than marry for erotic love: which has the unfortunate tendency to settle on someone radically different than oneself, such as the very un-bourgeois Mariane. Natalie will remove Wilhelm from the room and from the spectacle of Mignon’s dead body, but Humboldt pointed out that it is scarcely necessary. The fact that Wilhelm is largely

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<sup>128</sup>See letter to Goethe of July 5, 1796 (HA VII, 638).

**unaffected** by the loss only confirms that he is prepared to abandon the aspect of himself to which she has stood in such a special relation. As dizzy and unbalanced as he is apt to become even to the end of the novel, Wilhelm is learning to stand on his own two feet. That even includes a decision to marry for adult, practical reasons rather than for needy, particular love. More to the point, Wilhelm has left the theater and, with it, everything Dionysian. These have been replaced by the Apollonian humanism of the *Oheim*.

## CHAPTER V

### THE TEMPLE OF APOLLO (A GREENHOUSE?)

#### Man-Making Experience: the Semantics of *Erlebnis*

The self that assumes its form in the Bildungsroman is not content with just getting through life, for better or worse. After all, this sort of novel is supposedly about a *Meister* of life, not just another episode of *Survivor*. But in spite of his surname, Wilhelm is decidedly not a master. Not yet, at least. His is inherited capital; and his father's brand new, old-style, representative house is no home to Wilhelm. His is a younger generation that no longer sees in paternal capital a monument to father's achievement, the legacy of which was to be preserved and perpetuated by the son. It was no longer the learner's permit with which the successful burgher, newly *arrivé*, was qualified to take supervised Sunday drives in the aristocratic *grand monde*. For the son, rather, that capital was the means to purchase memory-making experience: experience by which the modern subject might realize its individual selfhood.<sup>129</sup> In the *Lehrjahre* all the world is no longer a stage, a fact that is slow to sink into Wilhelm's brain. The subject newly emerged from its primary socialization—and that is Wilhelm, who, according to Kittler and Roberts, has not yet freed himself from the Oedipal relation that such “home schooling” (or mothering indulgence) engendered—expected to find in the world an *Erlebnis-Park* ideally suited to his personal and developmental needs. It is this perilous, even **narcissistic** misunderstanding that the Spinozan tonic of the Tower was formulated to treat.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> In this respect the words of Faust might **almost** stand as the motto of the burgher youth: “Was man nicht nützt, ist eine schwere Last, / Nur was der Augenblick erschafft, das kann er nützen” (v. 682-85). [“What one does not use, is a heavy load, / Only what the moment makes is of any use DWH)]. The impressive new house of Wilhelm's father weighs on the son like a useless burden; and he certainly is inclined to live for the moment—so much so, that his plan to misuse a business trip to launch his theatric career does not weigh in the least on his conscience: “ja daß er vielmehr diesen Betrug für heilig hielt” (42). [“Yes, he even looked upon this deception as something holy” (DWH).] This deception of himself and others is possible, only because he sees in the favorable circumstances “den Wink eines leitenden Schicksals” (Ibid.). [“the guiding hand of fate” (EAB 21).]

<sup>130</sup>It has become a commonplace in *Wilhelm-Meister* criticism, that Wilhelm narcissistically views the world as an extension of himself. This is most explicit in Per Øhrgaard's *Die Genesung des Narcissus: Eine Studie zu Goethe: “Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre”*, trans. Monika Wesemann

As Schiller recognized, however, Wilhelm never gets his philosophy straight from the source. Nor does the reader, for that matter, for whose sake Schiller suggests that Goethe let the Abbé be the voice for an “etwas deutlichere Pronunziation der Hauptidee” [“a somewhat clearer articulation of the main idea”].<sup>131</sup> In the end, though, Schiller lauds the “ästhetisch[e] Richtung” or aesthetic direction that Goethe gives Wilhelm’s development.<sup>132</sup> The “ästhetische Geistesstimmung” [“aesthetic mood of mind”] of the novel is the spoonful of sugar, as it were, that **is** the medicine by which Wilhelm is both healed of his fatalism and prepared for a life of autonomous and productive *Tätigkeit*. In Schiller’s view, Wilhelm’s moral instinct is fully intact; his sensuality requires only finer definition, not a fundamental correction. The fact that his childlike (albeit bruised) egocentrism can love all, only because it still assumes that all love him, presents no fundamental problem to modern morality; it is dangerous, rather, only from a practical point of view. In the naturalistic world selfishness is healthy and good, so long as it has not turned narrow and aggressive. Melina is the unappealing example of that. Those not

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(Copenhagen: Univ., Inst. for germansk filologi, 1978). But the suggestion of narcissism appears in several other studies, more recently in the (psycho)analysis of Kathryn R. Edmunds. See: “‘Ich bin gebildet genug . . . um zu lieben und zu trauern’: Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship in Mourning”, in: *Germanic Review* 71(2) 1996: 83-97. In my view, however, the narrow Freudian definition of narcissism in such studies overlooks the incapacity of even the mature and (presumably) healthy modern subject to sympathize genuinely with the pain or negative experience of another, especially if that pain makes the claim of immediate dependency on the subject, or in any way belies or resists the functional presumption and *techné* of personal autonomy.

<sup>131</sup>Letter to Goethe of October 19, 1796 (HA VII, 649).

<sup>132</sup>In his letter of July 9, 1796, Schiller presents a question together with its answer : “Aber im Ernste – woher mag es kommen, daß Sie einen Menschen haben erziehen und fertig machen können, ohne auf Bedürfnisse zu stoßen, denen die Philosophie nur begegnen kann? Ich bin überzeugt, daß dieses bloß der ästhetischen Richtung zuzuschreiben ist, die Sie in dem ganzen Romane genommen. Innerhalb der ästhetischen Geistesstimmung regt sich kein Bedürfnis nach jenen Trostgründen, die aus der Spekulation geschöpft werden müssen: sie hat Selbständigkeit, Unendlichkeit in sich: nur wenn sich das Sinnliche und das Moralische im Menschen feindlich entgegenstreben, muß bei der reinen Vernunft Hilfe gesucht werden.” [“But seriously – what made it possible for you to educate and complete a human, without encountering difficulties that only philosophy can address? I am convinced that this may be attributed only to the aesthetic direction that you embarked on throughout the novel. Within the aesthetic mood of mind there is no need for the comforting answers that must be sought in speculation; it (aesthetics) possesses independence and infinitude in itself: only when the sensual and moral in man are at odds with one another, must one turn to reason for help.”] (HA VII, 646). It is clear here that Goethe’s gentler solution is possible, precisely because Wilhelm is, in Schiller’s estimation, a human (“Menschen”) still fully intact. This is to say that his sensual and moral instincts are, from the humanistic standpoint, still more or less in harmony with one another. We will have reason to call Schiller’s judgment fundamentally into question.

fit for such a world, on the other hand, are predisposed to Dionysian self-dissolution, so that no one else bears any responsibility.<sup>133</sup> In this respect even compassion tends toward such self-negation, if it becomes a tragic fixation. “Wehmut”, on the other hand, can still be “truly human”, as long as the subject of the sentiment can **get over it**. It is this shaking-off-the-past business with which Wilhelm still has trouble. And yet Wilhelm’s words to Friedrich at the close of the novel—“Erinnern Sie mich nicht [. . .] an jene Zeiten!” [“Don’t remind me (. . .) of those days”] (610; EAB 373)—make it undeniable that he has come a long way in this respect; that he is prepared, as Kathryn R. Edmunds has recognized, to discard “some memories [that] are persistently perceived as threatening” to his self.<sup>134</sup>

The hands of scholars who believe in the Bildungsroman have been bound respecting the *Lehrjahre*, in the sense that the limitations of Wilhelm’s consciousness, which have become much more evident in the last century, leave him even at the end of

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<sup>133</sup>Blessin: “Alle, die sonst noch in den *Lehrjahren* zu Tode kommen—Mignon, der Harfner, Aurelie—haben sich ganz von innen aufgezehrt. Es gibt keinen, der nachweislich schuld daran wäre.” [“All of the others who die in the *Lehrjahre*—Mignon, the harpist, Aurelie—devoured themselves from within. There is no one who evidently bears any guilt for it.”] See *Goethes Romane: Aufbruch in die Moderne*, p. 90. Even if Blessin acknowledges the exception, “daß Wilhelm an Mariane schuldig wird” [“that Wilhelm is guilty with respect to Mariane”], Wilhelm and the reader are spared certainty about her fate until new developments have made it uninteresting: uninteresting, at least, to the observer characterized by the narrator at the beginning of Book Two, who takes no interest in an individual’s fate once it has been decided—once, as the Abbé (and Kant) might say, freedom has surrendered to necessity (Ibid.). It is worth noting, too, that Blessin’s observation concerning the self-destruction of certain characters corresponds to Hegel’s premise, asserted in the *Vorrede* of his *Phenomenology*: “Das Bestehen oder die Substanz eines Daseins ist die Sichselbstgleichheit; denn seine Ungleichheit mit sich wäre seine Auflösung.” [“The consistency or substance of a being is its identity with itself; for non-identity with itself would be its dissolution.”] See *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Wolfgang Bonsiepen and Reinhard Heede (Düsseldorf: Rheinisch-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1980), p. 39. This point is clarified in the Introduction, where Hegel characterizes the subject that cannot rise above its natural state: “Was auf ein natürliches Leben beschränkt ist, vermag durch sich selbst nicht über sein unmittelbares Dasein hinauszugehen; aber es wird durch ein anderes darüber hinausgetrieben, und dies Hinausgerissenwerden ist sein Tod” [“What is confined to a natural life cannot move beyond its immediate existence; but it is driven out by something else, and this tearing-out (from itself) is its death”] (57, my insertion). This death is literally true in the *Lehrjahre* for those characters who cannot adapt to the ineluctable logic of the prevailing *Zeitgeist*, the liberal economy. The affinity of Goethe’s novel with Hegel accentuates the personal strength and adaptability necessary to restrain one’s desire and thereby preserve self-identity. This will prove all the more necessary in the *Wanderjahre*, where the conservatism of Hegel’s 19<sup>th</sup> century demands personal *Entsagung* (i.e. the renunciation of one’s desire) in exchange for a seat in post-Napoleonic Europe.

<sup>134</sup>See Edmunds, “‘Ich bin gebildet genug . . . um zu lieben und zu trauern’: Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship in Mourning”, *Germanic Review* 2(1996): 83-100 (83).

the novel still far from the ideal of *Bildung*: self-cultivation coupled with social integration. In this respect it has become questionable whether **Goethe's** Bildungsroman is a Bildungsroman at all. In reality, though, it is a problem facing virtually all Bildungsromane, like an elite club that is too selective to admit anyone. Still, our analysis in the foregoing chapter has made it clear that the Society of the Tower represents a fuller realization of modern consciousness and values than does the title character; that the Tower functions as a bridge that spans the gap between the competing (i.e. economic) demands of the personal and the social. It is characteristic of the Tower that the modern Christianity of Natalie, rather than conferring a gift in the way of charity, is attentive to individual debits and credits and functions in the way of a beatific broker. Every one is **personally** responsible only for him—or her—self. Yes, the novel is that modern! Yet Goethe must have recognized that personal *Bildung* could be realized fully only in the rarest instances, by the most gifted and fortunate, unless some larger agency were to intervene as the advocate of one like Wilhelm, who stands somewhere between the exceptional and the all too average.

When Schiller observed of his friend's novel, "daß er keine solche wichtigste Person hat und braucht" ["that it neither has nor needs a most important person"], he is alluding to what he in an earlier letter had referred to as the "Ökonomie des Ganzen" ["economy of the whole"], a world that revolves around no one character, not even around the protagonist.<sup>135</sup> Schiller's nagging desire to hear from the Abbé a clearer articulation of the central logic or economy of the novel, confirms that the Tower is the novel's true nucleus of modern humanity in Goethe's novel, a center to which Wilhelm must gravitate if he is to get a grip on his own life. It is no accident that critical understanding of the Tower has grown with the entry of the social sciences into literary scholarship. The accession of sociological criticism to what had been the prerogative of the humanities or *Geisteswissenschaften* is prefigured in the *Lehrjahre* by the Tower's advancement, which Jarno announces in Book Eight, from aesthetic pedagogy to an active interest in modern

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<sup>135</sup>The first quote is from Schiller's letter to Goethe of July 8, 1796 (HA VII, 640); the second is from his letter of November 28, 1796 (HA VII, 651).

man's social and economic existence.<sup>136</sup> Even so, an insurance and investment agency is a poor standard for personal *Bildung*.

The same is true of Jarno himself, whose altogether pragmatic—one might say 19<sup>th</sup>-century character—is so fully autonomous and blind to unifying ideals as to be incapable of winning the love or interest of anyone. His planned marriage to Lydie is motivated by convenience; his relationship with a woman in the *Wanderjahre* is entirely professional. And in the post-Napoleonic, Biedermeier age of the second *Wilhelm Meister* novel—“die Zeit der Einseitigkeiten” [“the age of one-sidedness”]—he dismisses unsentimentally humanistic, “vielseitige Bildung” [“multifaceted cultivation”] as a relic of the past and devotes himself to the lonely profession of geology: a specialist, in other words, of lifeless, volcanic nature.<sup>137</sup> For those reasons, it makes sense that Goethe singles out **Lothario** as his male model of a humanistic *Bildung* and, at the same time, as a citizen of the modern social economy. In Lothario Wilhelm finds a true personality, his ideal of self-cultivation. Yet Lothario is a personality only in a distinctly modern, psychological sense, as opposed to the public personalities Wilhelm has admired at court and on stage. Moreover, Lothario must literally flee people like Aurelie, who sees in his dynamic and engaging personality an “Anführer” [“leader”] for the shepherd-less Germans; whereas his ambition is devoted to a strictly private agenda (264).

### *Lothario as Model Man*

We already have seen that the education of Lothario—as a privileged orphan under the Abbé's immediate tutelage (no PTA to interfere)—disengages him from the continuity of tradition and, hence, from humanity's “fallen” condition: literally subject to (or more precisely, **of**) the sticky and otherwise universal predicate of history and of the meaning it confers on all born into it.<sup>138</sup> Even if the *Oheim* is not able to ensure beyond his death the

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<sup>136</sup>See HA VII, p. 563ff.

<sup>137</sup>See *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (HA VIII, 37; DWH).

<sup>138</sup>“Fallen” in this context refers primarily to the Enlightenment project of human renewal. This involved liberation of the human conscience from its bondage to *l'Infâme* of church authority, as well as the elevation of that same conscience to moral autonomy under such rational social principles as Kant's Categorical Imperative. I perceive, however, a decided affinity of this secular



perfect integrity of the New Eden that he created—as the *prima causa* of a godlike humanity—the partial liquidation of his paradise is no longer important. For he has made possible all the same a new race of humans immune to original (or any other) sin. It is Lothario’s **insusceptibility to guilt** that astonishes and disorients Wilhelm when he first encounters the unconventional gentleman. As he approaches the estate of the latter, Wilhelm has assumed the role (actor that he is) of a Fury: he has come to answer Aurelie’s death on the head of the faithless lover who had broken her heart and is, therefore, guilty of her tragic disposition and death. Rather than a cry of remorse, however, the words that Wilhelm hears from Lothario are strangely unconventional. The latter calls to Jarno, ““Ich erhalte die wunderlichste Depesche von der Welt”” (424). [“I have just received the most remarkable *dépêche* in the world”” (DWH)]. The word “Depesche” is typical of Lothario’s modern vocabulary; it is the sort of French that Aurelie earlier called “eine perfide Sprache” [“a language that is *perfide*”] (342; EAB 207). She explains her choice of words: ““Perfid ist treulos mit Genuß, mit Übermut und Schadenfreude” (Ibid.). [*Perfide* is ‘faithless,’ mixed with pleasure, arrogance and malice”” (Ibid.).] Her slanted definition of the French language reflects her own lovesick bias. While Wilhelm defends French as ““ein[e] Sprache [. . .] der man den größten Teil seiner Bildung schuldig ist”” [“a language which has provided us with most of our culture””]—the language, in other words, of higher European culture—Aurelie insists that French is ““recht die Sprache der Welt, wert, die allgemeine Sprache zu sein, damit sie sich nur alle untereinander recht betrügen und belügen können”” [“indeed the language of the civilized world and worthy of becoming the universal language so that people can all cheat and deceive each other””] (Ibid.; *ibid.*).

Despite her jaded view of French—the **diplomatic language**, that is, by which Lothario withdrew from their affair—her reflections are remarkably insightful with respect

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sense of the word “fallen” to Martin Heidegger’s existentials of Dasein in its primary condition, *das Verfallensein*: into which *das Man* generally finds itself “thrown”. Heidegger is referring to the mediate situation in which Dasein understands itself, in terms of the anonymous authority and averageness of social existence. Middle-class awareness of and reliance on **public opinion** since the eighteenth century, as the ultimate authority to which government must conform, lest it forfeit its mandate, has resulted in a shallowing out, and manipulation of, public authority, a shallowness regretted by such widely differing thinkers as Heidegger himself (especially after the *Kehre*) and Jürgen Habermas, notably in his influential early study, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*.

to modern language in general. What she denigrates as mutual deception is related to the special function that language assumes in the liberal economy as **a medium of negotiation and exchange**. Aurelie's emotional distress would be diagnosed today as codependency, rooted as it is in the sort of personal relation that Blessin sees relegated to the past in the modern *Lehrjahre*. Her urgent and aching need for someone or something outside herself and her own activity is portrayed in terms of an ultimately mortal self-negation that is virtually identical to the terminal loss of identity Hegel outlines in his *Phenomenology*.<sup>139</sup> Aurelie's real problem is that **she will not trade**; she clings to Lothario, rather, as to her one-and-only, the irreplaceable object of her love. Again, it is Blessin who discovered that in the *Lehrjahre*, "Man muß tauschen können, wenn man besitzen will." ["One must exchange, if one wants to possess"] (*Die Romane Goethes*, 38). Wilhelm must overcome his need for his grandfather's art collection, his need for his first love, and his need for a theatric vocation. Each has a value; but each must be relinquished in order to obtain something else. Aurelie, on the other hand, refuses to let go of one in whom she sees the satisfaction of her **need**: of that *Bedürfnis* that, as a necessity, constituted in the eyes of the Kantian Schiller (and Abbé) the dreaded opposite of moral freedom.

When Wilhelm, now acquainted with the *treffliche Menschen* of the Tower, confesses to the "Bitterkeit im Herzen" ["bitterness of heart"] that he had borne toward Aurelie's faithless lover, Lothario reflects with admirable self-scrutiny on the mistake he had made: "ich hätte meine Freundschaft zu ihr nicht mit dem Gefühl der Liebe verwechseln sollen, ich hätte nicht an die Stelle der Achtung, die sie verdiente, eine Neigung eindringen sollen, die sie weder erregen noch erhalten konnte" (467ff.). ["I should not have confused friendship with love. I should not have allowed affection to invade the respect she deserved, affection that she could neither arouse in me nor receive from me in return" (EAB 286).] His next words are striking: "Ach! *sie war nicht lebenswürdig, wenn sie liebte*, und das ist das größte Unglück, das einem Weibe begegnen kann" (468, my italics). ["*She was not lovable (worth loving) when she loved*,

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<sup>139</sup>See p. 117, note 5.

and that is the worst misfortune that can befall a woman” (Ibid., my insertion and italics).] The causal linkage in which the word is placed sets “liebenswertig” in an entirely modern context. The point Lothario makes is that when Aurelie loved, she was incapable of **earning** the love of the other; as Blessin might say, she could not “tauschen” or trade. Her failure is not a lack of good qualities, for Lothario grants her his “Achtung”, a word suggestive of both admiration and danger (Ibid.). He means, rather, that she was not worth loving when she loved, making parity impossible.

*Liebenswertig* and *Achtung* as Lothario uses them resemble to a hair the title concepts of Schiller’s essay *Über Anmut und Würde*. Both terms denote a positive value, but only *Anmut* has the aesthetic appeal (today we would say “sex appeal”) that equips the bearer for the modern Dating Game. Aurelie, then, disqualifies herself for romance in the liberal social economy. Her love requires loyalty or *Treue* in a clearly feudalistic sense; “treulos” is, after all, the closest German word that she can find for what she calls Lothario’s perfidy in love. In reality, he acknowledges no binding obligation in the absence of sexual desire. Modern love is thus an **aesthetic experience** of the individual and is, as a consequence, inseparably linked to personal freedom. More important for this study is, that **love in the *Lehrjahre* is a formative experience** and, as such, must never interfere with the ongoing self-cultivation or *Bildung* of the subject. It is an entirely subjective experience independent of the relation it would seem to imply. In the *Lehrjahre*, in fact, all legitimate relations must derive their value from the larger social network, irrespective of a subject’s feeling. The sexual union of men and women falls, then, under one or the other of two categories: the erotic or the marital relation. This is because personal *Bildung* and man’s social existence are entirely separate interests, the one public and the other private.

The character in Wilhelm’s biography who stands in contrast to Aurelie is Philine, whose name signifies love, and whose free, flirtatious nature the tragic actress despises. Whereas Aurelie is demanding, even downright stingy with her affection, Philine has no scruples about using her sex appeal and sexual favors as a sort of currency, with which she can get something else she wants, be it good food and company from the *Stallmeister* or Wilhelm’s and her own luggage from the highwaymen. More importantly, Philine’s love

is literally **her own business**, as she tells Wilhelm: ““Auf den Dank der Männer habe ich niemals gerechnet, also auch auf deinen nicht; und wenn ich dich lieb habe, was geht’s dich an?”” (235). [“I’ve never expected thanks from men, and not from you either. And if I love you, what’s that to you?”” (EAB 139).] In other words, Philine neither requires nor expects fidelity from a man or from herself. Apart from her function as male fantasy, Philine can adapt to any social situation; knowing how to please, she pleases herself. What she lacks, however, is the sort of aesthetic self-consciousness necessary for *Bildung*. Hence, when she reappears with her children at the close of the *Wanderjahre*, she is striking, if not for absurdity, at least for her hen-like and prosaic nature.<sup>140</sup> Of the impression she makes in Makarie’s imposing presence, the narrator confesses, “Wir erwarteten wohl kaum, Philinen [. . .] an so heiliger Stätte auftreten zu sehen, und doch [kam] sie an” (Ibid). [“We hardly would have expected to see Philine turn up in such a holy place, but she did arrive” (DWH).]

In spite of Wilhelm’s aesthetic self-consciousness, Schiller was almost embarrassed for him, too, amid such impressive company as the humans of the Tower.<sup>141</sup> What with all of the romantic wrong turns that Wilhelm makes in Books Seven and Eight, Goethe must turn again to Lothario, then, to depict the healthy sort of sexual experience that promotes personal *Bildung* and leaves no one footing the bill (or the baby)—Dutch treat, so to speak. Lothario sustains a wound in a feudalistic duel, a retrograde slip that even this otherwise showcase *Reformadel* cannot avoid, man of arms that he is. He attributes to his physically weakened condition the nostalgic sentiment that comes over him when circumstances return him to the scene of a love affair from his youth. As he approaches the parental home of his lover, a tenant farmer’s daughter, the trees, flowers, and children recall vividly the tender experiences of earlier years: ““Zufälligerweise traf

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<sup>140</sup>HA VIII, p. 439ff.

<sup>141</sup>In his letter to Goethe of July 5, 1796, Schiller writes regarding Wilhelm’s anger over the pedagogical theatrics of the initiation ceremony and *Lehrbrief*: “Ich gestehe, daß es mir ohne diesen Beweis von Selbstgefühl bei unserm Helden peinlich sein würde, ihn mir mit dieser Klasse so eng verbunden zu denken” (HA VII, 638). [“I confess that, without this evident sense of self-worth, I would have been embarrassed to imagine our hero allied so closely to this class” (DWH).] It is this “Selbstgefühl” or high-minded self-esteem, incomplete though it may be, that sets Wilhelm far apart from the otherwise modern woman, Philine.

heute alles zusammen, mir die ersten Zeiten unserer Liebe recht lebhaft darzustellen” (464, my italics). [“Chance would have it that today everything combined to bring back to me those first days of our love” (EAB 284).] Significantly, this modern man acknowledges the accidental nature of the experience—no fatalistic hogwash about “destiny” and “meant to be”. Still more important is the sheer volume of detail to his memory. Unlike the invariably **typical** conventions, traditions, and even erotic games (involving role-play, of course) that Wilhelm encountered at the Count’s residence, Lothario’s recollections are the distinctly individual, personal memories of a modern self-consciousness: of an imagination, in other words, that is at once lively (“lebhaft”) and under the individual’s control.

These are, in fact, the memories of a true *Meister*, a master of humanity:

“Ob mir gleich die Abendsonne in den Augen lag, sah ich doch, daß sie sich am Zaune beschäftigte, der sie nur leicht bedeckte. Ich glaubte meine alte Geliebte zu erkennen. Da ich an sie kam, hielt ich still, nicht ohne Regung des Herzens. Einige hohe Zweige wilder Rosen, die eine leise Luft hin und her wehte, machten mir ihre Gestalt undeutlich” (466).

[“Although the evening sun was in my eyes, I could see that she was working near the hedge, which only partly obscured her. I believed this was my old love. As I came up to her, I stood still, not without some heartthrobs. Tall branches of wild roses, swayed by a gentle breeze, were concealing her somewhat” (EAB 285).]

The vivid representation of sensory impressions, as well as the detailed dialogue that he recounts with what turns out to be a younger relation of his earlier lover, demonstrates that we have in Lothario a man well-trained in the art of autobiography. In this way he is like Wilhelm, who narrated his life story to Mariane. The difference is Lothario’s freedom from fatalistic superstition and the fact that, unlike Wilhelm, he is too conscientious to get any woman pregnant. To be more precise: **he is fully aware of his total responsibility for his own life**, and he encourages, even assumes this same independence in others. Beyond that, there is a clearly different structure to the memories of the master versus those of the apprentice. In contrast to the sheer impressionism of Wilhelm’s memory, that took from almanacs and the travel accounts of others the skeletal details that a letter home required, Lothario’s recollections are as specific as they are vivid, in every sense Cartesian. They are the product of an imagination, the blossom of which is rich and

beautiful, precisely because it is rooted firmly in the soil of objective reality. The same is true of the conversation that Lothario relates later, having visited the woman in her present home. Their mutual satisfaction of seeing one another again, free as it is of resentment and regret; his genuine pleasure at finding her in a comfortable domestic situation; and more importantly, their common pleasure in the recollection of their youthful love: all of this points again to the significance of love as a formative experience in the *Lehrjahre*. Their affair, as a clear and discrete unit in Lothario's (or Margarete's) memory, has lent richness and depth to his (or her) personality. At the same time, it is not really a shared memory, such as might establish a complex and sticky relationship. It is, rather, the sort of love that gives the subject a personal history. It is the strictly individual and personal experience that would come to be called an *Erlebnis*.<sup>142</sup>

What is undoubtedly the most attentive and comprehensive study of the word *Erlebnis* is to be found in Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode*, where he critiques the subjective aesthetics that originated with Kant: who found a devoted disciple in Schiller. While *Erlebnis* itself, according to Gadamer, appeared in only isolated instances until the 1870s, even the earlier, related substantive, *das Erlebte*, referred to what an individual experiences **personally**, as opposed to what he has learned from others. Gadamer: "Das Erlebte ist immer das Selbsterlebte." ["lived experience is always experienced by oneself."]<sup>143</sup> Still more important for our interest is that the stock of *Erlebnis* rose from its very beginning with the growing interest in and importance of **biography**, especially of the artist, in the nineteenth century. Indeed, it would be no stretch to suggest that it was

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<sup>142</sup>Lothario's relationship with Therese, on the other hand, is founded on a compatibility of interests and on mutual esteem for the other's abilities. It is in this respect a thoroughly economic relation grounded in man's social existence. So practical is their tie that Therese feels unthreatened by the prospect of marital infidelity—an old-fashioned hangup belonging to the Dark Ages!—on the part of her husband. It is even a favorite saying of hers, "daß eine Frau, die das Hauswesen recht zusammenhalte, ihrem Manne jede kleine Phantasie nachsehen und von seiner Rückkehr jederzeit gewiß sein könne" (461). ["that a woman who kept her household duties in good order could tolerate any flight of fancy on her husband's part, and still be certain that he would come back to her" (EAB 282).] Therese: model housekeeper—and so understanding! In her we have the other male fantasy in the novel, the perfect wife. She sees in her husband the partner and provider; what he does on his own time does not threaten her position as spouse in that strictly delimited sense. In this respect, then, Margarete and Therese represent two separate and distinct interests in Lothario's life, his personal *Bildung* and his mature social life, respectively. Neither relationship makes demands on the whole of Lothario's self.

<sup>143</sup>*Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, p. 66.

this new value attributed to the unique and outstanding individual, especially in the experiences that **shaped him** (and that **he shaped**) that demanded a word for experience altogether different from the *Erfahrung* of universal truth and of the natural sciences. After all, if we are right, the *Lehrjahre* or biographies in the Abbé's archive record the fruits of personal freedom (for by those fruits you will know **him**, i.e. the interesting individual), rather than the necessities of natural law, which are but the paint and canvas common to all. In the aesthetic humanism of the Tower, by contrast, it is the formal quality of the (self-)portrait that finally matters.

For Gadamer, *Erlebnis* is a symptom of the same nineteenth-century aesthetics that isolated the artist, as nature's pet, from his social context and removed art from the tradition that had let it speak its truth. Now the artwork was transferred to the museum, confined to its frame, and made to testify to the genius of the artist. Gadamer identifies one dimension of the word that stresses the individual, "pantheistic" meaning of all *Erlebnis*. At this point the needle on our Goeth-o-meter registers in the dark red. By this Gadamer means that, unlike the general validity of *Erfahrung*, an *Erlebnis* is experienced as such only so far as it corresponds to an individual's cognitive makeup or, in aesthetic terms, to the shape of his personality.<sup>144</sup> The other dimension has to do with the positivistic result of the experience, the "bleibendes Ergebnis" that is retained in the individual's memory: the depth and detail of which depend in one way or other on the personality of the subject (67). Lived experience as *Erlebnis* is what Wilhelm implies when he shares with Natalie his admiration for her aunt, the *schöne Seele*, and praises "diese Selbständigkeit ihrer Natur und die Unmöglichkeit, etwas in sich aufzunehmen, was mit der edlen, liebevollen Stimmung nicht harmonisch war" (518). ["her independent spirit and her inability to make anything part of herself which did not conform to her noble loving nature" (EAB 317).] In other words, she could experience only what suited her nature. Natalie agrees.

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<sup>144</sup>Gadamer compares *Erlebnis* in Dilthey's writings with the sum of its earlier usage and observes, "daß Diltheys Erlebnisbegriff beide Momente enthält, das pantheistische und mehr noch das positivistische, das Erlebnis und mehr noch sein Ergebnis" ["that Dilthey's concept of lived experience includes both moments, the pantheistic and, even moreso, the positivistic, the lived experience and its result"] (70).

The men of the Tower would counter that she achieved such personal harmony largely by withdrawing from nature and society, the two fields or dimensions of human experience. The formative challenge that faces the individual is to develop the subjective organs necessary to discern, articulate, and integrate such experience. It is an aesthetic development for which art prepares those who have the ambition and discipline. The Abbé explains:

“[D]er Liebhaber sucht nur einen allgemeinen, unbestimmten Genuß; das Kunstwerk soll ihm ungefähr wie ein Naturwerk behagen, und die Menschen glauben, die Organe, ein Kunstwerk zu genießen, bildeten sich ebenso von selbst aus wie die Zunge und der Gaum, man urteile über ein Kunstwerk wie über eine Speise. [. . .] Das Schwerste finde ich die Art von Absonderung, die der Mensch in sich selbst bewirken muß, *wenn er sich überhaupt bilden will*” (573, my italics).

[“The lover of art looks for some general indefinite pleasure: the work of art is to appeal to him just like a natural object. People tend to believe that the faculty (organs) of appreciating art develops as naturally as the tongue or the palate, and they judge a work of art as they do food. (. . .) What I find most difficult is the separation a man must achieve within and for himself *if he is ever to attain self-cultivation*” (EAB 351, my insertion and italics).]

The Abbé then clarifies just what this formative mastery entails: “sobald der Mensch an mannigfaltige Tätigkeit oder mannigfaltigen Genuß Anspruch macht, so muß er auch fähig sein, mannigfaltige Organe an sich gleichsam unabhängig von einander auszubilden” (Ibid.). [“When a person sets himself a goal of manifold activity or experience, he must be capable of developing manifold organs in himself which are, in a manner of speaking, independent of each other” (Ibid.).]

The aesthetic organs to which the Abbé refers correspond roughly to the humanist standard of **taste**, one of the traditional categories of knowledge (including also *Bildung*) that Gadamer places in opposition to the playground and epistemological no man’s land of Kantian aesthetics. But here the organs are to function “gleichsam unabhängig von einander” (Ibid.). [“independent of each other” (Ibid.).] This is not because a work of art cannot appeal to more than one organ of taste. After all, the nineteenth century would invent the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The word “gleichsam” stresses, rather, that *Bildung* toward individual mastery, not unlike bodybuilding in our own day, perfects an “organ” by exercising it in isolation. The Abbé’s choice of words (*Organe*) envisions *Bildung* as a



natural process; but in the human it involves self-consciousness and therefore requires mastery of one's senses and perception. For example, Lothario enjoyed what he knew to be an illusion created by the accidental interplay of light and his weakened physical condition. He is a model of human aesthetic freedom and of the human capacity to influence and shape one's own experience.

Man may be a social animal, a theme that the Tower repeats again and again with little variation. But a truly human society is the liberal economy, and its model citizen is the autonomous individual trained in aesthetic freedom. The link that the Abbé sees between the appreciation of art and practical activity recognizes the relation in which a clearly aesthetic refinement stands to productive endeavor in the humanism of the Tower. In Lothario we have one in whose development art played a largely incidental role, but whose life exemplifies the aesthetic autonomy of modern man. The incidental encounter with an earlier lover, we have seen, demonstrates that he can experience separately the erotic affair that enriches his personality and the practical, economic sexuality of marriage and family. Therese's pragmatic appreciation of this difference gives her the same modern stamp, even if she herself lacks the added personal dimensions that *Erlebnis* or lived experience makes possible. Wilhelm, by contrast, has a more fully developed and subtle personality, but he lacks the discipline essential for productive activity in the liberal economy. The more balanced manhood of Lothario points to the vocational compass that will direct *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*.

In the *Lehrjahre* Lothario's love affairs and related experiences are called *Abenteuer* or adventures.<sup>145</sup> This, too, earmarks them as *Erlebnisse* as Gadamer sees adventure employed by Georg Simmel. According to Gadamer, the *Abenteuer* stands for Simmel in the same relation to an individual's life that Schleiermacher had attributed to certain numinous moments in the individual's larger life, and that to life in its totality. Such was the romantic resonance field, as it were, within which *Erlebnis* would trumpet

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<sup>145</sup>The Abbé offers as a prelude to the news of Lothario's duelling wound, "Der Baron hatte ein kleines Abenteuer mit einer Dame" (429). ["The baron has had a little adventure with a lady" (EAB 262).] And when the recovering patient challenges the other men to guess what had happened while he was riding, Jarno guesses correctly: "Sie haben heute gewiß ein Abenteuer gehabt [. . .] und zwar ein angenehmes" (464). ["You must have had some adventure or other today, but apparently a pleasant one" (EAB 284).]

the note of true humanity. Gadamer sums up in the following Schleiermacher's romantic vision of life (*Leben*) that the word *Erlebnis* would come to express: "Jeder Akt bleibt als ein Lebensmoment der Unendlichkeit des Lebens verbunden, die sich in ihm manifestiert. Alles Endliche ist Ausdruck, Darstellung des Unendlichen." ["Each act remains as a lived moment connected to the infinitude of life that is manifested in it. Everything finite is an expression, a representation of the infinite."] (Gadamer 69). Essentially the same is true of adventure as it is exemplified in Simmel's fiction and thought, Gadamer argues. This likewise is the case with regard to Lothario, who is decidedly **not** another rapacious aristocrat after the manner of Richardson's Lovelace. Rather than a series of typical conquests, his unique adventures contribute to his *Bildung*, and that in a manner distinctly different from the kind of *Bildung* that would be equated with extensive reading—a learned burgher *Kultur*, in other words.<sup>146</sup> His adventures add depth and contour to his personality. The proximity of *Abenteuer* to *Erlebnis* is not just a matter of semantics. Rather, both words exemplify an entire aesthetic vision of life. It is the watchword of an aesthetic cosmology, at the center of which stands a fully formed and cultivated humanity.

That Dilthey stressed the discrete result so much more than the pantheistic aspect of *Erlebnis* stemmed from his particular interest in the poetic genius in *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung*. It is the unique force of Goethe's "dichterische Phantasie" ["poetic fantasy"] to which Dilthey ascribes both his vivid memories and the intensely personal quality of his poetic productions.<sup>147</sup> Dilthey's "Phantasie" is in many ways identical with the "Einbildungskraft" or imagination, except that his aesthetic program needed to distinguish, as had Kant a century earlier, the high road that a poet's genius traveled from the epistemological thoroughway of everyone else. Although Goethe was Dilthey's model

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<sup>146</sup>Boyle: "If there is *Bildung* in *Wilhelm Meister's Years of Apprenticeship* it is not of the kind which ambitious middle-class readers, such as headmaster Manso in Breslau, sought there in vain, and which accompanies social advancement." See by the same: *Goethe: The Poet and the Age; Volume II, Revolution and Renunciation, 1790-1803*, p. 411.

<sup>147</sup>Dilthey allies Goethe with the romantics, overlooking fundamental differences, in what he perceives to be a "Befreiung der dichterischen Phantasie von der Herrschaft des abstrakten Verstandes und des von den Kräften des Lebens isolierten Geschmacks." ["liberation of poetic fantasy from the dominion of intellectual abstraction and a taste isolated from the forces of life."] From: *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung: Lessing, Goethe, Novalis, Hölderlin*, 14<sup>th</sup> ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), p. 124.

for the creative exception, Goethe himself had abandoned his *Künstlerroman*, the *Theatralische Sendung*, for a *Bildungsroman* entitled accordingly; and yet even the *Lehrjahre* leans heavily toward the *Gesellschaftsroman*, especially given the social aims of the Tower. This is to say that Goethe was interested in the more universal nature of human(izing) experience, such that even his standout Lothario is not an artist, but simply a model of active, productive humanity in modern society. The love life of his youth, then, exhibits the heights to which the memory and biography of even the non-artist and private man can soar!

### Goethe's Morphology of *Bildung*

#### *Eros as a Function of Personal Development*

Nicholas Boyle, who has catalogued the points of contact between Goethe's morphological theory of botany and the *Lehrjahre*, asserts that "[t]he power causing both [Wilhelm's and the canoness's] souls to 'develop' is the power of *eros*, the desire for an absent beloved" (343). In Wilhelm's case that desire leads him through a series of loves, as well as through his theatric "self-deception" (Ibid.). Boyle's equation of Eros with desire, however, is itself problematic. His characterization of eros as a series of substitutions, while reflecting the perpetual deferment of desire, overlooks the fact that in the traditional romance, eros manifested itself in the obsession with one particular beloved for whom, in the eyes of the lover, there simply was no other. This is not to say that the love-sick protagonists in romances never get over their obsession, or that they never fell in love with anyone else. Of the ancient Greek and Roman romances that Doody presents as examples, some lovers remain faithful throughout the narrative to their first love, while others fall for another.<sup>148</sup> Be that as it may, the power of Eros makes the individual suffer the indignity of **needing another person** to be happy. It is true, of course, that Wilhelm has trouble letting go of his first love, Mariane; that Philine and the Countess are really substitutions for her. Boyle is right, however, that this series of replacements represents—indeed, makes possible—Wilhelm's personal development or *Bildung*. It is the deferment

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<sup>148</sup> See Margaret Doody, *The True Story of the Novel*.

or substitution, then, by which Wilhelm's desire undergoes aesthetic formation or cultivation, resulting in a personality that, in spite of his imperfections, makes Wilhelm so much more attractive than the philistine Werner. Even as Wilhelm comes to realize that *Bildung* was what he always wanted, by the end of the novel he successfully resists the tragedy of Mariane. Neither pity nor fear can assail him, for he can stand on his own two feet!

In his groundbreaking study, *Höfische Gesellschaft und französische Revolution bei Goethe*, Dieter Borchmeyer explores in detail Goethe's response to the social conditions and turmoil in France, as they are registered in his dramas and prose fiction. *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* occupies a pivotal position in Borchmeyer's analysis, for Wilhelm is drawn precisely to the representative forms and customs of the outdated and vulnerable *ancien régime*. Borchmeyer notes in particular how an **economization** of even personal relations penetrates and pervades every corner of society in the *Lehrjahre*, and more particularly in the closing chapters. Borchmeyer points to the absence of erotic or even personal love in either of the planned marriages that represent the supposed happy end of Wilhelm's story:

Der Verzicht auf dieses Glück, wie es ihm 'seine' Amazone hätte schenken sollen, gleicht dem Verzicht Lotharios auf erotische Erfüllung; beide suchen in der Ehe, wie gesagt, eine Rationalisierung des Verhältnisses der Geschlechter, Rettung vor der jede Kalkulation durchkreuzenden Macht des Eros und durch die Ordnung ihres Gefühlslebens wie ihrer privaten Verhältnisse die Gewährleistung eines kontinuierlichen, auf die Grundsätze der 'Ökonomie' verpflichteten produktiv-tätigen Lebens (193).

[His surrender of this happiness, which 'his' Amazon supposedly meant to him, corresponds to Lothario's surrender of erotic fulfillment; both seek in marriage, as I have said, a rationalization of gender relations, a rescue from the power of Eros to cancel every calculation; bringing order to their emotional life and personal relations guarantees the continuity of a productive-active life that is committed to 'economic' principles.]

Borchmeyer recognizes that the marriage and happy end that Wilhelm delights in has nothing to do with an erotic relation. We already have seen, too, that Natalie herself ascribes romantic love to "Märchen" or fairy tales.

While Wilhelm most likely does not fully understand all the implications of his marriage to Natalie, we know that his *Wanderjahre* are very literally "wandering years",

spent with no home at all, as he seeks out and finally settles on a career. I would disagree only with Borchmeyer's statement that Lothario's marriage means a forfeiture of his erotic fulfillment. Both his *Abenteuer* and Therese's attitude toward them confirm that his erotic life is secured, precisely because it is maintained separate from the economic interests of marriage. Be that as it may, this bifurcation of human sexual interests completely redefines the nature of the erotic, economizing it in the way of two entirely separate accounts. We have seen that Lothario has his sexual adventures almost as well under control as his domestic affairs; and though he still may slip up, he learns from his mistakes. The development and distinction of the human aesthetic organs of which the Abbé speaks describes an aesthetic division of consciousness, implying that masterful humans know how to keep their experiences separate. It is noteworthy that the Abbé attributes the lower, sentimental and, in that sense, vulgar experience of art to the *Liebhaber* or lover. The devoted lover of an artwork such as Wilhelm, with his special fondness for the cheesy painting of the king's sick son, has not developed the separate organs of aesthetic refinement in his consciousness.

This likewise implies that a person's devotion to a particular beloved, like Wilhelm's to Mariane, is characteristic of a lower form of love on the humanist scale. Most never rise to this level of aesthetic mastery; the same is true of the characters' romantic interests. Jarno has no emotional life to speak of; and Wilhelm's idealism confines him to only a few harmless and high-minded flirtations in the *Wanderjahre*. Yet the case of Lothario is an illustration of both the possibility and difficulty of maintaining the division of one's sexual interests. I must concur with Borchmeyer, then, when he describes the *Lehrjahre* as a book written "gegen den Eros" ["against Eros"] (195). Boyle's characterization of Eros as a factor in Wilhelm's *Bildung* is itself a symptom of how erotic relations are altered in Goethe's novel. The separation of the sexual adventure essential for personal development from domestic sexuality **divides** Eros so as to **conquer** it. This is necessary, if one is to achieve full mastery of one's life as a modern human. Wilhelm, by contrast, has just barely completed his apprenticeship.

Having said that, I nevertheless acknowledge that Boyle's botanical reading of the *Lehrjahre* represents a giant step forward in understanding both the novel as a whole and

its theme of *Bildung* in particular. Boyle recognizes a larger logic in Wilhelm's otherwise random experiences and factual development, by considering both within the broader context of Goethe's morphological vision of life and of his specific, even definitive interest in plant growth. We do not have the space here to review the parallels in detail. Of particular interest to us is the way Goethe treats the either hasty or delayed, shorter or prolonged period of sexual appeal in the characters of the novel. Boyle compares Wilhelm's organic development to the stem growth and "sexual flowering" of the cotyledonous plant (413). It must be acknowledged from the outset that pubescent sexuality, especially that of the maiden, has long been equated in both the licit and illicit sex trade with the flowering plant; that the virgin lost her precious (and pricey) flower with her first experience of heterosexual intercourse. That being said, Boyle makes visible the sheer volume of detail with which the botanist Goethe expanded on—one might say **illuminated**—the hackneyed metaphor.

Boyle sees in the otherwise random experiences of Wilhelm a process of *Bildung* that parallels stem growth and flowering in Goethe's botanical morphology. According to Goethe, the basic unit in the plant was the leaf; indeed, such was the whole of Goethe's *Urpflanze* or primal plant. The stem for its part, Boyle explains, "is in Goethe's theory not an organ in its own right, but merely the consequence of the growth of paired or alternate leaves from one node to the next" (413). This Boyle compares to the development or formation of Wilhelm, whose old story assumed a new, more general, and **distinctly botanical** meaning during Goethe's search for the primal plant in Italy. The rich sap of life in Wilhelm makes it possible for him to grow from one "leaf" of experience to the next; to grow higher and stronger than most other characters in the novel, especially the parents of the lily-bearing Mignon, Augustin and Sperata: "who, like monocotyledons,"—including lilies—"hasten to sexual union before they have become fully formed" (Boyle 414). We already have seen that their particular incest is a uniquely "monstrous" instance (Schiller) of the more general, pathological idealism that guides the Wilhelm of Book One and beyond. While not incestuous, Wilhelm's relationship with Mariane is typical of the *Liebhaber* or lover in the Abbé's characterization. As such, it corresponds as an erotic relation to his favorite painting of the king's sick son, which Roberts identifies as "the

emblem of the thwarting of growth” (52). Wilhelm does indeed have trouble moving beyond his erotic essentialism. But Wilhelm’s vital, cotyledonous nature is able, once he recognizes that personal *Bildung* is his true aim, to see in his first love just one lovely leaf of his life, one page in his biography.

Eventually, however, Wilhelm reaches his limit. Boyle dissects the same in the following terms:

By the end of book 5 the theatre has proved inadequate nourishment for Wilhelm’s desire for development and a disagreeable phase of loss and retrenchment sets in. In the world of plants, the *Essay* tells us, the transition from sprouting to flowering may be gradual or, as it Wilhelm’s case, abrupt (413).

Boyle is referring here to the professional and personal changes, for Wilhelm a distressing crisis, that alienate him from Serlo’s theater and leave him desperate for a wife. So unsettled is Wilhelm that he will grab onto the domestic stability that Therese represents just to hold himself upright. For both it is a less than ideal solution, each for the other more of a consolation prize. As we already have seen, Wilhelm will feel ashamed, “daß er gegen ihre großen Tugenden nichts aufzustellen hatte, was eine zweckmäßige Tätigkeit beweisen konnte” (505). [“at having nothing to match her own fine qualities, nothing that testified to any active purpose in his life” (EAB 309).] Therese, having read his biography, reassures—herself?— in a note to Natalie that even in the absence of accomplishments, “er hat von Dir das edle Suchen und Streben nach dem Bessern, wodurch wir das Gute, das wir zu finden glauben, selbst hervorbringen” (531). [“he has your noble seeking and striving for the better part, by which we can produce ourselves the good that we suppose we have found” (DWH).] In other words, even if Wilhelm cannot give her the moon, he more or less has the right stuff. His biography is not the resumé of an achiever after the order of Lothario. Wilhelm is no mighty oak of shade and shelter; but he may do well as the ornamental rose in Therese’s vegetable garden and, given time, even supply a decent cup of rose hip tea.

Wilhelm is in all events ready, even desperate, to pair up and settle down, such that the “Blume” or flower (Natalie) that Friedrich holds out to him is, in Wilhelm’s own words, “ein Glück [. . .], das ich nicht verdiene” [“a happiness I never earned”] (610; DWH). Friedrich’s metaphor, like the similarity Therese recognized in her two friends,

reassures us that there is indeed a morphological likeness in Wilhelm and his *Amazonen*. As opposed to the pragmatic littleness of Therese's domain, Natalie and Wilhelm strive or stretch for an ideal, even if in him that idealism has resulted only in an appealing person and personality: the "sexual flowering" that is the lovely and fragrant climax of *Bildung* read botanically. We already noted that Schiller was almost embarrassed for Wilhelm when he is surrounded by the exceptional humanity of the Tower. For Schiller it was Wilhelm's indignant "Selbstgefühl" that redeemed him. Even more significantly, however: the contrast of Werner puts on display the prize-winning blossom that Wilhelm himself has become!

### *How to Have Sex Without Losing Your Flower*

The scandal-raising love of the actor-turned-tutor, Melina, and the daughter of a respectable (if privately troubled) burgher home portrays in Book One the fate that awaited Wilhelm, had he realized his dream of a thespian marriage with Mariane. Wilhelm finds the wayward young woman's initial conduct appealing. Of the impression that her bold confession before a judge makes on the sympathetic onlooker, Wilhelm, we read: "Wilhelm faßte, als er ihr Geständnis hörte, einen hohen Begriff von den Gesinnungen des Mädchens" (51). ["Wilhelm formed a high opinion of the girl's character" (EAB 26).] He imagines Mariane in the same circumstances and, given the many performances he has seen of her in similar roles, Wilhelm "legte ihr noch schönere Worte in den Mund, ließ ihre Aufrichtigkeit noch herzlicher und ihr Bekenntnis noch edler werden" (Ibid.). ["put even finer words in her mouth, and let her appear even more heartfelt in her sincerity and nobler in her confession" (Ibid.).] Even if we look past the embellishments of Wilhelm's imagination, there can be little doubt that the sexual relationship with Melina makes the "artig[e] Verbrecherin" ["charming criminal"] all the more lovely and appealing (Ibid.; *ibid.*). It is, after all, her recent first taste of the forbidden fruit, and her relish of that new knowledge, that makes her especially bold and attractive. In response to the court clerk's indiscrete and awkward questions, we read: "Wilhelm stieg die Röte ins Gesicht, und die Wangen der artigen Verbrecherin belebten sich gleichfalls durch die reizende Farbe der Schamhaftigkeit" (50). ["Wilhelm blushed,



and the cheeks of the (charming criminal) were likewise enlivened by the appealing color of embarrassed modesty” (DWH, insertion from EAB).] It is clear from the language here that the young woman’s first sexual experiences have enhanced her beauty and appeal.

By that same token, it is just after she has held the bleeding *Narziss* in her lap and has been stained by his blood—a situation that anticipates coitus and the penetration of her hymen—that the *schöne Seele* views herself for the first time entirely naked. She likewise confesses, “[U]nd ich darf nicht verschweigen, daß ich, da man sein Blut von meinem Körper abwusch, zu erstenmal zufällig im Spiegel gewahr wurde, daß ich mich auch ohne Hülle für schön halten durfte” (368). [“(A)nd I cannot fail to admit that when I first happened to see myself in the mirror while they were washing his blood off me, I thought I could consider myself beautiful, even without my clothes” (EAB 223).] Her precarious health and religious inclination are the circumstances that permit her to withdraw from the duties of marriage and childbearing, and to devote herself fully to her ideal of moral perfection. They make possible, that is, the ongoing spiritual development that would cause her to view even her body as “ein Kleid” or “fremdes Wesen” [“a garment” or “alien thing”], and would culminate in a *schöne Seele* or beautiful soul (415; DWH). Philine, by contrast, is unique among the women in the novel, for she manages to be sexually active and, at least for a time, to preserve her personal independence. One might even go so far as to say that it is this juggling act, possible only at the expense of her personal dignity, that makes her so enticing to most of the men in the novel. It is characteristic that the two things she derides most in the other women are virginal virtue and pregnancy. Of the latter she says once that she wished she might never see another woman “guter Hoffnung”, i.e. “expecting” (203). This is no doubt due to the fact that her own pregnancy would rob her of the power that her sexual enticements give her over men. In this respect Schödlbauer sees in Philine a Circe-figure, whose sensual spell over Wilhelm represents a distinct threat: “der Verlust des heroischen Impulses” [“a loss of the heroic impulse”] (129).

Even apart from Schödlbauer’s classicist reading of the novel, it cannot be denied that the men who fall for Philine’s spell are reduced to a horny, even swinish sensuality. As soon as she becomes pregnant, on the other hand, Philine can interest no one except

her equally clownish consort, Friedrich. Much the same is true of the other pregnant women in the novel. Mariane forfeits her livelihood as an actress (and prostitute); Mme. Melina's eloquence becomes manipulative and annoying. Even Melina himself, whose desperate need to support a family blinds him to every value other than money, must badger Wilhelm into giving him what he wants. In spite of Wilhelm's loftier character, the Melinas stand as a reminder of what most likely would have been in store for him had he fallen with Mariane into the trap of pregnancy and the stress of feeding a family from an actor's meager income.

In light of the above, it becomes clear that sexual maturity and the first sexual experience comprise together the "sexual flowering" (Boyle) of human *Bildung*. It represents in most individuals the height of personal appeal, the limit of their personality. Along the same line, that blossom is lost as soon as the individual succumbs to sexual **necessity**, be it in the form of either purely physical lust or pregnancy—or even, as a consequence of the latter, the provider's care of supporting a family. Only in so far as one preserves one's freedom from necessity in the Kantian sense, can the aesthetic growth and perennial blossom of the personality be perpetuated. For Lothario that ongoing *Bildung* is guaranteed by productive activity—the *zweckmäßige Tätigkeit* that bears the Abbé's imprimatur—and by a wife that appreciates his need for an occasional adventure. Both experiences are distinguished by the independent, **subjectively determined purpose**, and by the tangible result or *Ergebnis*: one in the personality, as subjective memory, and the other in the economy, as product. In these two terms, *Erlebnis* and *zweckmäßige Tätigkeit*—lived experience and purposeful activity—we have **the two forms of experience that are suitable to the *Bildung* of humanity in pantheistic nature and the liberal social economy.**

Boyle's attentive reading of the *Lehrjahre* under the microscope of Goethe's morphology makes it evident that our botanical metaphor of the blossom is in reality more than a metaphor or hermeneutic for a critical interpretation of the novel. Boyle demonstrates the painstaking mental labor that Goethe put into preserving the credibility of his morphology as a general account of organic metamorphosis, even after he had surrendered the inorganic, mineral world to Jarno-Montan and the other unhumanistic

vulcanists.<sup>149</sup> Having detailed Goethe's corrective theory of "simultaneous metamorphosis" as a last-ditch effort to extend "the notion of metamorphosis to cover the vegetable, insect, and animal worlds," Boyle characterizes the idea as a "conceptual suicide", formulated "at the cost, in the last case, of reducing it to a metaphor" (485). At the cost, too, I would add, of understanding the human condition. This intellectual wrestle with nature came after Goethe already had concluded the *Lehrjahre* to his satisfaction: a biography of Wilhelm's *Bildung* as a human metamorphosis that culminates in the fertile blossom of his personality. Boyle reminds us of an entry in the journal of Goethe's *Italienische Reise* where, reflecting on Wilhelm Meister, Goethe muses, "Möge meine Existenz sich dazu genugsam entwickeln, der Stengel mehr in die Länge rücken und die Blumen reicher und schöner hervorbrechen." ["May my own existence develop fully, the stem grow longer and the flowers blossom more numerous and beautifully" (DWH).]<sup>150</sup> Goethe's wish for his own floral development applies undoubtedly to Wilhelm, too, whose life has, according to Boyle, "the same pattern as a plant" (415).

While he appears to be well aware of the unique role that Goethe attributes to the will in human metamorphosis, Boyle does not pursue the matter further. In the *Lehrjahre*, though, the Abbé does address human will in aesthetic terms that are consistent with aspects of Goethe's morphology. Specifically, he belittles precisely the emotional and erotic pleasure that Wilhelm, Serlo, the baroness, the countess, and even Therese's evil stepmother derive from theatric masquerades and melodramas. According to the Abbé's indictment of the art *Liebhaber*—a consumer of sentimental kitsch, in his characterization—such indistinct pleasure **poses a danger to personal identity** (572ff.). His point is that, unless one has the discipline to develop the "Organe" necessary for aesthetic differentiation and judgment, one risks falling into moral disorder and dissolution:

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<sup>149</sup>Boyle: "Goethe had acquired a copy of Kant's *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* and here he found an authoritative argument that matter, by its very concept, had to be devoid of the characteristics of life. The consequence was evident: totalizing theories of all Nature, organic and inorganic, were for the younger generation; men had more solid concerns. Before the combined authority of Kant and Humboldt Goethe yielded up his original happy fancy of a unified science of 'the world of the eye' and consented to eliminate from his Morphology the inorganic sciences, particularly minerology and parts of optics" (483).

<sup>150</sup>HA XI, 217. See also Boyle, p. 411ff.

“[W]eil die Menschen selbst formlos sind, weil sie sich und ihrem Wesen selbst keine Gestalt geben können, so arbeiten sie, den Gegenständen ihre Gestalt zu nehmen, damit ja alles loser und lockrer Stoff werde, wozu sie auch gehören. Alles reduzieren sie zuletzt auf den sogenannten Effekt, alles ist relativ, und so wird auch alles relativ, außer dem Unsinn und der Abgeschmacktheit, die denn auch ganz absolut regiert” (573ff.).

[“But because most people are themselves without form, since they cannot give a shape to their own self, their personality, they labor away at depriving objects of their form, so that everything shall become the same loose and flabby substance as themselves. They reduce everything to what they term ‘effects,’ to the notion that everything is relative; and so the only things that are not relative are nonsense and bad taste which, in the end, predominate as absolutes” (EAB 351).]

The self-negation of Hegel that means death in Aurelie, Mignon, and the *Harfner*, can in other, more vital organic natures assume the (un)form of aesthetic dissolution, even decadence. The frivolous, sometimes shameful disorder that prevailed at the count’s castle is, after all, but one monarchy removed from the anti-humanist aesthetics of de Sade.

Wilhelm’s new openness to the flora in Lothario’s botanical garden comes late in the *Lehrjahre*, too late to influence how he understands his personal development. His ideal of *Bildung* had been tailored after the representative customs and costumes of aristocracy and theater. The blossom of his personality is thus a factual outcome of his experiences largely independent of his own erroneous ideas: those accidental supplements of character that are changed by objective experience, according to the theory of the *Roman* presented in the *Lehrjahre*. In light of Goethe’s biology of *Bildung*, however, the priority of self-cultivation that Wilhelm announces to Werner in Book Five, and that has replaced altogether his Dionysian dream of Book One, turns out to have serious implications respecting the nature of human relations in modern society. Wilhelm’s acquired “Kälte”, that bothered Humboldt, troubled D.H. Lawrence as well. As Boyle reminds us, “Lawrence denounced the ‘peculiar immorality’ of Wilhelm Meister’s ‘intellectualized sex’ and more acutely, his ‘utter incapacity for any *development* of contact with any other human being” (411). In reality, though, the absence of Eros in the novel that Borchmeyer recognized is not due simply to a peculiarity of Wilhelm’s nature, or to an intellectualization of the fleshy fornication that abounds in Lawrence’s novels. The priority of personal freedom in liberal society—overlying, as it does, the existential

freedom that is inseparable from the real human condition—stems rather from a liberal suspicion with regard to personal relations and commitments: in which moderns see a threat (be it oppression, dependency, or otherwise) to the subjectively determined aims of private productivity and personal development. In fact, the ultimate value of personal freedom sees a problem in any form of responsibility beyond that for one's own self.

Negative experience of the theater leaves Wilhelm literally dis-illusioned as to his future prospects for *Bildung* as an actor. It would seem that his solemn promise of justice for Aurelie represents the only remaining certainty of his life. But we already have seen how flimsy his vow proves once he leaves the theater, the Dionysian domain of fate, and sets foot on the *terra firma* of the Tower. As with one getting off a roller coaster, which has led him up and down and around in its fixed path, the solid ground of autonomy only makes Wilhelm lose his balance, even his sense of orientation. Passive soul that he is, the decisive men of the Tower make him feel like a little boy among Olympians. It is only against his better judgment, now too limp to resist, that he agrees to participate in the conspiracy to remove Lydie from the premises. Not until he enters the home of the *Oheim*, recognizes the art of his grandfather's collection and, more importantly, finds the Amazon who both saved his life and **was** the promise of a new one: only then does he discover a thread, a hope of continuity in his life.

Having entered the house, he finds himself “an dem ernsthaftesten, seinem Gefühle nach dem heiligsten Orte, den er je betreten hatte” (512). [“in the most solemn and, for him, sacred place he had ever seen” (EAB 314).] A portrait of Natalie's aunt, the *schöne Seele*, leads to a conversation that recognizes in her subjective spiritual striving a formative value in spite of her ““allzu zart[e]”, ““allzu gewissenhaft[e]”” *Bildung* [““all too tender”, ““all too conscientious”” self-cultivation] (518; DWH). Unlike the practical, productive dynamism that shames Wilhelm at Lothario's castle, the humanist aesthetics that prevails in the house of the *Oheim* is something that Wilhelm is prepared (and given his aesthetic apprenticeship, qualified) to recognize. He declares to Natalie, “Es ist kein Haus, es ist ein Tempel, und Sie sind die würdige Priesterin, ja der Genius selbst” (519). [“it isn't a house, it's a temple, and you are its noble priestess, indeed, its presiding genius” (EAB 318).] The inner sanctum into which the “priestess” eventually leads

Wilhelm is the mausoleum that is called the “Saal der Vergangenheit” [“Hall of the Past”] (539). The cheerful (“heiter”) humanism that prevails in the house generally, and more particularly in the mausoleum, as well as the admonition inscribed over a doorway (“Gedenke zu leben”; “Remember to live”), confirm our sense that Wilhelm has found in the house of the *Oheim* an Olympian temple dedicated to Apollo, and in the Hall of the Past its holy of holies.

In Books One and Two Wilhelm had looked to the theater as a temple of trans-subjective experience, where he was disburdened of the individuality he found so hard to bear. His intense sexual relationship with the Dionysian prostitute-priestess Mariane was a consequence of the erotic appeal of theatric representations, in which the audience—a pack of sensual, sentimental *Liebhaber*, according to the Abbé’s definition—was treated to the ritual sacrifice of an individual who is designated for undoing by his own hubris. The passionate relish of the spectator was in reality a cannibalistic feast on his or her own tiresome individuality. In the end, however, it is Wilhelm’s decisive goal of personal *Bildung*, and not that earlier vision of ritual communion, that finally prompts him to take center stage. Mignon attempts literally to hold him back from this step—but not because she stands in a thematic opposition to the theater. Her maenadic frenzy following the opening night performance of *Hamlet* is due not least of all to the fact that the **song** that is her (and her father’s) true voice signifies the opposition of their lyric *Poesie* to modern, humanistic *Dichtung*. Wilhelm’s brief acting career literally and figuratively represents the final stage of his apprenticeship in Dionysian aesthetics; once he has exhausted its formative potential, he will experience the formalism of Apollonian aesthetics. It will prove a rough transition; but the Apollonian vision of his Amazon, which this Narcissus experiences as he lies bleeding in Philine’s lap, gives him a taste of true human beauty and worth.

Boyle has demonstrated that, viewed against the background of Goethe’s morphology, Wilhelm does indeed grow and his personality blossom according to the author’s distinctly botanical model of *Bildung*. In the biology of *Bildung*, the personal apex of “sexual flowering” is more about the beauty of the flower than it is about an intimate relationship. Even apart from the botanical metaphor, the dualism of subject-

object relations in Goethe's novel leaves no recognizable room for human relations outside the depersonalized marketplace of the liberal social economy, the hegemony of which in the *Lehrjahre* Blessin has demonstrated.

Wilhelm talks **a lot**, of course. But nowhere in the novel does anything said by another character introduce an utterly new and unsettling idea into his head, at least not until he has become acclimated somewhat to the environment and values of the Tower. And even then there is no end to the misunderstandings. Periodically in Books One through Five, the Abbé and Jarno offer counsel that is intended to interrupt the steamroller of Wilhelm's mind and mouth. Apart from that, the meaning of others (which Wilhelm rarely solicits) either is absorbed smoothly into his understanding—often due to an agreeable misunderstanding—or results in cognitive dissonance. If Wilhelm's **learning disability** has presented a problem to those who would read Goethe's novel as a Bildungsroman, that is due not least of all to with the nature of human *Bildung* as it is conceived in the *Lehrjahre*. Unlike his early twentieth-century comrade, Hans Castorp, Wilhelm never does much reading beyond Tasso, Shakespeare, and the French neoclassicists; and even then it is only the compelling personalities that interest him. Rather than seeking intellectual refinement, he insists that the development and cultivation of his own personality was “dunkel von Jugend auf mein Wunsch und meine Absicht” [“even as a youth (. . .) my vague desire and intention”], a claim we have no reason to doubt (290; EAB 174).

In the Apollonian world of the Tower, development toward personal autonomy encompasses the whole of human value: everything from religion and art to business and technology. Even if he is no Lothario, then, Wilhelm's growth tends toward the same sun. While he would appear to have a family at the conclusion of the *Lehrjahre*, he will be sent off in search of a profession, and his son to boarding school. As for his wife, Natalie, we know that she gets a letter or two during her hubby's long study abroad. So if Wilhelm really is in some sense incapable of “any *development* of contact with any other human being” (Lawrence), that is really not his fault. The metamorphosis of man in the *Lehrjahre* is an individual organic process that largely excludes the possibility of personal intimacy beyond an occasional pollination. That is the extent of “the birds and the bees”

in Goethe's novel. Family and financial worries, by contrast, tend to hinder self-cultivation, even if they have the sanction of the modern social contract. So if Wilhelm appears to have trouble with personal relations, it is really just part of the botany of *Bildung* in Goethe's novel. After all, Wilhelm is every bit as affectionate as the next . . . plant.



## CHAPTER VI

### DINING ON DIONYSOS

#### Wilhelm's Dionysian Ordeal

##### *Odysseus and the Burgher Subject*

Chapter Three of this study concluded with a passing comparison of the burgher subject Wilhelm and that first European subject of romance, Odysseus. Undoubtedly, the most important reading of Odysseus as prototype of the modern burgher is to be found in the first excursus of Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialektik der Aufklärung*.<sup>151</sup> The following could stand as the central premise of the essay: "der Held der Abenteuer erweist sich als Urbild eben des bürgerlichen Individuums, dessen Begriff in jener einheitlichen Selbstbehauptung entspringt, deren vorweltliches Muster der Umtriebene abgibt" (61). ["The hero of the adventures manifests himself as a primal image of that same burgher individual, whose concept originates in a unifying assertion of self, the ancient pattern of which is provided by the beleaguered vagabond" (DWH).] Like my own "romance", Horkheimer's and Adorno's attribution of adventures to Odysseus, while supported by a respectable hermeneutic tradition, nevertheless may strike the more historically sensitive reader as incongruent, given the origin of both words in the medieval tradition.<sup>152</sup> While the *Abenteuer* of the chivalric hero exemplified the struggle of the pilgrim soul to overcome obstacles standing in the way of its redemption, the same become in Goethe's Bildungsroman what German humanist culture—which grew up in the Olympian shadow of Goethe's work and biography—would call *Erlebnis*: experience that constitutes the modern subject as an interesting and appealing personality.

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<sup>151</sup>See "Odysseus oder Mythos und Aufklärung", in: Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente*; in: Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., vol. 3, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1981), pp. 61-99.

<sup>152</sup>No one less than Gadamer, who largely concurs with their assessment of the Enlightenment, nonetheless takes issue with Horkheimer's and Adorno's "Anwendung soziologischer Begriffe wie 'bürgerlich' auf Odysseus" ["application of sociological concepts like 'bourgeois' to Odysseus"], in which he sees "einen Mangel an historischer Reflexion" ["a lack of historical reflection"]. See footnote 198 on page 279 of *Wahrheit und Methode*.

As masters of the Frankfurt School, Horkheimer and Adorno make every effort to identify in Odysseus the patriarchal ruler of civilization, prototype of the bourgeois capitalist, whose consolidation of power (and capital) is derived from a what is essentially a **sublimation** of the exchange rationale of sacrifice. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, Odysseus overcomes the primitive contractual terms of sacrifice by anticipating (and thereby preventing) the demanded offering with a voluntary self-negation. Such is, for example, Odysseus's self-effacing answer of "No man" to the query of Polyphemus as to his name, by which Odysseus escapes the nominalist equivalence of the cyclops and thereby preserves the very identity he would appear to have surrendered: "Das identisch beharrende Selbst, das in der Überwindung des Opfers entspringt, ist unmittelbar doch wieder ein hartes, steinern festgehaltenes Opferritual, das der Mensch, indem er dem Naturzusammenhang sein Bewußtsein entgegensetzt, sich selber zelebriert" (71 ff.). ["The persistent identity of the self, which emerges in overcoming sacrifice, is itself an immediate, hardened, firmly held ritual offering in which the human, asserting his consciousness in opposition to the natural context, celebrates his self."] According to the logic of subjectivity, then, Odysseus **substitutes** a sacrifice of his own for the offering that—rooted as it is in the inflexible, material tit-for-tat of nature—would require either his life or individuated self. It is a temporary, voluntary renunciation that assumes, even as it asserts, the self-conscious subject of civilized man.

In light of his tactics, Odysseus appears to Horkheimer and Adorno as the subject of Western civilization, who asserts and sustains his self-consciousness by means of his cunning: "Das Organ [!] des Selbst, Abenteuer zu bestehen, sich wegzuwerfen, um sich zu behalten, ist die *List*." ["The organ of the self for prevailing in adventure, casting off its self in order to retain itself, is *cunning*."] (66, my emphasis).<sup>153</sup> His cunning enables Odysseus to preserve his life and selfhood against various threats lurking in the unhuman,

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<sup>153</sup>Not unlike Faust, who in Part II, Act V sees humanity and himself pitted against the sea, which opposes his heroic struggle to dike and drain the coast for human settlements—Goethe argues in his *Versuch einer Witterungslehre*, "Die Elemente daher sind als kolossale Gegner zu betrachten, mit denen wir ewig zu kämpfen haben, und sie *nur durch die höchste Kraft des Geistes, durch Mut und List* im einzelnen Fall bewältigen" ["The elements must therefore be viewed as colossal opponents, with whom we stand in an eternal struggle, and whom we can overcome *only with the utmost force of the mind, by means of courage and cunning*"] (HA XIII, 309, my emphasis).

pre-Olympian order of nature. In the instance of Odysseus's pseudonym, the self-preservation that motivated the temporary surrender of his identity likewise demands that Odysseus finally disclose the truth to Polyphemus, perilous though it be, lest the **instrumental** self-negation become factual and permanent.<sup>154</sup> The whole risky business undertaken by the isolated individual—who must negotiate his survival and his passage home with powers that recognize in man just another animal—is what legitimates (as ideology) the subject's primacy and power.<sup>155</sup>

Although I am more inclined than Gadamer to see merit in Horkheimer's and Adorno's comparison of Odysseus and the burgher subject, their exclusive interest in the ideology of power blinds them to a whole other dimension of the logic of subjectivity. Most notably, they interpret Odysseus' listening to the Sirens' song while bound as the factual fulfilment of the terms of a contract (securing his ship's passage) that nonetheless eludes its consequences: "Aber [Odysseus] hat eine Lücke im Vertrag aufgespürt, durch die er bei der Erfüllung der Satzung dieser entschlüpft." ["But (Odysseus) has sniffed out a hole in the contract, through which he escapes its dictates in the very act of fulfilling them."] (78). This juristic interpretation of the episode, however, fails to recognize Odysseus's motive for taking such extensive measures to expose himself to the singing—

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<sup>154</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno: "Der um seiner selbst willen Niemand sich nennt und die Annäherung and den Naturstand als Mittel zur Naturbeherrschung manipuliert, verfällt der Hybris. Der listige Odysseus kann nicht anders: auf der Flucht, noch im Bannkreis der schleudernden Hände des Riesen, verhöhnt er ihn nicht bloß, sondern offenbart ihm seinen wahren Namen und seine Herkunft, als hätte über ihn, den allemal eben gerade Entronnenen, die Vorwelt noch solche Macht, *daß er, einmal Niemand geheißten, fürchten müßte, Niemand wieder zu werden, wenn er nicht die eigenen Identität vermöge des magischen Wortes wiederherstellt, das von rationaler Identität gerade abgelöst ward.*" ["The one who calls himself No Man and manipulates the approximation of nature as a means of mastering nature, succumbs to hubris. The cunning Odysseus cannot do otherwise: while yet in flight, still within the realm of the giant and in reach of the stones he casts, he not only mocks him, but also reveals his true name and country; as if the primal order still had such power over him, who had just barely escaped, *that having called himself No Man, he fears becoming No Man unless he restores his own identity with the power of the magic word that had just been separated from his rational identity.*"] (87, my italics).

<sup>155</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno see an equivalence in the riches Odysseus reaps and capitalist profit: "Die Wehrlosigkeit des Odysseus gegenüber der Meeresbrandung klingt wie die Legitimation der Bereicherung des Reisenden am Eingeborenen. Das hat die bürgerliche Ökonomik späterhin festgehalten im Begriff des Risikos: die Möglichkeit des Untergangs soll den Profit moralisch begründen." ["The vulnerability of Odysseus to the waves of the sea sounds like a legitimation of the traveller enriching himself at the expense of the natives. Burgher economics has retained this more recently in its concept of the calculated risk: the possibility of going under is considered to be a moral justification of profit."] (80).

when he, too, might have stopped his ears as he had his men do. The fact is that Odysseus **wants** to listen. It is scarcely an interpretation at all, when we observe that Odysseus **chooses to experience a desire** that heretofore has meant death to the listener, when he otherwise might have closed his ears to it entirely. This has nothing to do with the accumulation or even the justification of power or wealth. It may be characterized as an aesthetic experience, rather, by which the desire of the subject—the arousal of which normally means the latter’s surrender—is manipulated instead to **enrich the self and its personal history**: just as the wily Odysseus is the first Western subject to wrest from fate and the gods an individual history of his own making. Again, I am not insisting that Homer’s hero is a prototype of the modern bourgeois. This does mean, nonetheless, that Odysseus, as the first subject of Western literature, is more than the durable survivor in the face of impossible odds. Again and again he gets away with pleasure that is the downfall of others. He **enjoys** triumphing over Polyphemus; he **enjoys** sleeping with Circe; he **enjoys** listening to the Sirens, etc. And in every case he manages matters so that his self, as the subject of experience, is enriched by an aesthetic pleasure without succumbing to the necessity of that experience: that has made a pig, a snack, or a shipwreck of everyone else.

It is not necessarily a structuralist obliteration of historical difference, then, to suggest a kinship of Odysseus and the protagonist of Goethe’s unromantic *Roman*, while acknowledging fundamental, even definitive differences. In his study *Kunsterfahrung als Weltverstehen*, Ulrich Schödlbauer points to the mythological figures that stand behind the characters in the *Lehrjahre*. Wilhelm, who is no Odysseus and “kein Herkules”, is characterized by Schödlbauer, rather, as “der heroische Liebende” [“the heroic lover”] (117). Schödlbauer recognizes in Wilhelm a passive rather than an active nature, who is driven by desire and the dream of its consummation, rather than by ambition and the will to realize his aim even in the face of opposition. At one point Wilhelm aspires to the **form** of heroic bravery, dressing like Prince Hal and opting for a dangerous travel route; but that results only in a near-fatal head wound. As we have seen, Wilhelm’s experience of love, sincere as it is, figures in the novel as an adventure, or *Erlebnis*, which adds form and substance to his personality. Schödlbauer’s concept of the heroic lover is not without its

ambiguities; nevertheless, his analysis sees a definitive expression of Wilhelm's character in the question that he poses to himself and to the world at the beginning of Book Seven: "Ein heiterer Tag ist wie ein grauer, wenn wir ihn ungerührt ansehen, und was kann uns rühren, als die stille Hoffnung, daß die angeborne Neigung unsers Herzens nicht ohne Gegenstand bleiben werde?" (421). ["A bright day is no different from a gray one if we observe it unmoved. And what is it that moves us but the silent hope that the native desires of our hearts may not remain without objects to focus on" (EAB 257). According to Schödlbauer, this question identifies in Wilhelm one whose love, for all its accidental objects, is a desire that manifests itself "in der leidenschaftlichen Jagd nach dem Schönen und Guten" ["in the passionate pursuit of the beautiful and the good"] (134). I would add that, even as this describes accurately the direction of Wilhelm's desire, the aesthetic equation of beauty and goodness that it assumes marks Wilhelm as an **idealist lover**. In other words, Wilhelm hopes to find in a beloved not only the "happy end" to the story of his life, but likewise the satisfaction of a longing for personal and moral wholeness.

In the Tower, however, the flower that is Wilhelm will come to learn the real meaning of love, as *Erlebnis*, as well as the value of productive activity in the same personal *Bildung* that he has come to realize was his real aim—and that he mistakenly had thought attainable in a representative vocation. After Lothario relates his run-in with the nearly identical relation of his favorite farmer's daughter, we are told that his story just gets the men started: "Unsere kleine Gesellschaft fand in der Rückerinnerung vergangener Zeiten manchen Stoff dieser Art. Lothario hatte am meisten zu erzählen. Jarnos Geschichten trugen alle einen eigenen Charakter, und was Wilhelm zu gestehen hatte, wissen wir schon" (466ff.). ["So our little group of people found much to retail (*sic.*) in the way of recollection of times past. Lothario had most to relate. Jarno's stories all had their own individual stamp. And we know what Wilhelm had to contribute" (EAB 285ff.).] Idealist that he (just barely) still is, Wilhelm will feel shame over the unfortunate turn that his masquerade with Lothario's sister, the countess, has taken. But the master adventurer Lothario, who knows even more than Wilhelm about sissy's twist of fate, turns out to be understanding. Men will be **human**, after all. Like Lothario, Wilhelm will learn that he too (unintentionally) abandoned a woman who still loved and needed him, and who

suffers and dies as a consequence. And the bastard he wants Lothario to acknowledge, Wilhelm later will learn is his own. Piece by piece, the armor of Wilhelm's outdated honor is dismantled, until he is left bare of romantic ideals. It is in this spirit of disillusionment, which Schödlbauer recognizes in Wilhelm's negative experience, that he returns to the city to retrieve Felix and Mignon.<sup>156</sup> Just as he had approached Lothario in the role of a Fury, to arouse in the rake guilt over Aurelie's death, Wilhelm himself will call Mariane's old servant Barbara a "Sibylle!" and "Furie!" for attempting the same with him (476).

### *The Sacrament of Guilt*

The setting is Barbara's disclosure of Mariane's miserable end, and of Wilhelm's fatherhood regarding Felix. In response to Wilhelm's skepticism, she will present Mariane's epistolary pleas to his love and honor, all of which had been intercepted and returned by his protective brother-in-law, Werner. Wilhelm's response to these revelations stands in stark contrast to his broken and grieving self at the outset of Book Two. He answers Barbara's insinuations with counteraccusations and proves in every respect so **insensible to personal guilt**, as to leave the old woman dumbfounded. "Euer Betragen kommt mir [. . .] unerträglich vor" ["(Y)our behavior seems unbearable to me"], she says in frustration (488; DWH). Wilhelm would make the same impression on Humboldt, as we have seen. Yet his unassailable sense of personal dignity prefigures the "Beweis" of "Selbstgefühl" ["evidence" of a "sense of self"] that Schiller would recognize in Wilhelm's manly anger over the secretive scheming of the Abbé *et al.*: into whose hands Wilhelm at one point wanted to place his fate, but whose manipulations he has come to find infuriating and insulting. There can be no doubt that Wilhelm's sojourn among the exemplary humans of the Tower, while undoubtedly playing a decisive role in this change, has only made easier a natural development that his old-fashioned, romantic notions

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<sup>156</sup>The following passage from Schödlbauer, which we already have cited, characterizes Wilhelm's painful transition (or, following Kittler, his **secondary socialization**) from the ideal world of his imagination to the objective world: "Doch anders als [Don Quijote] entspringt für Wilhelm aus der *Desillusionierung* das Leiden an der Erfahrung." ["But in a manner different from (Don Quijote), suffering from experience has its source in *disillusionment*."] (118).

(*Gesinnungen*) had hindered, but that, as Wilhelm's unconscious instinct, already was at work in his love for Mariane.<sup>157</sup> By this point in Book Seven, Wilhelm not only has become aware that his desire is for personal *Bildung*, but he also has learned from the modern men of the Tower that it sometimes means stepping over someone's dead body—*sorry!*—and that to err in this way is human, beautifully human.

Even before Wilhelm sets off to retrieve Felix and Mignon from the theater, he is entertaining thoughts of a life together with that domestic dynamo, Therese, and of the children at her side: “Er dachte an Mignon und Felix, wie glücklich die Kinder unter einer solchen Aufsicht werden könnten; dann dachte er an sich selbst und fühlte, welche Wonne es sein müsse, in der Nähe eines so ganz klaren *menschlichen Wesens* zu leben” (463, my italics). [“He thought how happy Mignon and Felix would be in her care, and then he thought about himself and what a delight it would be to dwell in the presence of such a clear-minded *human being*” (EAB 283).] Who wouldn't dream of marrying a human being! Lothario's recollections of past love make up the following chapter, and then Wilhelm sets out to retrieve the children, as yet ignorant of the Fury's snare. Until now Wilhelm had not even recognized the pandering former servant of Mariane in Aurelie's maid. Following the recognition, Barbara, who by default has custody of the children, prepares him for a midnight visit with a letter from Mariane, in which he reads “mit unassprechlichem Entzücken das Wort *Treue*” (475). [“the word ‘faithful’ (. . .) with inexpressible delight” (EAB 291).] Uncertain about Mariane's fate, Wilhelm still retains the hope of a happy end to the melodrama in which he finds himself. Sensitive to the drama of the moment, he exclaims to Barbara, “Laß mich den Becher des Jammers und der Freuden [. . .] auf einmal trinken!” (473). [“Let me drink to the dregs the cup of sorrow and joy!” (EAB 289).] He thirsts for the juice of sentiment!

When she later arrives at his room, Barbara baits Wilhelm with the insinuation that he is cold-hearted—“daß Ihr Euch jetzt wie damals in Eure kalte Eigenliebe hüllet, wenn uns das Herz bricht” [“that you will envelop yourself in your own cold selfish interests,

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<sup>157</sup>See again Wilhelm's and Serlo's theory of the novel in Book Five (307ff.) that, in light of Rosemarie Haas's interpretation, I argue is really a theory of the whole genre in terms of the Bildungsroman.

as you always did while our hearts were breaking”]—so that he will open his heart to her attack (475; EAB 291). She then proceeds to pour him a glass of champagne in memory of the midnight they once shared in a happier setting:

“Aber seht her! so brachte ich an jenem glücklichen Abend die Champagner-flasche hervor, so stellte ich drei Gläser auf den Tisch, und so fingt Ihr an, uns mit gutmütigen Kindergeschichten zu täuschen und einzuschläfern, wie ich Euch jetzt mit traurigen Wahrheiten aufklären und wach halten muß” (Ibid.).

[“But look here! This is how I brought out the champagne on that happy evening, put three glasses on the table, and you began to beguile us and make us drowsy with happy childhood tales, whereas tonight I will enlighten you and keep you alert with sad truths“ (Ibid.).]

Wilhelm’s sentimental exclamation and Barbara’s prelude recall that other supper where wine was poured, instituting for the future a rite of remembrance. The same is true of her intention to keep him awake, just as Jesus chided his disciples for sleeping while he was in anguish (Luke 21.41-46). More to the point, Barbara’s explicitly sacramental symbolism interprets the memorial of **the Lord’s Supper as a religious ritual in which the participants acknowledge personal *guilt*** and submit their self to an angry, even vengeful authority. In the *Lehrjahre*, then, it is a tragic ritual, in which the participant surrenders his guilty individuality and returns, resigned and with bloody hands, to a primal monotony. The dead Mariane functions noticeably as *tragos* or scapegoat, her pregnancy and social isolation following from a sexual relation that did not enjoy the sanction of middle-class morality, but that was a formative experience for Wilhelm. That Goethe turned the street-smart Madame B into the vulnerable Mariane, is due not only to Wilhelm’s need for someone who could return his affection but, more significantly, to **the novel’s requirement of a victim**.

While Mariane in her letter anticipates her own death, Wilhelm’s assumption that the letter is recent lets him hope for a reconciliation, healing and human tears on all sides: happy end! However, the other notes from Mariane that Barbara presents to Wilhelm not only end that hope, but are letter-ally so many parts of her dying but faithful self that Wilhelm, reading, takes into his self. The (Dionysian-Christian) sacrificial symbolism identifies this episode as a **formative sacrifice**, in which the initiate, Wilhelm, ingests the living-dying body of the victim, Mariane, as her life and death are integrated into the



biography of his *Bildung*. At the same time, the confrontation with Barbara functions in the novel an ordeal that Wilhelm must pass—just as initiates of the Freemasons and Illuminati had to endure ordeals—if he is to both secure his *Bildung* and qualify his biography for the pedagogical archive of the Society of the Tower. Unlike the letters, which merely represent Mariane’s living, conscious self (i.e. her **psyche**), the wine or champagne that Barbara pours is the emblem of Mariane’s blood and, in that sense, of Wilhelm’s guilty part in her tragedy. Barbara more than once calls upon Wilhelm to drink (“Trinkt!”) from the glass that she has filled for him, just as she drinks from hers; she has filled a third glass “zum Andenken meiner unglücklichen Freundin” [“in memory of my unhappy friend”], for whose return Wilhelm has until now retained a hope, but whose conspicuous absence is meant to emphasize her fate and Wilhelm’s guilt (476; DWH).

The words that Barbara and Wilhelm then exchange decide the showdown. It is here that Wilhelm calls her a Fury, “indem er [. . .] mit der Faust auf den Tisch schlug” [“banging his fist on the table”]—another *Beweis* of his *Selbstgefühl!*—and demands to know, “[W]elch böser Geist besitzt und treibt dich” (Ibid.). [“What sort of evil spirit can it be that possesses and impels you?” (EAB 291).] The bearer of an evil spirit that he calls Barbara is identical to the Mephistophelian “Advokat des bösen Geistes” [“advocate of the evil spirit”] that, according to the *Oheim*, points “nur auf die Blößen und Schwächen unserer Natur” [“points only to the flaws and weaknesses of our nature”] in its determined opposition to the human spirit (404; DWH). In the post-Christian, aesthetic world and values of the Tower, the guilt that once pointed to error with a view toward reconciliation and moral healing, is now the evil, anti-humanist spirit that opposes human individuation and autonomy.

Wilhelm turns the interrogation on Barbara. Asserting that he is sensible enough of Mariane’s “Tod und Leiden” [“sorrow and death”], he accuses Barbara of gluttony “beim Totenmahle” [“at the funeral feast”] and demands that she, rather, “trink und rede!” [“drink and speak!”] (476; DWH). She may still insist to Wilhelm, “Sie sind uns noch sehr verschuldet” [“You still owe us a great debt”] (Ibid.; EAB 291); but he asserts in his turn that the crimes are hers alone and, like a prosecutor, interrogates her: “[S]o hast du das unglückliche Geschöpf geopfert? so hast du sie deiner Kehle, deinem

unersättlichen Heißhunger hingegeben?“ (478). [“So you sacrificed this unhappy creature for the sake of your own swilling and gluttony?“ (292; Ibid.).] Wilhelm will soften as he **devours** the rest of Mariane’s letters, but the crocodile tears he sheds are not the acknowledgement of guilt or the emblems of authentic grief in the face of death: they signify rather that same sentimental *Wehmut* that Schiller prized as “ein[e] wahr menschlich[e] Trauer” [“a truly human sorrow”].<sup>158</sup> Even as Athenian tragedy became in eighteenth-century Germany the sentimental *bürgerliches Trauerspiel*, or bourgeois melodrama, always good for a cathartic cry, Wilhelm’s death as Hamlet is followed by his therapeutic release from death, as the actors stand up for the applause: “Die vier fürstlichen Leichen sprangen behend in die Höhe und umarmten sich vor Freuden” (323). [“The four noble corpses jumped up and embraced each other joyfully” (EAB 196).] The consequences of his theatric therapy and of his introduction to the humans of the Tower are evident in Wilhelm’s new capacity to resist the evil spirit of guilt. I say “new”, because Wilhelm toward the close of Book Seven stands in shining contrast to the Wilhelm who surrendered entirely to his tragic fate following his presumed discovery of Mariane’s infidelity.

That resistance is not entirely new, however. The younger Wilhelm’s narcissistic entrapment in the paradise of his imagination, a consequence of his prosperous and privileged childhood, similarly predisposed him to overlook even the more glaring woes of others, so long as they were instrumental to the designs and delights of his imagination. And if some stood in the way of the same: “er hätte die Menschen, die nur zu seinem Verdrusse da zu sein schienen, vertilgen mögen” (140). [“He would gladly have obliterated everybody who seemed to be there just to exasperate him” (EAB 80).] Whoever does not play along should get out of the picture; and if they frustrate his desires, he would like to wipe them out! At this point in Book Two, it is his burgher sense of propriety that prevents Wilhelm from acting out the storm that rages inside him—as opposed to Friedrich, who in Book Two reflects the as yet immature, even childish side of

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<sup>158</sup>Letter to Goethe July 2, 1796 (HA VII, 633).

Wilhelm's temperament.<sup>159</sup> At the same time, his self-restraint is evidence of an, if not fully developed, at least functional aesthetic self-consciousness: that was nurtured by his middle-class upbringing, by his father's and grandfather's (however different) aesthetic tastes and, of course, by the beautiful and lofty personalities of the stage. In the course of Books Seven and Eight, Wilhelm graduates from the representative aesthetics of nobility and theater, and comes to recognize the higher value of self-discipline in an active life, as modelled by the beautifully active personalities of the Tower. Wilhelm's dignified insusceptibility to the implication of his responsibility in Mariane's death is confirmed in his initiation into the Society of the Tower, where the Abbé announces, to Wilhelm's relief and satisfaction, that the mother of his child "war [. . .] Ihrer nicht unwert" (497). ["was not unworthy of you" (EAB 304).] What a relief! Mariane's motherhood is no reason for Wilhelm to be ashamed of his boy Felix. The question of Wilhelm's guilt, like any other suggestion of human flaws or shortcomings, meets with dead, discrete silence among the modern men of the Tower.<sup>160</sup>

Schödlbauer likewise has noted the relevance of human sacrifice to Goethe's novel, but he sees altogether different implications than those that I have suggested. According to Schödlbauer, whereas many in the middle-class, including Wilhelm's

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<sup>159</sup>Just as the gadfly Melina again is pestering him, Wilhelm hears "eine jugendliche Stimme, die, zornig und drohend, durch ein unmäßiges Weinen und Heulen durchbrach. Er hörte diese Wehklage von oben herunter, an seiner Stube vorbei, nach dem Hausplatze eilen" (139). ["a young person's cry, angry and threatening, and constantly interrupted by weeping and moaning. Then down the stairs it came, past his room, out on to the square" (EAB 79).] A short time later, when Friedrich throws another tantrum, we read, "Wilhelm stand nachdenklich und beschämt vor dieser Szene." ["Pensively and somewhat disconcertedly Wilhelm observed this whole scene."]-all the world is a stage for Wilhelm. But the scene portrays his inner turmoil: "Er sah sein eignes Innerstes, mit starken und übertriebenen Züge dargestellt" (140). ["What he saw was an exaggerated display of his own self" (EAB 80).] Here Friedrich stands as the Goethean *Spiegelung* or, in this case, projection, of Wilhelm's still childish subjectivity.

<sup>160</sup>We see this when Wilhelm learns from Jarno that his lovely countess is in fact Lothario's sister, but that Lothario does not hold Wilhelm responsible for the count's mistaken omen of death and its consequences for the countess. (The count had seen Wilhelm-during a naughty game-in his own bedroom and night clothes and taken it for a vision of himself.) Jarno's lesson: "'Daß niemand einen Stein gegen den andern aufheben soll, und daß niemand lange Reden komponieren soll, um die Leute zu beschämen, er müßte sie den vor dem Spiegel halten wollen'" (433). ["That no one should cast stones and no one should compose long speeches to put others to shame, unless he delivers them before a mirror" (EAB 265).] Jesus's admonition against judging one's enemy or offender, as also the whole of Christian morality, is changed from authentic mercy as a means of reconciliation, into an agreement to keep silent about one another's wrongs against third persons: whose suffering and death is given a cheerful ("heiter") makeover in the Hall of the Past (540).

brother-in-law Werner, were inclined to see in their beloved liberal economy a condition of nature, where everyone looks out for himself, Lothario and the Tower point to the state as the necessary guarantor of rights and stability.<sup>161</sup> In this respect, only civil society and the state essential to it can secure the peaceful conditions essential to middle-class industry and social relations. Schödlbauer demonstrates that, not unlike Horkheimer and Adorno, Goethe attributes the bloody terms of sacrifice to man in his natural, pre-civilized condition, rather than to civilization itself. Schödlbauer compares the *Lehrjahre* to Goethe's fragment, "Die Reise der Söhne Megaprazons", and to conversations in which Goethe explained the origins of human sacrifice, showing that Goethe saw in the latter a primitive means of ending the (Hobbesian) war of the natural condition in the establishment of a covenant or social contract (*Bund*). Goethe includes Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac under his rubric of **civilizing** sacrifice; or as Schödlbauer puts it: "Heilsgeschichte ist Bundesgeschichte" ["history of man's salvation is the history of the social contract"] (151). Here is not the place to review in detail the Goethean conception of human sacrifice that Schödlbauer lays out. Still, in light of his analysis, the *Harfner's* delusional attempt to knife Felix among the flames of the burning theater, as well as the former's apparent (albeit accidental) poisoning of the child, mirror the biblical story of Abraham offering Isaac.

An angel, of course, interrupts Abraham and prevents him from carrying out the divine demand. According to Goethe, the gods—as always, for Goethe, in classical plurality—had commanded the sacrifice only to mimic and highlight the violent terms of primitive man, and to stress the mercy of the social contract that overcomes the brutal

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<sup>161</sup>Schödlbauer: "Das heißt, [die 'Sicherheit' des Besitzes] beruht nicht auf dem Prinzip der Selbsthilfe – wie dies Werner naiv andeutet –, sondern auf der Stabilität der 'bürgerlichen Gesellschaft', der Rechtsgemeinschaft, die mit wirksamen Sanktionen gegen den Rechtsbrecher aufwartet. Werners Verwechslung des 'bürgerlichen Zustandes' der Rechtssicherheit mit dem 'Naturzustand' der Selbsthilfe mag daher alles andere als revolutionär sein – sie arbeitet, wie die Ausführungen Lotharios nahelegen, der 'Staatsrevolution', dem faktischen Auseinandertreten der gesellschaftlichen Kräfte und der Widerkehr des Prinzips der Selbsthilfe in die Hände." ["This is to say, (the security of one's property) is not grounded in the principle of self-reliance – as Werner naively implies –, but rather in the stability of 'burgher society', in common rights, which impose effective sanctions on the lawbreaker. Werner's confusion of the 'burgher state', based on guaranteed rights, with the 'natural condition' of self-reliance may be everything other than revolutionary – it still plays into the hands, according to Lothario's reasoning, of 'political revolution', of a factual disintegration of social forces, and of a return to the principle of self-reliance."] (147).

terms of nature. “[Goethe] greift damit auf die bundes- oder förderaltheologische [sic] Tradition der Bibelexegese zurück.” [“(Goethe) reaches back in this respect to the federalist theological tradition of biblical exegesis.”] (Ibid.). In this sense, the figurative rescue of Felix from poisoning—thank Chance!—as the boy lies between his father and the angelic Natalie, signifies Wilhelm’s return to burgher society. In the world of the Tower, however, that society means neither the aristocratic aspirations of Meister Sr. nor the unsocial selfishness of Werner. It is, rather, the liberal state populated by modern *Bürger*: as civil-minded *citoyens*, rather than petty *bourgeois*. Goethe recognized in the terrifying sacrifice of heads to Madame Guillotine in the French Revolution a bloody return to natural brutishness; whereas the modern *Bund* or social contract of the Tower aims to secure private enterprise and property—and, with them, the conditions for self-cultivation—from the looming danger of such revolutions. In this respect Blessin is right about the anti-revolutionary interest of the Tower.

Against the background of such social logic, Barbara’s *Todesmahl* (“funeral feast”) stands out as the demand of a jealous Mother Nature to answer the death of Mariane on Wilhelm’s (since Bastille Day: detachable) head: a demand that a now self-conscious/confident Wilhelm flatly refuses. This would appear to be at odds with the idea that Mariane is sacrificed to Wilhelm’s personal development. Wilhelm would seem to be right, then, in his insistence that it is Barbara, rather, who prepares Mariane’s sacrifice for the gratification of her own “‘unersättlichen Heißhunger’” [“‘insatiable gluttony’”] (478; DWH). No doubt it is Barbara alone who stages her disclosure of Mariane’s death as what we since Nietzsche may call a Dionysian sacrament: Wilhelm’s full participation in which would signify an acknowledgement of his guilty role in Mariane’s fate and, with it, a surrender of his life and autonomy as an individual. By now, however, Wilhelm has been introduced to the humanism of the Tower. He has learned from Lothario’s example that harm inflicted unintentionally on another person is unfortunate, but that it is nothing to come undone over. Aurelie’s sad end followed from her own character rather than from their relationship or how it ended. Lothario does chide himself for having an adventure with such a basket case; but according to the Abbé it is something to learn from and leave

behind. Wilhelm, too, has learned that what he didn't know shouldn't hurt him; or more to the point: what he did not intend cannot implicate him.

I have suggested that being faced with Mariane's death represents a sacrificial ordeal for Wilhelm. We have seen that the terms of the sacrifice are determined by Barbara as the representative of nature's primitive and brutal assignment of guilt, as well as its demand for retribution. In the eyes of Mother Nature, it does not matter that Wilhelm's part was unintentional and therefore **accidental**. This makes all the difference, by contrast, from the socioeconomic perspective of the Tower.<sup>162</sup> Unlike nature, this civilized state, as a *polis* of human creation, is what Schödlbauer characterizes as a "Rechtsgemeinschaft" ["community based on legal rights"] (147). The "Staat" that Lothario paints for Werner, and to which the former gladly pays his dues (namely sales tax), can alone guarantee "die Sicherheit des Besitzes" ["the security of property"] (507; DWH). While not a function of nature in the world of the Tower, the State as Lothario describes it operates on parallel, yet distinctly human terms. It ends the vengeful justice of nature by establishing its own laws and levying egalitarian taxes to support its operations, thereby creating a more peaceful and humane playing field for individual, productive aims and efforts. Those liberal laws and levies stand as the new necessities for enlightened, autonomous humans. Placing the Abbé's words in a new context, those laws and taxes are the new "Grund ihres Daseins" ["basis of existence"] on which the "Vernunft des Menschen" ["(h)uman reason"] can now peacefully use the accidental for its own self-determined ends. Lothario's domestic partnership with Therese will operate on these terms. More significantly, **Wilhelm's accidental role in Mariane's tragedy stands outside the boundaries of public interest.**

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<sup>162</sup>We remember that upon their first encounter in the novel, the Abbé declared to Wilhelm, "Das Gewebe dieser Welt ist aus Notwendigkeit und Zufall gebildet; die Vernunft des Menschen stellt sich zwischen beide und weiß sie zu beherrschen; sie behandelt das Notwendige als den Grund ihres Daseins; das Zufällige weiß sie zu lenken, zu leiten und zu nutzen, und nur, indem [die Vernunft] fest und unerschütterlich steht, verdient der Mensch ein Gott der Erde genannt zu werden" (71). ["The texture of this world is made up of necessity and chance. Human reason holds the balance between them, treating necessity as the basis of existence, but manipulating and directing chance, and using it. Only if our reason is unshakeable, does man deserve to be called a god of the earth" (EAB 38).] Wilhelm has not risen to such godlike mastery of all things accidental. He will learn, though, to be grateful for accident, which absolves him of guilt and works so wonderfully to his advantage.

Love as adventure, then, belongs to the private side of liberal social relations: the quarry of *Zufall* (Chance) out of which the individual, in the *Oheim*'s masonic metaphor, can hew his or her own life.<sup>163</sup> Marriage, on the other hand, belongs to the necessary conditions of middle-class society and is, consequently, of public interest. After all, one can **calculate** the right sort of domestic partner, just as Lothario dreams of a merger with Therese. But Cupid's arrows fly and strike at random and do not lie, consequently, under the full control of reason. The same is true of all accidents; they will happen. Nevertheless, the Abbé sees in them the possibility of aesthetic freedom: "das Zufällige weiß sie [die Vernunft] zu lenken, zu leiten und zu nutzen" (71). ["manipulating and directing chance, and using it" (EAB 38)]. This ability to preserve one's autonomy in the face of accidents, including erotic love; to use them, rather than succumb to them, in the cultivation of one's self: such mastery of life is a general trait of the men of the Tower. By way of contrast, all characters in the *Lehrjahre* who still understand love—be it parental, fraternal or erotic—as a binding personal relation "naturally" wither and die as soon as Wilhelm enters the liberal economic world of the Tower. There Wilhelm gladly gives up his tragic (i.e. dramatic) reading of life for an offer he can't refuse: Natalie, his Apollonian "Amazone". Against the backdrop of the modern dualism of public versus private life, then, the sacrifice that Barbara prepares for Wilhelm represents a test of his potential for personal autonomy. If he succumbs to grief and guilt over Mariane, Wilhelm's personal freedom, and with it his ongoing *Bildung*, will have reached their terminus; for **negative subjective experience**—unlike its corrective, dis-illusioning equivalent on the objective side—puts an end to the psychically unburdened conditions

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<sup>163</sup>We recall again his explanation to his niece, the *schöne Seele*, of what we have called his **aesthetic dualism**: "Das ganze Weltwesen liegt vor uns wie ein großer Steinbruch vor dem Baumeister, der nur dann den Namen verdient, wenn er aus diesen *zufälligen Naturmassen* ein in seinem Geiste entsprungenes Urbild mit der größten Ökonomie, Zweckmäßigkeit und Festigkeit zusammenstellt. Alles außer uns ist nur Element, ja, ich darf wohl sagen, auch alles an uns; aber tief in uns liegt diese schöpferische Kraft, die das zu erschaffen vermag, was sein soll, und uns nicht ruhen und rasten läßt, bis wir es außer uns oder an uns dargestellt haben" (405, my italics). ["The whole world is spread out before us like a stone quarry before a builder, and no one deserves to be called a builder unless he can transform these raw (*accidental natural*) materials into something corresponding to the image in his mind, with the utmost economy, purposefulness and sureness. Everything outside us is just material, and I can well say the same about everything about us: but within us there lies the formative power which creates what is to be, and never lets us rest until we have accomplished this in one way or another in or outside ourselves" (EAB 246, my insertion and italics).]

essential to the perennial flowering of human *Bildung*: self-cultivation conceived botanically in Goethe's morphological vision of life.

### Sentiment as Self-Preservation

#### *Wilhelm's Crocodile Tears*

Blessin has observed that with the sole exception of Mariane, "Alle, die sonst noch in den *Lehrjahren* zu Tode kommen—Mignon, der Harfner, Aurelie—haben sich ganz von innen aufgezehrt. Es gibt keinen, der nachweislich schuld daran wäre." ["All of the others who die in the *Lehrjahre*—Mignon, the harpist, Aurelie—devoured themselves from within. There is no one who evidently bears any guilt for it."] <sup>164</sup> Blessin sets apart the Mariane-story, however. He distinguishes it as the "kurze[en] Roman" of the *Lehrjahre*, pointing to its almost hermetic isolation ("Distanz") from the rest of the novel (89). What distinguishes it in Blessin's view is the fact, "daß Wilhelm an Mariane schuldig wird" ["that Wilhelm incurs guilt respecting Mariane"] (90). In contrast to the others, who die of self-inflicted wounds, as it were, Blessin observes that Mariane

stürzt [. . .] in einen sozialen Abgrund. Das nicht verhindert zu haben muß sich Wilhelm vorwerfen. Aber viel zu spät. *Denn da er um keinen Preis an eine nicht wiedergutzumachende Vergangenheit gekettet sein soll, bleibt er die längste Zeit von der Schuldfrage dispensiert* (Ibid., my italics).

[falls into a social abyss. Wilhelm must recognize that he bears responsibility for having let it happen. But much too late. *He shall not be chained to an unredeemable past; for this reason he is spared for the longest time any question of guilt*" (my italics).]

For Blessin this disposal of the "Schuldfrage" is simply a symptom of Goethe's modernity, a fact to which he devotes no further consideration. After all, Blessin had diagnosed "das personale Verhältnis" ["personal relation"] as a feudalistic and therefore **unmodern** "Entselbstung, die mit den Verkehrsformen der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft

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<sup>164</sup>See *Goethes Romane: Aufbruch in die Moderne*, p. 88: "Gestorben wird aus Gründen einer in den Figuren angelegten Disproportion wider streitender Kräfte." ["Death occurs for reasons of a disproportion of conflicting forces in the characters."] (88). We have seen that Hegel shares this assumption of Goethe, that an individual at odds with herself is terminated, as it were, by this failure to realize harmonious self-identity.



unvereinbar ist.” [“negation of the self that is inconsistent with with the forms of relations in burgher society.”]<sup>165</sup>

Our own interest in the symbolic function of the Mariane-romance in the *Lehrjahre*, however, demonstrates that the “Schuldfrage”, or question of guilt, is a crucial turning point in Wilhelm’s development. That Wilhelm is not confronted with her tragedy until late in the novel, makes possible his aesthetic education, as well as Wilhelm’s introduction to a natural philosophy that has no place for guilt or regrets. The past happened to us, the country curate tells him: “doch es ist gefährlich, sich davon Rechenschaft geben zu wollen” [“but it is dangerous to draw any conclusions from it”] (422; DWH). Dwelling on the past is dangerous, because it poses a threat to the progressive mentality essential for individual growth and goal-oriented living. On Wilhelm’s response to Mariane’s death, then—an unintended outcome for which he nonetheless bears significant responsibility—depends his formative future. Blessin reminds us, “Aus Madm. B., wie Mariane in der *Theatralischen Sendung* heißt, ist das liebende Mädchen geworden” (*Goethes Romane*, 91). [“Madm. B. in the *Theatric Mission* became the young woman in love.”] Even Schiller accused Goethe of “poetic selfishness” (“poetischen Eigennutzes”) with regard to Mariane: “Fast möchte ich sagen, daß sie dem Roman zum Opfer geworden, da sie der Natur nach zu retten war” [“I might almost say that she was sacrificed to the novel, since she by nature might have been saved”] (HA VII, 631). But Schiller was wrong to suppose that Mariane is sacrificed to the sentimental needs of readers brought up on Richardson. Wilhelm’s history with Mariane, rather, stands as an original sin, or early mistake, that predates his conscious *Bildung*.

The analysis of Horkheimer and Adorno helps us to recognize the psychology of sublimation in civilized man’s relation to stupid nature. According to them, Odysseus anticipates the personal sacrifice demanded of nature with a temporary renunciation of his own invention. It is a manipulation of sacrifice that, by resisting or preventing the dehumanizing surrender of self to the natural order, **subjects** the latter, rather, to the disciplined will and identity of that self. In view of Odysseus’s aesthetic experiences, I

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<sup>165</sup>*Die Romane Goethes*, p. 37.

would add that he sublimates a desire, which threatens his self, in such a way that makes the self conscious of its own capacity as a subject to know and feel objects. Descartes was the first modern to ground epistemology in an ontology of the subject. Even before that, though, early modern Christians had learned that **desire**, to which Paul had traced human sin and alienation from God and others, proved a more substantial and delightful guarantee of subjectivity. On the horizon of modernity, the human soul—whose individual worth Jesus had proclaimed—had mastered the celestial aesthetics of mass and Church art that were designed to divert desire (via the Virgin) to God. Moreover, the leash and lash of restraint that had been donated by Church authority, rather than extinguishing desire, amplified it instead to a volume all but unknown since the Roman Empire. De Sade would devote volumes to an elaborate aesthetic of decadence that can be traced to this origin. But that is another dissertation.

Wilhelm's identification of the (in society) competing aesthetics of church and theater typifies the *Weltanschauung* of the modern self: whose subjectivity, for all its religious posturing, requires a transcendental subject—now equated as destiny with its desire—only as training wheels, until it has sufficient self-confidence/consciousness to stay upright on its own. By the closing chapters of Book Seven Wilhelm has arrived at that point. Even as he refuses Barbara's Dionysian sacrament of guilt, Wilhelm surrenders to tearful sorrow as he reads Mariane's letters: "er überließ sich ganz seinem Schmerz" (483). ["He gave way entirely to grief" (EAB 295).] This might be read as a triumph of Barbara's assault on his heart and conscience, but that would be mistaken. Rather, Wilhelm's sorrow exemplifies the peculiar *techné* by which the modern subject had learned to experience to its advantage the Dionysian aesthetics of desire and death. Still hoping for a happy end, Wilhelm begs Barbara to end the dramatic build-up, so that he can proceed to the climax of a joyful reunion with Mariane. Barbara, we read, is overcome with "monstrous" grief: "die Tränen stürzten ihr aus den Augen, und ein *ungeheurer Schmerz* ergriff sie. [. . .] Sie warf sich auf die Erde an einem Stuhle nieder und weinte bitterlich" (481, my italics). ["tears poured from her eyes, and she was seized by a monstrous grief. (. . .) She threw herself to the floor before a chair and wept bitterly" (DWH). The Fury is no longer furious. She assures him that Mariane is dead, hands

Wilhelm a bundle of Mariane's letters and adds, "Hier diese Briefschaften mögen Ihre Grausamkeit beschämen; lesen Sie diese Blätter mit trockenen Augen durch, wenn es Ihnen möglich ist" (481ff.). ["These letters (. . .) will make you ashamed that you were so cruel. Read them with dry eyes, if you can" (EAB 295).]

In spite of her confessed use of Mariane for her own livelihood and security, Barbara stayed with Mariane, while not with unfailing friendship and support, certainly long and close enough to share in part her despair and destruction. She had advised Mariane for her own good (and for **her own** good), to stick with the practical and proven Norbert and drop "den jungen, zärtlichen, unbefiederten Kaufmannssohn" (10). ["that young, lovesick, unfledged merchant's son" (EAB 2). Even if Barbara then, like every other survivor in Goethe's novel, manifests a natural and healthy self-interest, her grief is still the wail of **personal loss**. Wilhelm, on the other hand, witnesses Mariane's tragedy in her letters, a medium with which the eighteenth-century reader had some experience. The letter was the literary form *par excellence* of modern subjectivity: in which the subject could exercise and display its knowledge and sensibility as the twin engines of its personality. The same is true of the cultivated reader of letters. In the discussion about drama and the novel/romance in Book Five, Samuel Richardson's best-selling epistolary novels make up three of the five examples offered for the genre. The epistolary novel, with its seemingly endless first-person narrative, was together with the theater the aesthetic fitness club of choice for middle-class sensibility: where tears rather than sweat were the proof, to quote Schiller (just barely) out of context, "einer wahr menschlichen Trauer" ["of a truly human sorrow"] (633).

When Wilhelm weeps over the pages of Mariane's fate, it is a modern experience of his own sensibility, for which reading novels and seeing middle-class melodramas in the theater have prepared him. Wilhelm himself describes his early explorations in subjectivity, when he earlier recalled for Mariane and Barbara his early experience of poetry. He remembers reciting from *Jerusalem Delivered*: "[I]ch konnte nie die Worte aussprechen:

'Allein das Lebensmaß Chlorindens ist nun voll,  
Und ihre Stunde kommt, in der sie sterben soll!'

daß mir nicht die Tränen in die Augen kamen, die reichlich flossen” (27).<sup>166</sup> His are not the tears, then, of a self bruised or broken by negative experience; they signify neither remorse nor grief—nor even a personal crisis such as the impending one that will send him into a downward spiral of disillusionment and despair. These are the tears, rather, of a well-exercised subject that is learning to manipulate and relish its own sensibility, an essential condition of an aesthetic self-consciousness. They are the cleansing tears of **catharsis in its modern, middle-class modality**: by which past troubles are incorporated into the subject, becoming part of its (now even more interesting) personal history. Wilhelm’s weeping, then, is not really a reliable indication of his grief over personal loss. It is indeed a healthy sign; it means the cathartic closure of what had been until this point a painfully open-ended *Erlebnis*. I therefore must finally disagree with Kathryn Edmunds, who is disturbed by Wilhelm’s failure to complete the mourning process as set forth by the psychologist Melanie Klein.<sup>167</sup> Edmunds’s focus on Mignon’s exequies and on the death-

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<sup>166</sup>English: “I could never, not without tears coming to my eyes, utter the words: / “But now the measure of Clorinda’s days is full / The hour draws near, the hour when she must die”” (EAB 12). I do not mean to imply that the aesthetic pleasure of tragedy is a uniquely modern discovery. Aristotle’s analysis of tragedy in the *Poetics*, of course, already locates its power in the affective experience of the spectator. For that matter, Wilhelm’s boyhood tears over the fate of Chlorinda remind us of those famous tears shed by the pre-medieval Christian of letters, Augustine of Hippo: “But I bemoaned not all this [fornication]; but dead Dido I bewailed, that killed herself by falling upon the sword.” See *St. Augustine’s Confessions*, trans. William Watts, vol. I (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 41. By the fourth century the student of letters was conditioned and expected to weep over Dido, a point that Augustine makes explicit in his indictment of the cultivated sexual *imitatio* of literature, which no Roman rhetorician could afford to leave out of his curriculum vitae. My point is, rather, that what for Augustine was initially a schoolwork exercise and became reality only in the way of imitation and habit, was for Wilhelm, as the scion of a prosperous *Bürgertum*, an entirely new experience of the modern subject: which had made the astonishing discovery that the affective force of everything from love to the numinous lies **entirely within itself**. I doubt, incidentally, that Goethe would be surprised to learn that he became for nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germans what Virgil had been for Romans: the required reading of school children, and what any *Germanist* has the good sense to admire and even emulate.

<sup>167</sup>Edmunds is troubled by Wilhelm’s “insufficient mourning of Mariane.” See p. 96 of: “Ich bin gebildet genug . . . um zu lieben und zu trauern’: Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship in Mourning”, in *Germanic Review* 71(1996): 83-100. Edmunds perceives a disturbing trick in Mignon’s exequies, which pass over the more complex matter of mourning as she defines it. If the aesthetic illusion of wholeness that the Tower presents is accepted, she concludes, “then self-deception and selective blindness [. . .] do not matter, as long as the individual is happy in his or her delusion” (97). Individual happiness, exemplified in the life-affirming “Heiterkeit” of the *Saal*, is the practical goal of the Tower. And anyone for whom that happiness is inaccessible is expected to die quietly in a corner, where she will not disturb the aesthetic wholeness of the more fortunate. Edmunds’s devotion to a neo-Freudian, “Kleinian” psychology of mourning, however, partakes of the same error that her analysis undertakes to point out. This is to say that while she, too,

defying aesthetics they represent, while recognizing a troubling sleight of hand, overlooks altogether Wilhelm's mourning of Mariane. Edmunds advocates Klein's definition of the "work of mourning", which is to "collect the bits of the lost love and to build in the inner psychic world a whole object" (Edmunds 84). I would argue that Wilhelm does indeed integrate Mariane (and not just one side of her, as Edmunds suggests) into his psyche—at least to the extent that such subjective integration is possible.<sup>168</sup> In this respect, even the mourning that Edmunds advocates reads it as a subjective process directed toward personal closure for the bereaved. Such finality is, after all, essential to the ongoing development of the subject. Wilhelm mourns Mariane as would any modern worth his salty tears!

We see that the tears shed by Wilhelm over Mariane are his sentimental response to her tragedy. It is the aesthetic experience of modern mourning, by which the bereaved (even in Edmunds's view) reconstructs the lost individual in his or her memory. It also enables Wilhelm to clear his mind of morbid, paralysing thoughts of death. His self-determined offering of his own sensibility and tears prevents the Dionysian surrender of his individuality that Barbara's sacramental sacrifice demands. Unlike Augustin—the namesake in Goethe's novel of that most famous confessional analyst of original sin—Wilhelm (even without his support group back at the Tower) summons the strength to resist the claim on his conscience, so that he can get on with the business of living. Guilt was and is for modernity the foremost emotional hangup that threatens a person's psychic health and autonomy. It is the foremost of the diseases in the subject, for which all of the modern Abbés and Krokowskis, armed with their pathology of bad relationships, are called on to heal the disabled individual.

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addresses the problem of Mariane's own moral ambiguity, which she sees covered up in the life-affirming aesthetics of the Tower's *Saal der Vergangenheit*, Edmunds does not even consider the moral issue of Wilhelm's part in Mariane's tragedy.

<sup>168</sup>Concerning Wilhelm's attempt in Book Two to destroy every reminder of his relationship with Mariane, Edmunds's Kleinian reading interprets it as follows: Mariane as a "bad object was supposed to be destroyed, but two pieces were preserved. On the basis of these two bits, her scarf and her pearls, Wilhelm will be able eventually to build up a 'good' Mariane as the internal object of his psyche" (86).

## *Modern Odysseus*

At the dawn of modernity, the prosperous burgher *Everyman*—in part of what is arguably the first staged advertising campaign aimed at the bulging middle-class pocketbook—was reminded of death and offered eternal life insurance by the medieval church, which needed capital if it was to stay competitive with the rising nation-state. Here we see an ecclesiastical authority (*l'Infâme* of Voltaire), that had inserted itself between God and the individual conscience, anxious to see someone living, in his free cities, outside its feudal-heavenly hierarchy. Now on the eighteenth-century eve (the *Götterdämmerung*?) of his final triumph over the feudal social order, the mature burgher is invited to surrender that existentially burdensome personal conscience to his beloved liberal economy and state: the **social conscience** of which is limited to trespasses on others' personal freedom and the violation of contractual relationships; which latter concession depends on, and unceasingly loses ground to, the former.

Even if Wilhelm is no Odysseus, his individual self-consciousness is constituted and preserved in much the same way that “der Umtriebene” [“the beleaguered traveller”] of Homer, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, had asserted his own. Fate (*Schicksal*) and Barbara (mean Mother Nature) correspond in the *Lehrjahre* to the pre-Olympian gods in the *Odyssey*: each represents the origin or womb of life that is antagonistic to individual consciousness (as subject) and demands the very substance of the self as offering, i.e. payment in kind. The terms of the sacrifices that the gods demand are intended to make the self recognize and submit to an order in which all creatures are equivalent. Horkheimer and Adorno note, for example, the tenderness of Polyphemus for his sheep, whose lambs he even positions so they can feed (85). The cyclops, then, is not sinister (“Der gesetzlose Polyphem ist nicht einfach der Bösewicht”); rather, the “Menschenfresser” [man-eater] fails to recognize the singularity of man, neglecting to distinguish him from the rest of nature (Ibid.). The gods of nature, that are older than the Olympian gods of civilization, oppose Odysseus because he asserts his own will and dignity against their (in the eyes of civilized man) primitive monism. The Frankfurt masters imply that his individual self-consciousness is possible only to the extent that Odysseus can modify the essentialism of sacrifice and emerge with his self intact—and,

furthermore, augmented by the experience. What Horkheimer and Adorno fail to recognize is the role of desire in Odysseus's experiences. As we have noted, the pleasure promised by desire compromises the integrity of the same self to which it promises fulfillment—unless Odysseus can avoid paying the piper, which he always somehow manages. So even in this sense, too, the subjectivity of the self does indeed accumulate like so much capital. The myriad of trials through which the subject Odysseus passes are thus the means by which his individual self-consciousness emerges and profiles itself, like the gifts he accumulates from his hosts: which, as Poseidon complains, more than compensate him for his lost share of Troy's plundered riches.<sup>169</sup> In this sense his **individual** achievement proves more profitable even than his earlier contribution to a group effort.

Wilhelm similarly proves that he is worthy to join the ranks of that modern Olympus, the Tower, only after he has sublimated Barbara's sacramental sacrifice of Mariane. By resisting Barbara's appeal to his guilt in Mariane's death, Wilhelm has become far more resistant to the implications of past negative experience and, therefore, to the doldrums of guilt, regret, depression, and generally low self-esteem. In fact, his aesthetic self-consciousness has become more durable for the experience. He still has no results to show off in the manner of outcome-oriented activity, the modern economic equivalent (as peaceful productivity) of classical heroism. But that is not important, at least not yet. That is what *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* are for. What matters for now

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<sup>169</sup>“Poseidon selber, der elementare Feind des Odysseus, denkt in Äquivalenzbegriffen, indem er immer wieder Beschwerde darüber führt, daß jener auf den Stationen seiner Irrfahrt mehr an Gastgeschenken erhalte, als sein voller Anteil an der Beute von Troja gewesen wäre.” [“Poseidon himself, the elemental enemy of Odysseus, thinks in terms of equivalency, when he complains again and again that the man acquires at the stations of his meandering travels more in guest-gifts than his allotted share from the Trojan plunder would have amounted to.”] (Horkheimer and Adorno 67). Horkheimer and Adorno, who see in the poems of Homer not myth, but the (in every sense) **rationalizing** narrative of civilization, single out Odysseus's deceitful manipulation of sacrifice to the pre-Olympian gods as evidence of the misleading “Scheincharakter des Mythos” [“illusion of myth”] in the *Odyssey*. According to H&A, the rationale of exchange that prevails when Odysseus is dealing with other humans—and, I would add, that underlies even his sacrifices to the more sensible and, consequently, more human Olympians, who at least know how to make a deal—earmarks the thinking of civilized man: “[D]er Tausch ist die Säkularisierung des Opfers” [“(T)rade is the secularization of sacrifice”] (67). Still more to the point: “Die Geschichte der Zivilisation ist die Geschichte der Introversion des Opfers” (73). [“The history of civilization is the history of an inversion of sacrifice.”] In other words, whereas sacrifice to the gods of nature requires more that one gets in return, the renunciation of exchange is motivated by the expectation of receiving more than one surrendered.

is that his affair with Mariane finally has assumed its proper and benign place in his memory, in the internal history of his aesthetic self-awareness: to be retrieved anytime Wilhelm and the other moderns swap stories about what made them human.

In the grips of fatalism, Wilhelm makes a **fatal** mistake. In spite of the fact that Barbara is around throughout Wilhelm's stint in Serlo's acting company, she never confronts him. It is not until Wilhelm has completed his theatric therapy and arrives at the home of humanism in the *Lehrjahre*, that he is made aware of his error. Still more importantly, he learns that in the pantheistic world of Enlightenment humanism, morality is confined to the egalitarian ground rules of the liberal social economy. Wilhelm is no more guilty for what happened to his countess or to Mariane, than Lothario is for the death of Aurelie. In this world, **no one is anyone else's keeper**, unless they have entered into a contractual relationship sanctioned by the modern state. And even then Wilhelm learns that his responsibility as a father and husband is largely economic. Rather than raise Felix himself, Wilhelm is advised by Jarno-Montan in the *Wanderjahre* to send his boy to the professionals of the *Pädagogische Provinz*. And having made productive use of the years of separation from his family, Wilhelm as surgeon can finally do his son some good with a successful treatment of his drowning. It does not matter that the bleeding administered by Wilhelm would not have a snowflake's chance in hell of saving Felix in reality. It is the modern spirit of specialization that matters! "Ja, es ist jetzo die Zeit der Einseitigkeiten", Montan affirms. "Mache ein Organ aus dir und erwarte, was für eine Stelle dir die Menschheit im allgemeinen Leben wohlmeinend zugestehen werde" (HA VIII, 37). ["Yes, this is now the age of one-sidedness"—professional specialization, that is—"Make an organ of yourself, and wait to learn what position a well-meaning humanity will assign you" (DWH).]

In the liberal social economy, the only real good one can do for others is limited either to what one does professionally, as an "organ" of human society, or to what conforms naturally to an individual's socialized self-interest.<sup>170</sup> Wilhelm's egocentric

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<sup>170</sup>The saintly social activism of Natalie, in whom Goethe, personified, in his own words, "die christliche Religion in ihrem reinsten Sinne", would appear to be an exception to the liberal ethos of the Tower and the *natural* value it places on socialized self-interest. See letter to Schiller of August 18, 1796 (HA VII, 627). But even Natalie's intervention avoids charity in the form of



*Bildung* meets these criteria; his love for Mariane and Mignon, as well as his sympathy with Augustin and Aurelie, do not. They mark those relationships, rather, for the shredder and waste basket of the liberal market as Blessin describes it in Goethe's novel:

Wenn [. . .] gegen die natürlichen Triebkräfte der Marktgesellschaft, *gegen die egoistischen Einzelinteressen* verstoßen wird, wenn nicht nur die vitalen Bedürfnisse falsch interpretiert, sondern überhaupt gegen sie gehandelt wird, dann werden diese auf eine verhängnisvoll zerstörerische Weise gewalttätig (my italics).

[Whenever (. . .) anyone violates the natural driving forces of market-based society, *contrary to egotistical, individual interests*; when the needs of life not only are misinterpreted, but someone acts contrary to them, they then turn violent in an ominously destructive manner (my italics).]<sup>171</sup>

Those who surrender to fate or feeling, forgetting their own good, are destroyed by dumb and meaningless accidents—unless they have capital, as does Wilhelm, and the sort of friends it can buy.<sup>172</sup> Survival demands following one's instinct, one's healthy self-interest. Be that as it may, the economic dimension of the *Lehrjahre* is not the only factor by which we can explain the deaths in Goethe's novel. The theme of *Bildung*, understood as self-cultivation, likewise plays a decisive role, albeit in an economic sense. Without exception, all characters in the *Lehrjahre* who are **dependant on a personal relationship**, erotic or otherwise, lack the vitality and/or the autonomy essential for ongoing, individual development. If they succumb to sexual necessity and get deflowered in the morphological sense, pregnancy and financial worries are their lot. If they cannot stand

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monetary gifts, an unnatural waste of perfectly good capital. Rather, she recalls for Wilhelm her childhood concern for “die Bedürfnisse der Menschen” and says that it has been her unvarying interest “*sie auszugleichen*” (526, my italics). For example, she recycles old, unused dresses of her aunt, the *schöne Seele*, and matches the respective debits and credits of those she assists. Whereas she gets notably angry with Mignon (calling her a “böses Kind” or “wicked child”): whose gifts and needs are **strictly personal** and thus fall outside the social categories of economic liberalism. I am reminded of Mother Teresa, whose charitable heart, too, found its “enlightened” critics—because she accepted donations even from persons known to be affiliated with organized crime. Once again, the social conscience of the modern state sees a danger in certain forms of personal generosity.

<sup>171</sup>See *Die Romane Goethes*, p. 36.

<sup>172</sup>Blessin notes the price of love in liberal society, as he contrasts between the total misery that overcomes Mariane with the subjective suffering of a well-financed Wilhelm: “Ob [Mariane] sich, um mit Brecht zu sprechen, Liebe überhaupt leisten kann,— diesen Streit muß sie nicht mehr mit sich ausfechten, sondern mit der Alten [Barbara]”. [Whether (Mariane), to speak with Brecht, can afford to love,— she does not have to argue this out with herself, but with the old woman (Barbara).”] See *Goethes Romane: Aufbruch in die Moderne*, p. 91.

life alone, as Lydia or Wilhelm cannot, they get paired with an autonomous person (Jarno, Natalie): for whom almost anyone will do, and from whom they soon will be separated anyway. Hey, ya gotta go, if ya wanna **grow!**

As we already have seen, Jarno informs Wilhelm, “Nicht allen Menschen ist es eigentlich um ihre Bildung zu tun” (549). [“Not all are (. . .) concerned with their self-cultivation” (EAB 336).] Novices of the Tower who just wanted domestic bliss or meaning, he is told, “wurden mit Mystifikationen und anderem Hokuspokus teils aufgehalten, teils beiseitegebracht” (Ibid.). [“were obstructed or deflected by mystifications and all sorts of hocus-pocus” (Ibid.).] Wilhelm, who needs meaning as well as marriage, will get similar treatment, causing him to suspect (not without reason) that all the hype about a world tour with Augustin’s brother, Marinelli, just means they want to be rid of him. He is worried that, just because they do not point out to him a predestined path for his life, they take no interest in his lowly, less autonomous self. Still, the Tower does not like a customer to go away empty-handed. But go away he must, either to his own happy home (if he can be satisfied with so little) or in **corporation** with the Tower’s grand, global network of liberalizing influence. Wilhelm’s developmental interests and, perhaps even more important, the considerable capital that Werner manages in his brother-in-law’s name, designate him for the latter.

This does not mean that Wilhelm can have anything he wants. But given his generally disadvantageous engagement to Therese (they share only their mistaken mistrust in the Tower), his decided attraction to Natalie, and his healthy, self-interested striving for higher and grander *Bildung*; given, moreover, that Natalie is above needy, particular love and out of the goodness of her heart—as Friedrich comically but accurately predicted—might marry anyone in need of a bride: the Abbé arranges Natalie’s agreement to wed Wilhelm. Accidental circumstances and Wilhelm’s good fortune, in a personal as well as an economic sense, make it possible for the Tower to supply the happy end (“Glück”) that the habitually fatalistic Wilhelm always wanted, but that is really no end at all. In fact, although in the last sentence of the novel Wilhelm claims that he has not earned such happiness, he is being rather hard on himself. He did, after all, enter the underworld lair of the Fury, Barbara, and emerge again not only with the children, but likewise with his

aesthetic self-consciousness fully intact. Mignon will die soon. But Felix, the very namesake of his own happiness, will be presented as his own son and reward.

So perhaps we must modify our earlier assertion that Wilhelm is no Hercules or Odysseus. Both of those heroes earned their stripes in part with a gloomy visit to the underworld. We have seen that in an important symbolic sense Wilhelm has done the same. He entered the presence of the Fury, resisted her sacramental wine of remorse, and devoured the potentially poisonous pain of the lover for whose tragedy he bore real responsibility. Above all else, he was required to sacrifice his self in guilt—undoubtedly the most dangerous Dionysian threat to his aesthetic self-consciousness—and he substituted instead an offering of sentiment. So in reality Wilhelm does deserve his happiness. In fact, basic values of the liberal, individualistic world of the modern social economy mean that even marriage is a domestic agreement subject to Jarno's division of labor; and children are best sent off to boarding school, just as Wilhelm will deposit his son in the *Pädagogische Provinz*. This suggests that the substance of his emotional life is entirely personal or individual. In other words, Wilhelm can have his happiness all to himself!

## CHAPTER VII

### SACRIFICE TO APOLLO

(or, Dead People Make Fertile Potting Soil)

Wilhelm/Orestes

#### *Wilhelm as Idealist-Lover*

Schödlbauer, we remember, sees in Wilhelm Meister the heroic lover (“der heroisch Liebende”). This is a decidedly modern category, however, for which peaceful conditions are essential. The closest thing to it in Homer is Paris, whose heroic potency in Helen’s bed appears effeminate against the context of the battle from which he is absent. No wonder those luxurious Trojans lost the war! It would take Aeneas’s vow of chastity to restore and define Roman self-respect. The archetype of the heroic lover must have more to show for himself than incidental flings between fights. To locate that **archetype** we must turn to modernity, as paradoxical as that may seem; for only the experience of medieval chastity—not in the name of manly fitness for battle (or football), but out of love and longing for an infinite Object, signified by the Virgin: only such an experience would make possible the ideal of **infinite desire** as a potent peacetime formula for subjectivity.

Don Juan (or Don Giovanni) stands out, of course, as the irresistible ladies’ man of modern Western arts and letters. It was Kierkegaard, moreover, who singled him out as the ideal representative of aesthetic humanism.<sup>173</sup> In Kierkegaard’s characterization, Don Giovanni—who finds his quintessential medium in Mozart’s opera—is the perfect lover due chiefly to the “sensuous-erotic” principle that underlies his naturally charismatic personality: “[I]f I imagine this principle concentrated in a single individual, then I have the concept of the sensuous-erotic in its elemental originality [*Genialitet*]” (64).<sup>174</sup> With

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<sup>173</sup> See especially the section titled “The Immediate Erotic Stages or the Musical-Erotic”, in *Either/Or*, Part I, from: *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, vol. III, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 45-135.

<sup>174</sup>The first brackets in the citation are mine; the second pair is included by the translators to clarify the English with the inclusion of the original Danish.

his singular critical insight into the modern character, Kierkegaard recognizes that the sensuous-erotic nature could not have originated in classical antiquity, but might only be realized in an essentially post-Christian age. He makes this point through his fictional author, the aesthetic thinker, **A**. The latter writes:

Sensuality is posited as a principle, as a power, as an independent system first by Christianity, and to that extent Christianity brought sensuality into the world. But if the thesis that Christianity has brought sensuality into the world is to be understood properly, it must be comprehended as identical to its opposite, that it is Christianity that has driven sensuality out of the world, has excluded sensuality from the world (61).

**A** concedes that sensuality did, of course, exist prior to Christianity; but he argues that only the latter's negation of sensuality dignified it as a principle. Specifically, it is Don Giovanni's character as an irresistible seducer that marks him as a figure of the **demonic**. Interestingly, Schödlbauer places his category of the heroic lover, personified in Wilhelm, along with all other forms of the heroic likewise under the rubric of the demonic. Both thinkers define the latter as a force of nature that has assumed human form. Far more relevant to our interest, however, is that **A** goes on to link the sensuous-erotic to that medieval meddler in the demonic, Faust.

Now, Kierkegaard's aesthete makes important distinctions between the two legendary figures, most of which are not important to us here. He observes, for one, "that [Goethe's] Faust, who reproduces Don Giovanni, seduces only one girl, whereas Don Giovanni seduces by the hundreds" (99). The exclusive interest of **A** is the phenomenon of the erotic as a modern aesthetic principle, exemplified in Don Giovanni's inexhaustible erotic charisma. In this respect it is Don Juan's power over women generally that matters most.<sup>175</sup> Yet I would contend that the one seduction of Goethe's Faust is precisely what defines his character; for Faust's seduction of Margaret, rather than one conquest among

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<sup>175</sup>The lady killer of the *Lehrjahre* is undoubtedly Lothario, of whom Schiller observed, "daß alle Weiber ihn lieben" ["that all the women love him"] (HA VII, 635). Apart from his physical appeal, it is precisely his modern autonomy, such that he **needs no one**, which makes him so attractive to women who themselves need someone. Still, his war experience and productive dynamism place him much closer to Odysseus than to either Don Juan or Faust. In that sense he is undoubtedly the modern, productive equivalent of the epic hero, whose freedom from need, especially of another person, contrasts starkly with Schödlbauer's heroic lover, Wilhelm: for whom even Schiller was not a little embarrassed, as soon as he mingles, not with the social misfits of his theatric detour, but with the godlike "Klasse" of the Tower (HA VII, 638).

many, is meaningful only **as an exercise or function of his subjectivity**. He does not need to seduce more than one woman; he raises Margaret, rather, to an erotic ideal dependent entirely on his own will and desire. It is a weight that neither Margaret nor any other flesh-and-blood woman can sustain. His love for her (?) shatters the social categories of marriage and family within which she lives: “Bin doch ein arm unwissend Kind, / Begreife nicht, was er an mir find’t” (v. 3215-16). [“I’m but a poor child and naïve, / What he sees in me I can’t conceive” (DWH).] The result is her social alienation and destruction. The same fate would happen to any other woman, too; but Faust’s influence over women is not, finally, what matters.

We must bear in mind that in the Witch’s Kitchen, Faust drinks a potion, the effect of which is limited entirely to his own perception. As the witch tells him, “Du siehst, mit diesem Trank im Leibe, / Bald Helenen in jedem Weibe” (v. 2603-04). [“You’ll find, having imbibed this brew, / Helen in every wench you view” (DWH).] This suggests that Faust’s passion for Margaret depends more on his own perception and subjectively amplified desire than on anything peculiar to its object. It unfortunately has proven impossible to devote equal analysis to *Faust* in this dissertation, as had been my original intention, given the extensive and detailed analysis it has required to trace through the text of the *Lehrjahre* the modern lineage and implications of Wilhelm’s subjectivity. I can only note here that Faust, too, not unlike Wilhelm, having destroyed one woman with the crushing burden of his imagination, undergoes an essentially therapeutic erasure of guilt that nonetheless retains his affair with Margaret in his personal history.<sup>176</sup> Faust, too, passes through feudal representation at the imperial court (in the second act of Part II) to the fantasia of the *Klassische Walpurgisnacht*. Moreover, his affair with Helen is an entirely aesthetic experience of his own subjectivity. Such a master of his own creative imagination no longer has any need of pimply, flawed, flesh-and-blood women. He eventually returns to a quasi-social existence, as he develops land won from the sea for

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<sup>176</sup>I am referring here to the fact that Faust will recall Margaret’s **form**, however vaguely, in Act IV of Part II; and that he will be led by her, as the eternal-womanly Beatrice of his desire, onward and upward in the closing cosmos of the second part. Even “die Liebe” [“the love”] attributed to Faust by the angels (v. 11938), in spite of its supposedly heavenly origin and end, does not minimize the obliviousness of his entelechy to other spirits. It is, rather, the wholly subjective desire that drives his never-ending *Bildung*.

new human settlements. But even then he is blind and can follow only the light within—the light of his imagination.<sup>177</sup> Any thorough treatment of subjectivity in Goethe’s writings would need to take into account his *Farbentheorie*, in which Goethe attempted among other things to bridge the chasm that modern thought had, from its beginning, found yawning through the middle of its epistemological grammar of subject and object. Most relevant to our purpose here is that **Faust’s love has nothing to do with a relationship**. In the yawning chasm of the closing scene of *Faust*, Part II (“Bergschluchten”), the entelechies of all living beings are represented in the ongoing progress of their *Bildung*, the *telos* of which is named in the last two lines: “Das Ewig-Weibliche / Zieht uns hinan” (v. 12110-11). [“The Eternal-Feminine / Leads us onward” (DWH).] Faust’s substance is the only being in the closing chorus line who has nothing to say—in glaring contrast to his elegant verbosity heretofore. He is by now the perfectly autonomous subject whose only interest is the infinite desire that literally leads him on.

The conclusion of Goethe’s magnum opus finally identifies erotic desire itself—once anathema to the Abbé’s pedagogy—as a *Streben* or *Trieb* [striving or drive/instinct]: the very engine, in other words, that drives progressive *Bildung*. In this sense, desire and its endless tendency should never find satisfaction; otherwise Faust’s ongoing development would be terminated. This is the essence of Faust’s wager with Mephistopheles: “Werd’ ich beruhigt je mich auf ein Faulbett legen, / So sei es gleich um mich getan!” (V. 1692-93). [“Shall ever I recline upon a bed of ease, / So let it be the end of me! (DWH).] Faust’s **manipulation** of Mephistopheles and the pleasures he procures are typical of Western dancing with the devil, as Horkheimer and Adorno note in their excursus on the *Odyssey*: “Polyphemus und die anderen Ungetüme, denen Odysseus ein Schnippchen schlägt, sind schon Modelle der prozessierenden dummen Teufel des christlichen Zeitalters bis hinauf zu Shylock und Mephistopheles” [“Polyphemus and the other monsters that Odysseus cheats are already models of the long procession of stupid devils from the Christian age all the way to to Shylock and Mephistopheles”] (86). Like

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<sup>177</sup>Faust: “Die Nacht scheint tiefer tief hereinzudringen, / Allein im Innern leuchtet helles Licht” (11499-500). [“The night seems deeper, deeply to intrude, / Only within is shining brightest light” (DWH).]

Odysseus, the smart subject of modernity knows how to circumvent the stupid monism of nature: stealing from its dangerous but dumb designs the very satisfaction with which the brutes had baited the snare set for his individuality—a trap that the civilized subject, having escaped and trumpeted his triumph, now may add to the capital of his self. In the *Lehrjahre*, by contrast, Wilhelm trusts his desire as the guidepost of destiny: that first points to the Dionysian end of his isolation, but which later marks the high road of his personal *Bildung*. Both interests coincide in his eyes with the theater throughout the first five books. He is simply too naive, in his childlike egoism, to manage the careful and calculated negotiations with nature that are essential to preserve his autonomy. And so Werner and the Tower do it for him—but only because he is a vital nature and, not least of all, because he’s (net) worth it.<sup>178</sup>

Wilhelm’s fatalistic lifestyle does bring trouble on others, particularly on Mariane and the countess; whereas his agreeable egocentrism—not to mention piles of paternal capital and his privileges as a phallic male (no pregnancy)—keep his own person largely out of trouble. What is more, having handed over his conscience to the strictly delimited moral ethos of the liberal social economy, Wilhelm is relieved of guilt for whatever role he played in the unfortunate (and in Mariane’s case, tragic) outcome of those relationships. This is true even after he is made aware of the same, for that occurs only after he has absorbed the values of the Tower. Through Book Five he remained true to his idealistic/feudalistic sense of his own integrity and honor. For that reason alone he undertakes the lofty cause of justice for Aurelie. Had he been aware at that point of the consequences of his own theatric affair and courtly flirt, he undoubtedly would still be devastated. Only after he has become acquainted with Lothario and Therese and has breathed the brave new air that is their element, is he armed to confront and vanquish the evil spirit of guilt. Wilhelm’s refusal to accept the burden that Barbara would lay on him

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<sup>178</sup>Schödlbauer, too, characterizes the Society of the Tower as a “Kreis der Begünstigten” [“clique of the fortunate”], the security of whose global network, with its vast social and economic resources, qualifies the mere prospect of Wilhelm’s marriage to Natalie as an “Augenblick der Glückserfüllung” [“moment of happiness realized”] (153). I would only stress more than Schödlbauer the necessary condition of Wilhelm’s capital, which supplements rather than drains the Society’s endowment. Were it not for that, all the personal charm in the world would not win him the hand of his Society girl.



breaks the spell of fate over him—if not once and for all, then only because this stage of his metamorphosis has just passed a crisis, and he has not yet regained his balance. Little wonder, though, that the deaths of Mignon and Augustin make so little impression on him in the end. They are the figures in whose lives Goethe-contemporary Christian Körner recognized “die Macht des Schicksals” [“the power of fate”] (HA VII, 653). More precisely, Schiller ascribes their “monstros[e] Schicksale” [“monstrous fates”], as we have seen, to the notably female “Schoß des dummen Aberglaubens” [“womb of stupid superstition”] of an unenlightened Christianity (HA VII, 631).

With their deaths, the aspects of Wilhelm’s character that the *Harfner* and Mignon reflect largely disappear, and his healing therapy is all but complete. Only one question remains unresolved. We remember that as he approaches Lothario’s castle and the Tower, Wilhelm still entertains the faint “Hoffnung, daß die angeborne Neigung unsers Herzens nicht ohne Gegenstand bleiben werde” (421). [“hope that the native desire(s) of our heart(s) may not remain without object(s) to focus on” (EAB 257).]<sup>179</sup> Is there no object that can finally satisfy his heart’s desire? It is not least of all an **existential** question that he poses, and the later suspicion he has that Natalie is out of his reach, and that the Tower is just trying to get rid of him, brings on a genuine existential crisis:

Nur der lebhafteste Schmerz, der ihn manchmal ergriff, daß er alles das Gefundene und Wiedergefundene so freventlich und doch so notwendig verlassen müsse, nur seine Tränen gaben ihm das Gefühl seines Daseins wieder. Vergebens rief er sich den glücklichen Zustand, in dem er sich doch eigentlich befand, vors Gedächtnis. “So ist denn alles nichts,” rief er aus, “wenn das eine fehlt, das dem Menschen alles übrige wert ist!” (571).

[It was only the stab of pain that he sometimes felt so wantonly and yet so necessarily having to abandon what he had found and refound, only his tears that gave him once more the sense that he was indeed still alive. In vain did he remind himself of the fortunate state he was in. “Everything is worthless,” he said to himself, “if that one single thing is lacking which makes everything else worthwhile” (EAB 350).]

Jarno repeatedly has told Wilhelm that his life is his own to manage. At the same time he assures him that his suspicions about the Tower are unfounded: ““Jeden Verdacht, ich versichere Sie, werden Sie uns künftig abbitten. Es ist Ihre Sache, zu prüfen und zu

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<sup>179</sup> The letters in parentheses are original to Blackall’s translation; I set them off, because the nouns in the German are all in the singular.

wählen, und die unsere, Ihnen beizustehen. Der Mensch ist nicht eher glücklich, als bis sein unbedingtes Streben sich selbst seine Begrenzung bestimmt” (553). [“You’ll be apologizing to us later for all your suspicions, I can assure you. Your job is to test and to choose; ours to assist you. No one is ever happy until his unlimited striving has set itself a limitation” (EAB 339).] His point is twofold: that Wilhelm needs to decide on a useful occupation that will take his mind off of all that nonsense about **the** purpose of life; and that he should not doubt the Tower Society. Hey, if you can’t trust your insurance agent and investment broker: Who can you trust?!

The Tower Society, in its authorized representative Jarno–“Diesmal hab’ ich Auftrag” [“This time I speak under authority”]–will try in vain to sedate an increasingly agitated Wilhelm with its endless flow of humanistic aphorisms (Wilhelm: “Phrasen”) (584ff.; DWH). Not until he learns that Natalie has agreed to be his, can Wilhelm trust the meddling Tower and acknowledge: “daß ich ein Glück erlangt habe, das ich nicht verdiene, und das ich mit nichts in der Welt vertauschen möchte” (610). [“that I have attained a happiness I don’t deserve, and that I would not trade for anything in the world” (DWH).] Thus even Wilhelm’s last words in the novel are evidence that, while he may have renounced fatalism when it stood against him, he still is likely to fall back on it in a moment of happiness. As his inattention to Jarno’s catechising showed, Wilhelm has not yet fully absorbed the liberal, pantheistic ideology of the Tower. He will in fact trade Natalie for his vocational studies in the *Wanderjahre*. Blessin has demonstrated, after all, that no promise or personal commitment can stand up against the overwhelming rationality of the liberal market in the *Lehrjahre*, for under its rule: “Man muß tauschen können, wenn man besitzen will.” [“One must be able to trade, if one would possess.”]<sup>180</sup> Hence, viewed from the standpoint of the Tower, Wilhelm is still in the grips of a theatric false consciousness. But that is no longer significant: his egocentric, formative instinct is strong and healthy; and the financial backing is there. He knows what to do, when the Tower makes him an offer he can’t refuse.

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<sup>180</sup>See *Die Romane Goethes*, p. 38.

Werner's reaction upon seeing his long lost friend, as well as Therese's and Natalie's agreements to marry Wilhelm, indicate that even his theatric error was fruitful, albeit in a personal rather than vocational sense. The same is true of his affair with Mariane and his sojourn among the nobility. How he interpreted these experiences at the time does not even matter. Just as Goethe himself viewed the *Lehrjahre* as one bright petal in the blossom of his own self-cultivation, we have seen that his morphology of even human *Bildung* is rooted in a fundamentally botanical vision of life.<sup>181</sup> Flowers naturally cannot have relationships, any more than fertilization by a bee flitting from flower to flower implies intimacy. And while it would be absurd to suggest that Goethe's made no substantial distinction between the classes of living beings, it is undeniable that **every relationship into which Wilhelm enters assumes an entirely functional, formative purpose in his wholly individual life.** When the relationship has exhausted its usefulness, the other person conveniently dies or disappears. Having **fertilized** Mariane, Wilhelm is separated from her. Moreover, the circumstances surrounding paternity in Philine's pregnancy are so far from ruling out Wilhelm as the sperm donor, as to make the latter even probable. This is supported, in fact, by Friedrich's own suspicion, as well as by the comically Cartesian proof of his fatherhood.<sup>182</sup> Beyond that, having gotten over the question of his own biological relation to Felix, Wilhelm is advised by Montan in the *Wanderjahre* that parental ties, too, are unimportant, even problematic for the individual and professional ethos of the modern social economy. Better to send his son to boarding school, so that they don't get in the way of each other's self-cultivation. When Jarno recites from Wilhelm's *Lehrbrief*, ““Nur alle Menschen machen die Menschheit aus, nur

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<sup>181</sup>My citation from Goethe's *Italienische Reise* in the Chapter V of this study, regarding Goethe's new conception of his *Wilhelm Meister* novel (see page 152, note 22), reflects on both Wilhelm and Goethe as subjects of *Bildung*.

<sup>182</sup>Friedrich confesses: ““Anfangs machte mich der verwünschte Besuch, den [Philine] Euch nach dem “Hamlet” abgestattet hatte, ein wenig irre” (559). [“But at first I was somewhat uncertain because of that visit [Philine] paid you after the performance of *Hamlet*” (EAB 342).] His comic character allows him to **conceive** his paternity in the following pun: ““Die Vaterschaft beruht überhaupt auf der Überzeugung; ich bin überzeugt, und also bin ich Vater” (Ibid.). [“Fatherhood rests only on conviction; I am convinced, therefore I am the father” (Ibid.).] Even Wilhelm cannot be certain that Felix is his own child. As vexing as cuckoldry was for male subjectivity, the reduction of family relations to economic rather than personal responsibility makes the question moot. Wilhelm is not even around to watch Felix grow up. How can he, when he has his own growth to worry about?

alle Kräfte zusammengenommen die Welt”” [“(Only a)ll men make up mankind and (only) all forces together make up the world”” (EAB 338, my insertions)], he is advocating a global economy in which neither Renaissance culture nor particular relationships can guarantee the personal wholeness that Wilhelm has sought in love and a distinctive calling in life.

In Natalie Wilhelm’s idealistic longing finds its satisfaction. While this is not the place to explore Natalie’s multiple significations in the *Lehrjahre*, she undoubtedly is the ideal woman by the standard of the Tower. Her perfect autonomy is evident in her **unromantic** answer to Wilhelm’s question about whether she has ever loved:

“Ja, mein Freund!” sagte [Natalie] lächelnd, mit ihrer ruhigen, sanften, unbeschreiblichen Hoheit, “es ist vielleicht nicht außer der Zeit, wenn ich Ihnen sage, daß alles, was uns so manches Buch, was uns die Welt als Liebe nennt und zeigt, mir immer nur als ein Märchen erschienen sei.”

“Sie haben nicht geliebt?” rief Wilhelm aus.

“Nie oder immer!” versetzte Natalie (538).

[ “Yes, my friend,” (Natalie) said with a smile of indescribably gentle and calm dignity. “And perhaps it will not be the wrong time to tell you that what we read in books about love, and what the world shows us of what it calls love, has always seemed to me idle fancy (only a fairy tale).”

“You have never been in love?” Wilhelm asked.”

“Never — or always!” she replied (EAB 330, my insertions).]

Whereas the childhood development of the *schöne Seele* had led through “Liebesgeschichten und Feenmärchen” [“love stories and fairy tales”] to a partial realization that her real love was her own soul; her niece Natalie, the socially useful Christian, appears never to have needed a favorite sheep or prince to motivate her moral relation to others. Her answer to Wilhelm’s question affirms that she is above particular love. She loves, not this or that individual, but humanity as a whole and its godlike aspirations. This exchange follows Wilhelm’s soulful call, he having seized her hand, “zu einem wahren wechselseitigen Vertrauen” [“for a truly mutual trust”] (Ibid.; DWH). But she had just insisted that her real loyalty is to Lothario. In Wilhelm’s first moment of ecstasy since his relationship with Mariane, his beloved only has eyes for . . . her brother. After all, he is the only man comparable to her with respect to her sublime humanity, and through whom alone she has learned, “daß das Herz gerührt und erhoben, daß auf der

Welt Freude, Liebe und ein Gefühl sein kann, das *über alles Bedürfnis* hinaus befriedigt” (538, my italics). [“that there is joy and love in the world, and feeling which brings contentment *beyond all need*” (EAB 330, my italics).] Heaven forbid that love should have anything to do with **need**. Why, that would be downright codependency!

### *Wilhelm's Guilt and the Oresteia*

Without doubt, Natalie's agreement to wed Wilhelm is intended in part to make possible her brother's marriage to Therese. Be that as it may, the ideal conclusion has an important thematic significance, as well. We already have determined that Natalie presides as priestess over the Apollonian legacy of the *Oheim*. That is in any event the impression that the house and its denizen make on Wilhelm: “So bin ich denn”, rief er aus, ‘in dem Hause des würdigen Oheims! Es ist kein Haus, es ist ein Tempel, und Sie sind die würdige Priesterin, ja der Genius selbst” (519). [“So here I am,’ he declared, ‘in the house of that remarkable uncle; yet, it isn't a house, it's a temple, and you are its noble priestess, indeed, its presiding genius.” (EAB 318).] We in turn have called the house of the *Oheim* a temple of Apollo, following the Nietzschean paradigm of Dionysian vs. Apollonian aesthetics. In these same terms Mariane was the prostitute-priestess of Wilhelm's Dionysian temple, the theater. But if we consider Natalie and her siblings as the intellectual children of the Olympian *Oheim*, **born from his head** in an all but literal sense—then “the ideal, asexual Natalie,” as *Genius* of the temple, functions in Book Eight as the virginal *parthenos*, **Pallas Athene**, and the house over which she presides as a modern Parthenon.<sup>183</sup>

It is not just a question of competing aesthetics. The federalist theory that Schödlbauer has attributed to the theme of sacrifice in the novel has a symbolic dimension that he does not appear to have recognized. Wilhelm has just returned, shaken, from his

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<sup>183</sup>In our own sexually hyperconscious age, it is little wonder that Natalie has not met with the same enthusiasm that she enjoyed in classical Weimar. Edmunds's contrast of “the erotically playful Philine and the ideal, asexual Natalie” is typical (83). As for Natalie as Athene, I find it more than interesting that Thomas Mann's Enlightenment pedagogue, Settembrini, suggests, “Man sollte der Pallas Athene hier in der Vorhalle einen Altar errichten, – im Sinne der Abwehr” [“One should establish an altar for Pallas Athene here in the entrance hall, – in the sense of resistance”] against Oriental atavism (366).

ordeal back at the Dionysian theater, having withstood the Fury Barbara's inditement of him in the tragedy of Mariane. The situation recalls that mythic fugitive from the Furies, Orestes. Orestes had avenged the murder of his father, Agamemnon, on his mother and her lover-accomplice, Aegisthus. In the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, the competing claims on Orestes are represented by the matrilineal blood-ties of the pre-Olympian Furies or Eumenides, whose vengeance Orestes has brought upon himself by killing his mother; as opposed to the legal-patriarchal marriage relation that Clytemnestra had violated with the murder of her husband, Agamemnon. He had shed first blood by sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia to appease Artemis, whom he had offended. The crux of the problem, then, lies for both generations of the ill-fated family in the question of **which parent has the superior claim on the child.**

In the *Eumenides* the matriarchal Furies argue that Orestes murdered the source of his life, whose blood flows in his veins. Apollo, by contrast, as the advocate of Orestes, appeals to the priority of the patriarch: whose seed signifies the true parent and is only planted and nourished in the (dirty) soil of the mother's womb. Unsurprisingly, the lawyer's argument is intended to undermine the force of the Furies' appeal to an elemental (i.e. natural) relation. The real interest of the Athenian Aeschylus, however, is to affirm the **legal** primacy of the father, whose claim to the child is uncertain and, consequently, a source of male anxiety: but whose **patriarchy depended on Athenian law**—and vice versa. Pallas Athene herself presides over and guarantees the decision reached by a jury of her Athenians; the vote ends in a tie, and the goddess breaks it by voting to acquit Orestes. It is not surprising that the children of law and civilization sympathize with the matricide, who then enjoys the protection of the goddess. Athene appeases the Furies with promises of recognition and reverence, as well a house on the (in Athens, **valuable**) real estate of their choice. The interest that Athene has in reaching a peaceful and mutually agreeable solution reflects the popular conviction that the blessing of the Furies—as gods of cyclical/seasonal nature—was essential for fruitful harvests and childbirths, as is evident in the promises that Athene purchases from them. Nevertheless, that the Furies can be won over to what they themselves recognize to be a shameful trespass on their ancient rights,

only confirms what Horkheimer and Adorno see already in Homer: the civilized perception that the gods of nature are stupid and can be manipulated to human advantage.

While Schödlbauer recognizes in Wilhelm's Amazon the goddess Diana (Artemis), and in Natalie a priestess, he fails to make the connection to the *parthenos*, Athene. In his analysis, in fact, the Natalie of Book Eight stands in no relation to mythology whatsoever; she is only the priestess who carries out the "Bundesopfer" or civilizing sacrifice, marking the transition from the bloody state of nature to a civil peace secured by the social contract (*Bund*) of the Tower. In light of our analysis, however, another dimension of myth comes into relief. Wilhelm, who had killed (as it were) the mother of **his** child, seeks refuge from a Fury and from the guilt she assigns. As he approaches the temple, Wilhelm clings to his son and pleads, "Aber diesen Schatz, den ich einmal besitze, erhalte mir, du erbittliches oder unerbittliches Schicksal!" (509). ["But the treasure I have here, may this never be taken from me, by inexorable, or beseechable, Fate!"] (EAB 312).] It is apparent here that he still sees himself dependent on the will of fate, of whose disposition toward himself, however, Wilhelm has become entirely uncertain. When he finally recognizes his Amazon, the Athene of this Olympian Parthenon, we read, "Die Amazone war's! Er konnte sich nicht halten, stürzte auf seine Knie und rief aus: 'Sie ist's!' Er faßte ihre Hand und küßte sie mit unendlichem Entzücken. Das Kind lag zwischen ihnen beiden auf dem Teppich und schlief sanft" (513). ["It was the Amazon! He could not control himself, fell on his knees, and cried: 'It is she!' He clasped her hand and kissed it with rapturous delight. The child lay between them both on the carpet, fast asleep." (EAB 314).] Before us here we have the scene of Orestes humbly begging the protection of the virginal goddess in her temple, his refuge from a wrathful Mother Earth.

As early as Book Three Wilhelm has been undergoing a metamorphosis that entered its crisis with his disillusioned retreat from the theater and with his acquaintance with the Tower and its Apollonian social-aesthetic values. That crisis climaxed in his ordeal with Barbara and now enters its final phase, as a new order emerges amid the seeming wreckage of his exhausted formative ideal. The closing lines of Book Eight, Chapter Two, articulate the influence that Natalie-Athene has on him, as he compares his vision of the Amazon with the flesh-and-blood (?) Natalie: "jenes [Bild] hatte er sich

gleichsam geschaffen, und dieses schien *ihn* umschaffen zu wollen“ (516, original emphasis). [“the former (image) had been fashioned, as it were, by him, the latter seemed almost to be refashioning *him*” (EAB 316, my italics).] What he senses is a transformation that is out of his hands, but that is effected in Natalie-Athene’s home by the influence of her godlike, Apollonian beauty and dignity. We have seen that he had sought personal and moral wholeness in love and in a beloved. He still will hope for this wholeness in a union with Natalie; and the realization or disappointment of this hope will determine in his eyes the direction of his fate. But Natalie will tell him that such hopes from love are only “Märchen”. As she later leads him into the inner sanctum of the temple, the *Saal der Vergangenheit* (Hall of the Past), Wilhelm admires the plastic representations of humanity in its timeless work and relations:

Wilhelms Augen schweiften auf unzählige Bilder umher. Vom ersten frohen Triebe der Kindheit, jedes Glied im Spiele nur zu brauchen und zu üben, bis zum ruhigen abgeschiedenen Ernste des Weisen konnte man in schöner, lebendiger Folge sehen, wie der Mensch keine angeborne Neigung und Fähigkeit besitzt, ohne sie zu brauchen und zu nutzen. Von dem ersten zarten Selbstgefühl, wenn das Mädchen verweilt, den Krug aus dem klaren Wasser wieder heraufzuheben, und indessen ihr Bild gefällig betrachtet, bis zu jenen hohen Feierlichkeiten, wenn Könige und Völker zu Zeugen ihrer Verbindungen die Götter am Altare anrufen, zeigte sich alles bedeutend und kräftig (541).

[Wilhelm’s eyes wandered from one picture to another. In a splendid sequence of vivid representations, ranging from the first childish impulses to employ all one’s limbs in play, to the calm, grave detachment of wise old age, showing that there is no inclination or faculty innate in man that he does not need or use. From the delicate awakening of self with which the maiden delays drawing water while she gazes admiringly at her own reflection, to the grand festivities at which kings and nations call on the gods to sanction their alliances – everything was there in all its power and significance (EAB 331 ff.).]

The language here is not that of Wilhelm’s own thoughts but of the representations themselves, to which the narrator lends his authorizing voice. Wilhelm and the reader are offered, then, something that comes remarkably close to the “Idee” of the novel that Schiller had hoped to hear from the Abbé. Schödlbauer is to be credited with the insight that in Wilhelm Meister’s apprenticeship, only art can represent the wholeness that he had looked for in love and personal representation. The statuary and murals in the *Saal* permit him to see the particular situations and individual social roles integrated in a unifying



representation of humanity. The words that Jarno reads to Wilhelm from his *Lehrbrief*, “Nur alle Menschen machen die Menschheit aus, nur alle Kräfte zusammengenommen die Welt” [“(Only a)ll men make up mankind and (only) all forces together make up the world”], articulate the conviction that no one individual can realize in himself the essence of humanity (552; EAB 338, my insertions). *Welt* here means not the distinctive spaciousness that houses, and is, individual Dasein in a Heideggerian sense, but rather the global anthill of countless men and women, the masses happily engaged in individual yet interrelated activity. It is what Thomas Mann’s twentieth-century Abbé of Enlightenment, Settembrini, means, when he reminds his worrisome lotus eater and castaway on “dies Eiland der Kirke,” Hans Castorp, that he is “[ein] Sohn der Zivilisation,” and calls upon him to return to his profession: that **is** the name (“Ingenieur”) by which the humanist calls him.<sup>184</sup> Settembrini shows Hans how he himself, the *Zivilisationsliterat*, makes even in his diseased isolation his own contribution to human progress (“Menschheitsfortschritt”): a belletristic volume for the encyclopaedic *Soziologie der Leiden* [*Sociology of Suffering*].<sup>185</sup>

Schödlbauer observes that the aesthetic holism of the Tower, manifest in the *Saal der Vergangenheit*, rescues the lost (because, I would add, **alienated**) individual from the bewildering worldwide web of economic relations; only its beautiful representations make it possible for him feel at home in modern society. Schödlbauer:

Der Held, der im Saal der Vergangenheit die Urbilder seines individuellen Schicksals betrachtet, unterwirft sich der Einsicht, daß sich *auch* in seinen Taten und Leiden das Schicksal der Gattung vollzieht. Nicht er, der einzelne, repräsentiert – gleichgültig, ob auf der Bühne oder in seinem wirklichen Dasein – gleich dem mythischen Herkules die Menschheit, sondern die Kunst verknüpft in ihren ‘bedeutenden’ Darstellungen, als ars memoriae gleichsam, das Einzelgeschehen, in dem sich der einzelne erkennt, zu einer Gesamtheit, die als geordnete Folge das Gattungswesen repräsentiert (163).

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<sup>184</sup>See pp.375 and 368 respectively of *Der Zauberberg*. The word “Abbé” may seem misapplied to Settembrini, given his Enlightenment disdain for Christian clericalism and quietism, as well as for

the Marxist misanthropy of his pedagogical adversary, the Judeo-Jesuit Marxist, Naphta. But Hans Castorp finds that even his first dose of the Italian’s humanist moralizing “schmeckte nach Sonntagspredigt” [“had flavor of Sunday sermonizing”] (93).

<sup>185</sup> See pp. 371 and 373 of *Der Zauberberg*.

[The hero, who considers in the Hall of the Past the primal pictures of his individual fate, subordinates himself to the insight that the fate of the species is realized *also* in his own deeds and sufferings. Not he, the individual, represents humanity as had Hercules – neither on stage nor in his actual being; it is art, rather, as *ars memoriae*, as it were, that links in its ‘meaningful’ representations isolated events, in which the individual recognizes himself, within a wholeness that represents the generic being in terms of an ordered succession.]

The representations in the *Saal*, the timeless truth of which makes such a strong impression on Wilhelm, validate and sanction aesthetically the global humanism of the Tower, including its social and economic designs. By submitting himself to the social (security) network of the Tower, Schödlbauer observes, Wilhelm surrenders the individual immediacy of his life; but with it he likewise loses his errors and their painful consequences: which he has suffered due to his passive, fatalistic lifestyle. We see this in the sequel of the *Wanderjahre*, where Wilhelm avoids the vales of sexual suffering into which the characters of the internal narratives descend, as he looks for, and finally settles on, a fulfilling vocation and career. He is no longer good for a romance in the second novel, because he by then has exhausted the erroneous notions or *Gesinnungen* that are essential to the novel or romance, as the theory of the *Roman* in the *Lehrjahre* defines it. But as generous compensation for his forfeited immediacy, Wilhelm enjoys interesting work, comradeship, security—and even a vacation on the sunny beaches of Lago di Maggiore in the Swiss-Italian Alps. *A, che bella vita!* Who wouldn’t sell his soul for such a life! And surrender his soul Wilhelm does, in a manner of speaking.

### Soulless Humanity and the Pathology of Guilt

Both Schödlbauer and Hannelore Schlaffer interpret Mignon as a Psyche-figure that occupies a central symbolic space in the *Lehrjahre*.<sup>186</sup> Before we explore their readings, however, it would be worthwhile to consider evidence offered by the novel respecting Mignon’s symbolic character. The Tower’s medic (and **psychoanalyst**) offers, as modern oracle and healer, the following diagnosis of Mignon’s malady:

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<sup>186</sup>See Schlaffer, *Wilhelm Meister: Das Ende der Kunst und die Wiederkehr des Mythos* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1980). While Mignon occupies the central position in the entire second chapter of the first part of Schlaffer’s study, which addresses Neoplatonism in the Wilhelm Meister novels, the excursus titled “Mignon als Psyche” is especially relevant to our interest.

“Die sonderbare Natur des guten Kindes, von dem jetzt die Rede ist, besteht beinah nur aus einer tiefen Sehnsucht; das Verlangen, ihr Vaterland wiederzusehen, und das Verlangen nach Ihnen, mein Freund, ist, möchte ich fast sagen, das einzige Irdische an ihr; beides greift nur in eine unendliche Ferne, beide Gegenstände liegen unerreichbar vor diesem einzigen Gemüt” (522).

[“What we are concerned with is the strange personality (nature) of that dear child Mignon. It consists almost entirely of a deep sort of yearning: the longing to see her motherland again, and a longing, my friend, for you – these, I may say, are the only earthly things about her, and both of them have a element of infinite distance about them, both goals being inaccessible to her unusual nature” (EAB 320, my insertion).]

The medic points to her homesickness and her love for Wilhelm as the sole traits of Mignon that tie her to this life and to the natural world—the only “earthly things” about her. And yet even these ties to life are dubious.

Mignon’s longing (“Sehnsucht”) for a homeland and a beloved is expressed in the most well-known of her songs, “Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn” [“Know you the land where lemon blossoms blow (bloom)”], the innocence and originality of which, we are told, are lost in Wilhelm’s German translation.<sup>187</sup> The first verse reads thus:

“Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn, / Im dunkeln Laub die Goldorangen glühn, / Ein sanfter Wind vom blauen Lorbeer steht, / Kennst du es wohl? / Dahin! Dahin /

Möcht’ ich mit dir, o mein Geliebter, ziehn!” (145). [“Know you the land where lemon blossoms blow, / And through dark leaves the golden oranges glow, / A gentle breeze wafts from an azure sky, / The myrtle’s still, the laurel tree grows high – / You know it, yes? Oh there, oh there / With you, O beloved, would I fare” (Ibid.).] When Mignon asks

Wilhelm if he knows the land, he speculates that it is Italy, to which she responds,

“Italien! [. . .] gehst du nach Italien, so nimm mich mit, es friert mich hier” (146).

[“Italy! (. . .) if you go to Italy, take me with you. I’m freezing here” (EAB 84).] In

Book Eight we learn from her uncle, Marinelli, that her father and she are indeed Italian; but even there, he says, she manifested an uncanny upward instinct. Her uncle recalls that the daughter of his brother and sister manifested a “besondere Lust um Klettern. Die höchsten Gipfel zu ersteigen, auf den Rändern der Schiffe wegzulaufen und den Seiltänzern, die sich manchmal in dem Orte sehen ließen, die wunderlichsten Kunststücke

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<sup>187</sup>See pp. 145ff.; also EAB 83 (my insertion).

nachzumachen, war ein *natürlicher Trieb*” (587, my italics). [“a special delight in climbing. The child made her way up the highest hills, clambered along the sides of ships, and imitated the feats of ropedancers who sometimes came to these parts – all this quite naturally (was a natural instinct)” (EAB 359, my insertion).] Wilhelm is likewise struck in Book Two by “etwas Sonderbares” [“something strange”] in her nature and conduct; she did not ascend and descend the stairs step by step, “sondern sprang” [“but jumped”] (110; DWH). As for hygiene, she washes and scrubs her face so hard, “daß sie sich fast die Backen aufrieb” [“that she almost rubbed her cheeks raw”] (107; EAB 59). To this we can add her songs and the longing they express to return to her origin, transfigured in her memory as a paradise. All of the details that the narrator offers about her, of which we have named but a few, suggest that Mignon is an alien in the material world, or more to the point: in the world of modern **materialism**. She is a soul whose greatness and celestial element are evident in her bounding steps, her desire and aptitude for heights, and her determination to erase or shed her awkward physical body.

In Schödlbauer’s analysis Mignon is part of the mythological triad of females—Philine (Circe), Mignon (Psyche), and the Amazon (Diana)—that marks the limits of what he calls the demonic (“das Dämonische”) in Wilhelm’s experience (117ff.). With his category of the demonic—borrowed from the older Goethe’s vocabulary, but modelled in Schödlbauer’s analysis on both the *Lehrjahre* and the earlier *Egmont*—Schödlbauer is referring to the path of negative experience and disillusionment on which the carefree/careless Wilhelm wanders from the time he leaves the secure burgher milieu of his family and friends, until he is reintegrated into burgher society, now in a loftier, humanistic sense: the *Bund* or social contract of the Tower.<sup>188</sup> In Schödlbauer’s interpretation Mignon functions “als Seelenfreundin und -geleiterin des Helden” [“as soulmate and guide of the hero”], signifying a higher ideal that secures Wilhelm against the seductive sensuality of Philine-Circe and other demonic threats to his heroic-lover impulse. I would argue that, as the personification of Wilhelm’s soul, Mignon reflects the nineteenth-century humanist view that the soul of the Judeo-Christian Bible, even as early

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<sup>188</sup>My translation, “social contract”, accents the modern sociopolitical sense that is so important for Schödlbauer, although it obscures the biblical-mythological covenant to which Goethe traces it.

as Abraham, represented the origin of the modern individual, which the earliest monotheism asserted against the monism of pagan religion.<sup>189</sup> From this point of view, Mignon-Psyche does indeed protect Wilhelm from natural, demonic threats to his individuation and personal *Bildung*. These include Philine's stupefying sexual allure and the Dionysian no-(hu)man's-land of the theater.

Schödlbauer traces Mignon's declining significance in the course of Wilhelm's development from his head wound and vision of his Amazon/Diana (Natalie) until, on seeing him embrace the Tower in Therese, Mignon dies of heart failure.<sup>190</sup> Once he has entered the home of Apollonian autonomy, Wilhelm neither needs nor has any use for the introspective subjectivity that Mignon-Psyche represents, but that earlier had been the necessary condition of his particular selfhood. It is the same sort of introspection, incidently, beyond which the *Schöne Seele* of Book Six never manages to progress. While even the younger Wilhelm will find difficult, even painful, his reentry into human society and the objective world, he can thank the god within for a self-restraint that preserved him from the consequences of impulsiveness (Friedrich) or family and financial troubles (Melina). It should be noted that Schödlbauer's Psyche is largely isolated from her own mythological context to function in what he sees as a whole new constellation peculiar to the *Lehrjahre*. Given that there undeniably are multiple mythological configurations in the *Lehrjahre*, Schödlbauer's reading of Mignon in her relation to Wilhelm helps us to recognize how her benefactor benefits from her presence, her protector from her protection. I would argue that Mignon, as the personification of Wilhelm's soul—or in Goethe's world, the godly origin of his entelechy—represents the objectification of his

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<sup>189</sup>In Volume II of his Goethe-biography, Boyle discusses Hegel's treatise, "Der Geist des Christentums und sein Schicksal" ["The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate"]. Boyle points to Hegel's characterization of Abraham as a determined individualist, and to his monotheism as an emphatic self-isolation from larger human society and nature. Boyle observes that Hegel's Jesus seeks to heal the wounds of alienation in the face of a Judaism that stresses separation and exclusion. In this sense, it is easy to recognize that Schödlbauer's reading of the *Lehrjahre* in the light of middle-class federalist thought feels the same socio-political pulse that Boyle senses in Hegel. See Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age*, Vol. II, *Revolution and Renunciation*, p. 585ff.

<sup>190</sup>Given my own interest in Wilhelm's *Bildung* as metamorphosis, I would point out that, in view of Schödlbauer's interpretation, Philine's decidedly female sensuality and fertility stand as the threat of sexual necessity (pregnancy and domestic cares) that lurks between the pre-adolescent sexual ambiguity of Mignon (as original innocence) and the godly androgyny of the Amazon.

personal ideal, of his individual and moral worth. In this way she preserves him, throughout his absence from the middle-class mainstream, from a brutish sensuality, as well as from the base necessities of life that would follow from such unreflected, immediate living.

However, Schödlbauer's reading far from exhausts Mignon's significance in the novel, even if we restrict our interest to her role as Psyche. Schlaffer demonstrates a wider range of very specific points of contact between Mignon and other characters in Goethe's novel, on the one hand, and the Cupid and Psyche tale in Apuleius's *Golden Ass*.<sup>191</sup> Moreover, if we believe Schlaffer, the Tower generally, and Natalie in particular, stand in opposition to Mignon, at least insofar as she is to be identified with Psyche. Schlaffer sees in Natalie Psyche's sister, who compels the latter to divulge the secret of her divine lover: just as the glaringly enlightened Natalie pries into Mignon's secret of having seen Philine and Wilhelm together in bed. Philine here is the jealous Venus, as her name also suggests. Schlaffer, while not as emphatic as Schlechta, clearly shares some of his mistrust of the Tower. But unlike the Nietzsche-scholar's peculiar dislike for the Tower *per se*, the analysis of Schlaffer diagnoses it as a sign of the time: of an artless and prosaic nineteenth century. In her enlightened determination to isolate and name everything, the representative of the Tower, Natalie, obliges Mignon-Psyche to come out of the closet at last. But even then Natalie permits her to wear her angel's gown only because it is the closest thing to a dress that the **girl** has been willing to put on. In other words, Natalie's zeal for grown-up gender distinction, like the life-affirming exequies for Mignon, suggest that the Tower fails to grasp her character as soul.

Much the same is true of Wilhelm, once he begins to practice the (for him) new language of human autonomy. Having imagined Felix and Mignon in Therese's maternal care, Wilhelm realizes for the first time that Mignon, **like any other child**, needs a decent

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<sup>191</sup>I find it very significant that the larger narrative of Apuleius, in which the Cupid and Psyche is related, was itself known by three or four titles, including *Metamorphoses*, which only reaffirms the symbolic importance of the tale in the *Lehrjahre*—in which Goethe, as Neumann stresses, portrayed “die Metamorphose des Menschen” [“the metamorphosis of humanity”] (119). This has been confirmed in the relevance that Boyle has demonstrated of Goethe's organic morphology to the *Lehrjahre*. For that matter, the work of Apuleius, even as it exemplifies Margaret Doody's ancient romance with its goddess (Isis), was undoubtedly the most important classical precedent that made the new and modern **novel** suitable for men. See Doody, *The True Story of the Novel*.

home and an education: “Ich zog das liebe Kind an, seine Gegenwart ergötzte mich, und dabei hab’ ich es auf grausamste vernachlässigt” (504). [“I attached the dear child to myself, her presence delighted me, and I only neglected her cruelly” (DWH).] Interestingly, he now perceives personal closeness and affection as insufficient; what she needs are material benefits. When Wilhelm retrieves her from Barbara, Mignon expresses the desire to remain with him, to which he responds **reasonably**, “daß doch etwas für ihre weitere Bildung getan werden müsse” (488). [“that (. . .) something should be done for her further education” (EAB 229).] Already we see the rational sort of ideas that Wilhelm considers, as he exercises his new social conscience! But Mignon don’t need no education. She answers him, “Ich bin gebildet genug, [. . .] um zu lieben und zu trauern” (Ibid.). [“I am educated enough to love and sorrow” (Ibid.).] These very words might be used to describe Wilhelm’s experience before he is initiated into the Tower, and to a lesser extent even thereafter. The pain of love and its disappointments characterize precisely the “Erfahrungen des Herzens und Geistes” [“experiences of heart and mind”] that Wilhelm has had in abundance. But as Schödlbauer points out, such immediate living, as opposed to “Denken und Handeln *aus* Erfahrung” [“thinking and acting *based on* experience”], necessarily becomes “das Leiden an der Erfahrung” [“the suffering of experience”]—the pain, in other words, of negative experience (118, original emphasis). Yet this is precisely the sort of education with which Mignon identifies herself and that she has no intention of abandoning. Her strange comfort in the painful experience of love is consistent with her soul-ful identity: a stranger in modern human nature and society, who longs for a paradise of warmth and love, rather than the cold climate of post-feudal individualism.<sup>192</sup>

We have seen that under Natalie’s authority, Mignon plays an angel in an enlightening holiday lesson for the other children. What is more, with Pallas Athene’s permission she is permitted thereafter to wear the angel’s gown regularly, in lieu of the

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<sup>192</sup>That Mignon-Psyche belongs to the Middle Ages is evident when, having learned that Wilhelm had bought her freedom from the troupe of acrobats, she becomes “begierig, *seine Farbe zu tragen*” [“eager to wear *his colors*”]—the gray that has become the chosen symbol of his fate “seit dem Verlust Marianens” [“since losing Mariane”] (117; EAB 65, my italics). Since all she has to wear was her circus costume, Wilhelm orders a tailor to make her a dress; Mignon then presses the tailor to make her what is essentially a lackey’s outfit in the color that represents her lord and *Meister*. Moreover, having learned her (by Laertes exaggerated) purchase price, she is determined to *serve* worthy of it (“*verdienen*”) (106, my italics).

girl's clothing in which she has refused to be dressed. Herself undergoing a metamorphosis, Mignon would seem to be preparing to shed the cocoon of her body and return, not unlike Saint-Exupéry's *Petit Prince*, to her celestial origin.<sup>193</sup> Instead of the "leidenschaftliche Szene" or passionate scene that Wilhelm expects from the reunion Mignon has desired, her appearance is marked by a calm but striking contrast:

Mignon im langen weißen Frauengewande, teils mit lockigen, teils aufgebundenen, reichen, braunen Haaren, saß, hatte Felix auf dem Schoße und drückte ihn an ihr Herz; sie sah völlig aus wie ein abgeschiedner Geist, und der Knabe wie das Leben selbst; es schien, *als wenn Himmel und Erde sich umarmten* (525, my italics).

[Mignon, in a long white dress, her thick brown hair partly hanging loose and partly arranged, was seated with Felix on her lap, pressing him to her breast. She looked (entirely) like a departed spirit, and the boy like life itself: it seemed *as though heaven and earth were here conjoined* (EAB 322, my insertion and italics).]

Felix here is the true child of earth and nature, and Mignon a child of heaven who is preparing to return home from her earthly exile.

When she later runs to Wilhelm, and Natalie scolds her for the stress she is putting on her heart, Mignon replies, "Laß es brechen! [. . .] es schlägt schon zu lange" (543). ["Let it break! (. . .) It has been beating long enough (too long already)"] (EAB 333, my insertion).] Therese rushes in, embraces Wilhelm, and Mignon's heart breaks. Despite Mignon's transformation and extraterrestrial orientation, the significance of her death and exequies are staged with an altogether different message in mind. The distinct, **this-worldly** content of the chorus belies Schlaffer's reading of the choirboys as "Eroten", and Mignon-Psyche's sarcophagus as her "Hochzeitslager" ["wedding bed"] (76). The *Knaben* [boys] weep, rather, because "die Flügel heben sie nicht" ["the wings do not raise her"] (575; DWH). Like the enlightened pupils of Natalie, who noticed that the angel was just Mignon, the *Knaben* are disappointed to see that her wings just lie there; there is no **ascension**. The adult choir admonishes the disappointed children to get on with their own life and development: "in euch lebe die bildende Kraft" ["let the formative power live in you"] (Ibid.; DWH). The boys' final words signify that the funeral is over,

<sup>193</sup>An insight of Schlaffer supports the idea of Mignon metamorphosing into her true self, Psyche: "In dieser Gestalt ist sie der Schmetterling, das Symbol der Seele" ["In this form she is a butterfly, the symbol of the soul"] (76).



and that it is time to get back to what really matters: “Auf! wir kehren ins Leben zurück. Gebe der Tag uns Arbeit und Lust” (576). [“We rise and turn to life again. The day shall give us labor and joy” (EAB 352).] High ho, high ho, it’s off to work we go!

This does not mean that Schlaffer is wrong about the Apuleian symbolism in Book Eight or even in the exequies; it signifies, rather, that there simply is no place for death or the soul in the materialist social agenda of the Tower. In this respect I would argue that, while the Weltanschauung of the Abbé and the Tower almost certainly do not coincide exactly with Goethe’s evolving cosmology, their endless aphorisms and elaborately staged funeral nevertheless reflect the modern humanist values and priorities that Goethe undoubtedly shared. We have seen that Wilhelm feels most drawn and devoted to Mignon, when he is still nursing his own psychic and emotional wounds; when his perception still is fixed on what Aurelie characterizes as his inner (i.e. subjective) “Vorempfindung der ganzen Welt” (257). [“presentiment of the whole world” (EAB 153).] Moreover, Mignon insulates Wilhelm not only from Philine’s sexual advances, but from social life in general. It is, after all, when Wilhelm retreats from the battlefield of competing interests, that she, as well as her guilt-stricken minstrel-father, offer him the riches of their very private and **personal service**. Both Mignon’s refusal to perform her egg dance in public and her attempt to hinder Wilhelm from going out on stage are motivated not so much by an aversion to drama *per se*, but by her intensely personal and private nature. Whereas Wilhelm’s instincts lead him forward in his individual development, Mignon’s longing, like her father’s guilt, tends backward to the “unendliche Ferne” [“infinite distance”] of their origin in the absolute (522; EAB 329). It is a sentimental or even romantic longing, not unlike that which drove Werther to suicide. But as Blessin has observed, in the *Lehrjahre* that longing is transferred onto Mignon so as to make possible Wilhelm’s recovery from what Schings calls “ein[e] hypochondrie-verdächtig[e] Innerlichkeit” [“a suspiciously hypochondriac innerness”] (58).<sup>194</sup> Mignon’s metamorphosis into her true form coincides with Wilhelm’s decision to separate from her, and his embrace of the Tower with her death.

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<sup>194</sup>Consistent with the Tower’s pathology of Mignon, the word romantic would become for Goethe

The wish of Mignon to stay with the ill-fated and guilt-ridden *Harfner*, Augustin, when viewed against the background of his psychological regimen and therapy, suggests that the religious preoccupation with the state of one's soul can be traced naturalistically, even reduced to, a pathological fixation with personal guilt. Similarly, it is her fear of moral failing, even more than her poor health, to which the increasing isolation of the *schöne Seele* can finally be traced. I have shown that this same theme was predominant, too, in Barbara's sacramental sacrifice of Mariane: which was intended to make Wilhelm feel guilty for his role in the actress' social isolation, poverty, and death. Had he succumbed to her accusation, it would have meant the end to his prospects for either personal development or a carefree and active life in the liberal social economy. In this respect, then, I concur emphatically with Schödlbauer's attribution of Goethe's own social-historical views on sacrifice to the Society of the Tower. I would point out too, however, a further mythological dimension. Just as Wilhelm-Orestes seeks refuge from Barbara's fury in the temple of Natalie-Athene, the bloodless, death-defying sacrifice of Mignon-Psyche in the *Saal der Vergangenheit*—complete with humanistic, life-affirming art and with the inscription, “Gedenke zu leben” [“Remember to live”]—puts an emphatic, albeit strained end to Wilhelm's fatalistic **soul-searching**. In this respect I must finally disagree with Schödlbauer, when he asserts, “Das [den Saal] schmückende Motto ‘Gedenke zu leben’ dient nicht der Verdrängung des ‘momento mori’ im Bewußtsein der Lebenden, sondern formuliert die Verheißung des Bundes so wie jenes das Wesen der natürlichen Existenz” (154). [“The motto decorating (the Hall), “Remember to live”, does not serve to repress the ‘momento mori’ in the consciousness of the living, but rather formulates the promise of the social contract, as well as the essence of a natural existence.”] Schödlbauer's strangely incongruent expression, “natürlich[e] Existenz”, itself betrays the artificiality of Mignon's upbeat funeral. After all, Natalie pulls Wilhelm away from Mignon's corpse, and he is not permitted to see it until it has been submitted to the medic's “schöne Kunst, einen Körper nicht allein zu balsamieren, sondern ihm auch

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synonymous with illness, and the (Apollonian) aesthetics of classicism with health: “Klassisch ist das Gesunde, romantisch das Kranke.” [“Classical is what is healthy, romantic what is sick.”] See: *Maximen und Reflexionen* (HA XII, 487).

ein lebendiges Ansehn zu erhalten” [“beautiful art, not only to embalm a body, but also to preserve a lifelike appearance”] (545; DWH).<sup>195</sup>

Blessin sees in the Tower’s treatment of Mignon’s corpse evidence of a modern current running through all of Goethe’s novels, but more especially after the fateful *Leiden des jungen Werther*: a causality that traces all supposedly miraculous and spiritual phenomena to their natural, i.e. material causes.<sup>196</sup> In spite of that, Blessin recognizes in Mignon the one figure in all of Goethe’s novels that resists complete reduction to naturalistic terms, discerning in her wholly modern exequies a fault line that delimits the otherwise universal claim of the Tower’s naturalism:

Es ist schon merkwürdig, wie die *Lehrjahre* Mignon auf diese doppelte Weise getrennt zur Ruhe kommen lassen: als Körper und als Seele.

Der Verewigung ihrer körperlichen Existenz steht die Verzeitlichung ihrer Seele gegenüber. Heilsgeschichte und Psychopathographie werden von Goethe am Ende auseinandergerückt und zu selbständigen Sphären ausdifferenziert. Beide behaupten sie ihre ganz eigenen Rechte und ihre je besondere Wahrheit (165).

[ It is strange, really, how the *Lehrjahre* lays Mignon to rest in this double manner: as body and as soul.

The eternalization of her bodily existence corresponds to the temporalization of her soul. The history of redemption and psychopathography are set apart by Goethe at the conclusion and each differentiated as independent spheres. Each assert its rights and its own special truth.]

Given Blessin’s attention to the decidedly modern, even materialistic nature of Goethe’s novels, it is little wonder that he devotes a lengthy chapter entirely to Mignon, who remains finally an enigma in view of Goethe’s (since Italy) invariably naturalistic

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<sup>195</sup>Not a few twentieth-century readers, including Schlechta and Edmunds, have objected to what they see as a disturbing, even grotesque concealment of death in Mignon’s exequies. Schlaffer, on the other hand, is still more troubled (as was Humboldt) by how little Wilhelm is disturbed by it all: “Wilhelm sogar, den [Mignon] liebt, denkt flüchtig nur an ihr Glück, vor allem aber an seine Bildung” [“Even Wilhelm, whom (Mignon) loves, considers only briefly her happiness, but most of all his self-cultivation”] (79). Robert Tobin even argues that “[b]y the end of the novel, Mignon is a standing reproach to Wilhelm.” See by the same: “The Medicinalization of Mignon”, in: *Goethes Mignon und ihre Schwestern: Interpretationen und Rezeption*, ed. Gerhart Hoffmeister (New York: Lang, 1993): 43-60 (56). But as we have seen, Wilhelm is largely immune to reproach. And Tobin’s own analysis shows how the medical diagnostics of the Tower reduces Mignon to pathological terms that make even Wilhelm’s passing concern for her education seem moot.

<sup>196</sup>See *Goethes Romane: Aufbruch in die Moderne*, pp. 164-190.

orientation. In this respect Goethe, author of the *Lehrjahre*, evaded being pinned down entirely to an organic materialism that nevertheless saturates his mature works and interest.

The Tower's bloodless *Opfer* [sacrifice] of Mignon—the process of embalming, after all, involved replacing the blood with a chemical preservative—finally reflects modern aversion to every trace of man's mortality. While Goethe did not dismiss altogether the reality of the soul, he tended to understand man's spiritual substance as his individual, literally **self-centered entelechy**. In that sense human dignity and beauty required an emphatic and decisive break with the soul of pre-Enlightenment Christianity, with its consciousness of personal guilt and its (Schiller: “verwünscht[es]” [cursed]) *Memento mori*. The psychological reduction of Augustin's guilt-complex to religious superstition and incest, itself the consequence of infatuation with his subjective ideal, is contrasted with the personal and formative freedom of the *schöne Seele* from guilt. As for Wilhelm, he decides at last to break ranks with Dionysian fatalism and guilt. This central, even definitive theme of the novel makes explicit a modern social and philosophical development, rooted in the Enlightenment, that rejects not only church authority, but likewise **any spiritual dimension that is unreconcilable to the guilt-free and autonomous New Adam of modern humanity**. Mignon-Psyche's role as *Bundesopfer* [covenant-sacrifice], that Schlödlbauer has recognized, signifies more than the end of violence in the natural condition; it likewise implies 1) the end of guilt incurred in personal relations that stand outside the public interest; and 2) the determined erasure of death. Both are only possible if the reality of the soul, rather than being **called into question**, is expunged altogether, as irrelevant, from modern consciousness. This is the reason why, as Blessin has recognized, Mignon's physical body is rendered imperishable, while her *psychē* is dissected and reduced to the concepts of materialist psychology in her uncle Marinelli's diagnostic narrative. By contrast, the tragedy of Mariane, preserved only in her letters, is excluded altogether from the otherwise exhaustive historiography and archive of the Tower: that, despite a supposed knowledge of Mariane's character, edits out of Wilhelm's encouraging *Lehrbrief* the (for her alone) tragic consequences of

their affair—even as that same affair retains its selective/personal significance in Wilhelm’s memory.

Mariane herself has no childhood to narrate in the formative sense of the Tower. This has to do not least of all with the fact that actors in the *Lehrjahre* live a perpetual childhood and charade, exemplified in the accomplished player (in multiple senses), Serlo. As for Wilhelm’s autobiography, it requires its supporting playmate and victim, Mariane. If Wilhelm truly is incapable of “any development of contact with any other human being,” as D.H. Lawrence insisted, this is not least of all because masters of humanity understand the naturally formative value of all relationships, especially the sexual (See Boyle 411). That is why Wilhelm **falls** in love only once. As the human *Meister* Goethe himself writes in the “Erfahrung und Leben” section of his *Vade mecum* for the human apprentice, *Maximen und Reflexionen*: “L’amour est un vrai recommenceur” (HA XII, 534). In other words, if one succumbs to nature as Eros, one painfully sacrifices the self one has worked so hard to cultivate and distinguish. Forfeit your self, return to “Go”, and maybe you’ve learned your lesson! The downfall of Mariane and Aurelie lay not least of all in their failure to recognize that romance in life is as on stage. One plays a temporary role and moves on. Hey, they were the professional actors. They should have recognized that Wilhelm and Lothario were just preening their personalities!

As Roberts suggests, Wilhelm’s theatric highpoint in the role of Hamlet effects his therapeutic release from an oedipal infatuation with a lost (aesthetic) paradise of his childhood. In a larger context, though, it is a cathartic cure for Wilhelm’s theatric fatalism and for the Hamlet-sized guilt complex that comes with it. Hamlet’s soul-searching fills him with such paralysing scruples as to make decisive action impossible. That Wilhelm’s healing process proves so painful even with the guidance of the Tower, follows from that fact that he is no Lothario. He stands closer to Werther; but Blessin points out that the diseased idealism that destroyed the protagonist of Goethe’s first novel is projected here onto Mignon: the soul that the *Lehrjahre*, as I have shown, portrays as just the diseased fruit of a guilt complex. It is the guilt that Augustin is too weak to throw off. In a similar way, the Christianity of the *schöne Seele*, who has an otherwise functional formative instinct—“es ist ein Trieb, der mich leitet” [“It is an instinct that guides me”]—develops all

too *conscientiously* (Natalie: “allzu *gewissenhaft*”).<sup>197</sup> Be that as it may, her desire to realize in herself her own ideal of human godliness corresponds in that respect to the humanism of the *Oheim*. The problem from the Tower’s higher perspective is that it is a **moral** ideal; her anxiety regarding the possibility of moral failure leads to her estrangement from society. In either case, the personal conscience that is not authorized by the modern social contract has pathological consequences. Goethe’s distaste for all of this economically and formatively useless moralizing underlies the sentence that he passes over the author of Christianity in *Maximen und Reflexionen*: “Daß Christus auf eine Hamletische Weise zugrunde ging, und schlimmer, weil er Menschen um sich berief, die er fallen ließ, da Hamlet bloß als Individuum perierte” [“That Christ went to his destruction in a Hamletian manner, and even worse, because he surrounded himself with men whom he abandoned, whereas Hamlet perished as an individual”] (HA XII, 375). If Jesus had a guilt-complex, fine; but he should have kept it to himself! In Goethe’s world you are saved by **faith**—by trusting, in other words, your own instinctive self-interest.

Jesus’s Biedermeier Pontius Pilate was frank enough, at least, not to omit the full consequences of the New Adam and Eden that the Society of the Tower represents in the *Lehrjahre*. Wilhelm’s vacation on Lago di Maggiore depends on a decision that he must make: love for and loyalty to Mariane and Mignon, on the one hand, and with it guilt for promises broken and relationships abandoned; and on the other hand, admission into the City of Modern Men (Schödlbauer: “Kreis der Begünstigten” or “circle of the fortunate”)—and with it the freedom to spend or invest the financial and personal capital that comes with belonging to the Good Fortune 500. Wilhelm has the Goethean good sense to choose the latter; he trades his personal conscience for his brand new, self-cleaning social conscience; and his crushing existential freedom for modern, lo-calorie liberty. Med school and Lake Maggiore, here he comes!

Mariane is the bloody victim who is sacrificed in the darkness during Mignon’s life-affirming funeral. The nice thing about this modern conscience is that, living constantly for the future, past mistakes are left in the past. Wilhelm’s refusal to drink

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<sup>197</sup>For the first quote see p. 420; for the second, p. 518 (my emphasis).

Barbara's sacramental champagne, like the sentimental tears he sheds over Mariane's letters, marks the closure of their traumatically severed affair and its entrance into the selective archive of his biography: to be retrieved as personal memory and interesting story over a power lunch or routine surgical procedure. Moreover, another nice thing about productive, outcome-oriented activity, is that it keeps one's mind too occupied to dwell on injuries to others. That was the problem with Wilhelm's idealism, which had been modeled on and nursed by the theater; its moral idealism tended toward tragedy. In the prosaic world of the *Lehrjahre*, moral responsibility is strictly circumscribed to exclude all claims that do not enjoy the sanction of the liberal social economy. The novel's happy end depends on Wilhelm's agreement to live and judge only by the terms of its social contract. And should Wilhelm have nightmares or other emotional disorders arising from a guilt that just won't keep quiet, there is always the occupational psychotherapy of his modern country cleric. It didn't work for Augustin. But he belonged to another age!

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