

## THE MARRIAGE OF ARTIST NOVEL AND BILDUNGSROMAN: GOETHE'S *WILHELM MEISTER*, A PARADIGM IN DISGUISE

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### ABSTRACT

Goethe described the fruitful years from 1794, when he found Schiller's friendship and completed *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, in metaphors of creativity, insight and abundance: 'ein neuer Frühling' and 'ein unaufhaltsames Fortschreiten philosophischer Ausbildung und ästhetischer Tätigkeit'. Yet since the mid-twentieth century what has been called Goethe's 'prototypischer Bildungsroman' and its central concept have come under attack. The more the novel's structure and the symbolism of the hero's relationships to all other characters were disregarded, the more Wilhelm's identity became ambiguous.

Since the issue of genre is a major key to understanding the novel, Goethe's poetological and morphological principles are examined to make sense of the 'Masken' the author employs both to hide and to reveal Wilhelm's identity as a creative and self-reflexive poet. The first part of the 'Lehrbrief,' which deals with art and the artist as well as the mature Wilhelm's inheritance of his grandfather's art collection, receive focused attention. The hero's healing process from personal trauma, and his ultimate discovery of the solid foundation for his 'produktive Einbildungskraft' are tied to his poetic 'Doppelgänger', Mignon and the Harpist, and further to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the Tower, the picture of the sick prince, and to Natalie. The new interpretation of these interconnections reveals that with this novel Goethe produced nothing less than the paradigmatic 'Bildungsroman eines Dichters'. In the colourful figures that enter into or leave the hero's life, Goethe symbolises the increasingly demanding challenges his Wilhelm Meister has to confront and comprehend in order to master his vibrant imagination.

### APPROACHES TO *WILHELM MEISTER*

During the last fifty years, a scholarly debate has revolved around the previously canonical claim that *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* is a 'Bildungsroman'.<sup>1</sup> While Goethe's novel continues to enjoy highest appreciation and is regarded as the prototype for its genre, the genre, like the novel itself, has become a battleground of conflicting theories and interpretations. Related categorisations of this novel, e.g. as a partial 'Roman des Glücks',<sup>2</sup> or as the

<sup>1</sup> Goethe does not use the term, although 'Bildung' is a central concept for him. See Todd Kontje, *The German Bildungsroman: History of a National Genre*, Columbia, SC 1993, for a discussion of the 'Beginnings of the Bildungsroman Theory', and notes 9 and 36, below.

<sup>2</sup> Hans-Jürgen Schings, editor's introduction in Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre. Ein Roman. Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens*, ed. Karl Richter et al., Munich 1985ff., *Münchener Ausgabe* (MA), V. Schings qualifies this designation even further, see p. 642.

Goethean combination of – and transition between –‘anthropologischer’ and ‘Transzendentalroman’,<sup>3</sup> enlarged the framework of the discussion. Post-structuralism, on the other hand, which replaced the central concept of ‘Bildung’ with that of discursive socialisation processes, has distracted from, rather than resolved, the issue of its paradigmatic character.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, elements of what would constitute an ‘anti-Bildungsroman’ have been attributed to this Goethean work. Some scholars have theorised that dilettantism flourishes in it,<sup>5</sup> that picaresque or subversive,<sup>6</sup> destructive or anti-developmental<sup>7</sup> features prevail. As interesting as individual observations of this type might be, they have not succeeded in shedding light either on the novel’s structure, major theme and the significance of its ending or on its enigmatic characters and events. Emphasising the supposedly incongruous features of the work without pursuing leads toward understanding the novel’s structure and symbolism as a totality only increases the confusion.

Equally disturbing for the novel’s reception is the fact that the hero’s qualifications and ultimate identity as well as the direction and purpose of his journey have, indeed, appeared vague or at least ambiguous to many readers. The question of what Wilhelm did achieve factually and visibly at the end of his ‘apprenticeship’ to deserve a ‘Königreich’ (610) and the union with Natalie, the noblest symbolic woman figure in the novel, remains an unanswered puzzle.<sup>8</sup>

The difficulties in comprehending and explaining this book thus reach far beyond the predicament of scholars attempting to pigeonhole it into a theoretical category. Although *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* is one of the most frequently analysed works of Goethe’s oeuvre, it must be conceded that

<sup>3</sup> Manfred Engel, *Der Roman der Goethezeit*, I, Stuttgart 1993. He in addition affirms *Lehrjahre* as a ‘symbolischer Bildungsroman’ and speaks of a ‘Symbolik der Bildung’ (see p. 279, fn. 103, and pp. 316ff.).

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Kittler, ‘Über die Sozialisation Wilhelm Meisters’ in Gerhard Kaiser and F. K., *Dichtung als Sozialisationsspiel: Studien zu Goethe und Gottfried Keller*, Göttingen 1978.

<sup>5</sup> Ill-Sun Joo, *Goethes Dilettantismus-Kritik: Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre im Lichte einer ästhetischen Kategorie der Moderne*, Frankfurt a.M. 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Hans Eichner, ‘Zur Deutung von “Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahren”’, *JbFDH* 1966, 195. John Blair, *Tracing Subversive Currents in Goethe’s ‘Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship’*, Columbus, SC 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Schlechta, *Goethes Wilhelm Meister*, Frankfurt a.M. 1953; Friedrike Eigler, ‘Wer hat “Wilhelm Schüler” zum “Wilhelm Meister” gebildet? *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* und die Aussparungen einer hermeneutischen Verstehens- und Bildungspraxis’, *GoetheYb*, 3 (1986), 93–119; Jochen Hörisch, *Gott, Geld und Glück: Zur Logik der Liebe in den Bildungsromanen Goethes, Kellers und Thomas Manns*, Frankfurt a.M. 1983; Klaus-Dieter Sorg, *Gebrochene Teleologie: Studien zum Bildungsroman von Goethe bis Thomas Mann*, Heidelberg 1983. Heinz Schlaffer even calls this novel a ‘Zerstörungsroman’ – see ‘Exoterik und Esoterik in Goethes Romanen’, *GoetheJb*, 95 (1978), 212–26, here 222. For Marc Redfield the ‘Bildungsroman’ is a ‘pseudo genre’, an ideological phantom. For him it does not and cannot exist – see *Phantom Formations. Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman*, Ithaca, NY 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Page references in the text to *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* are to the *Hamburger Ausgabe* (HA), VII, ed. Erich Trunz, 10th edn, Munich 1981. Other volumes of this edition are indicated by Roman numerals.

fundamental and essential questions either have not been addressed or have received inadequate or confusing answers when the novel is appreciated for what it is: a highly structured artistic whole – intuitively and consciously composed – in which the diverse parts have been meaningfully integrated.<sup>9</sup> This claim of structured, almost ‘organismic’ integration also pertains to the novel’s seemingly extraneous sixth book, the ‘*Bekenntnisse einer schönen Seele*’.

To start with fundamentals it might be helpful to ask questions such as the following: why do the highly cultured aristocratic members of the Tower Society select a supposedly ‘passive’ merchant’s son, Wilhelm, in order to support, guide and initiate him into their secret order? Do Jarno, the Abbé and Lothario need the novel’s hero as much as he needs them? Is his induction and integration poetologically and even epistemologically necessary for the novel’s range and direction? What specific talent does Wilhelm – and he alone – possess in this work so that, when properly trained and integrated into other developed capacities, this talent can be exercised in a masterly manner and prove beneficial and productive? Why does it take so many detours for Wilhelm to reach his goal, and are they all necessary? Might Goethe himself, during the more than twenty years<sup>10</sup> of conceiving, writing, rethinking and revising the novel, have found it crucial to explore such a dynamic gift, because it involves the ‘Mittelpunkt und die Base seiner Existenz’?<sup>11</sup> After all, in a poem entitled ‘*Meine Göttin*’ (1780 – I, 144) Goethe expresses his unequivocal predilection for this creative human faculty of the imagination, allegorising it into a divinity.

Readers have asked why Wilhelm’s beloved and intentionally gender-ambiguous Mignon, who initially displays all the external features of the marionettes of his childhood, metamorphoses rather abruptly from an acrobat to a blindfolded dancer to become his ‘*Liebling*’, a child of the heart and a penultimate quasi-angelic figure. If she is the predecessor of and shares many characteristics with the genius-figures Knabe Lenker and Euphorien of *Faust II*, and Faust-Plutus calls Knabe Lenker, who defines himself as ‘*Poesie*’, ‘*Mein lieber Sohn*’ and states ‘*Bist Geist von meinem*

<sup>9</sup> Even a modest attempt to trace the history of scholarship dealing with Goethe’s *Lehrjahre* and the genre ‘*Bildungsroman*’ would exceed the space limitations of this article. Major studies, critical assessments and/or annotated bibliographies are to be found e.g. in: Lothar Köhn, ‘*Entwicklungs- und Bildungsroman. Ein Forschungsbericht*’, *DVjs*, 42 (1968), 427ff. and 590ff.; Martin Swales, *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse*, Princeton 1978; Dennis F. Mahoney, *Der Roman der Goethezeit (1774–1829)*, Stuttgart 1988; Jürgen Jacobs and Markus Krause, *Der deutsche Bildungsroman: Gattungsgeschichte vom 18. bis 20. Jahrhundert*, Munich 1989; Rolf Selbmann, *Der deutsche Bildungsroman*, 2nd edn, Stuttgart 1994. See also note 1, above.

<sup>10</sup> Based on comparative textual evidence, I agree with Hanna Fischer-Lamberg’s assessment and conviction that the very beginnings of the fragment of *Theatralische Sendung* must have originated in the early 1770s, contemporaneously with ‘*Urfaust*’ – see *Der junge Goethe*, V, Berlin 1973, p. 513.

<sup>11</sup> ‘*Selbstschilderung (I)*’, HA X, 529.

Geiste' (III, verses 5573, 5629, 5623), what does that imply for the novel's protagonist, Wilhelm Meister, and his own poetic genius-child?<sup>12</sup>

When fundamental questions like these about a work of abundantly rich substance, high artistic merit, and extraordinary literary consequence, such as Goethe's *Lehrjahre*, remain unresolved by the application of conventional methods, one has no choice but to change the approach and look for more comprehensive and rigorous ways of finding the answers. Since Goethe's lifelong preoccupation with artistic form and complex natural structures is characteristic for the holistic point of view that informs his poetic as well as scientific endeavours, a concentrated scholarly approach necessitates making constant connections between 'das Ganze und die Glieder' of this complex masterwork. The narrator's achievement of overarching wholeness is not only evidenced by the structural coherence of all its parts, by leitmotifs and key symbols interwoven in the fabric of the novel; it is also manifest in his use of 'wiederholte Spiegelungen', analogies, doubles, irony, projections and the 'antwortende Gegenbilder' which surround and define the hero's quest. These epic features do not operate merely as manipulative narrative stratagems, but rather constitute or contribute to the multiple layers of insight and meaning it contains. If, according to Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'nur das verständlich ist, was wirklich eine vollkommene Einheit von Sinn darstellt', and if it should be possible to find such a perfect unity of sense in Goethe's *Lehrjahre*, then a comprehensive approach includes hermeneutics requiring repeated close textual reading, and knowledge of Goethe's morphology and poetology.<sup>13</sup>

Another fruitful method for the interpretation of the novel lies in taking Goethe's statements about his fictional protagonist seriously, even verbatim. 'Meister', the narrator stated among other pronouncements,

müsse nothwendig so gärend, schwankend und biegsam erscheinen, damit die anderen Charaktere sich an und um ihn entfalten könnten [...]. Er sei wie eine Stange, an der sich der zarte Epheu hinauf Franke. Die [Mme. de] Staël habe alle seine, Goethes, Productionen abgerissen und isolirt betrachtet, ohne Ahnung ihres inneren Zusammenhangs, ihrer Genesis.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Wilhelm Emrich recognised that Goethe's genius figures inhabit the world of the poet. In concentrating on the figures of Faust (in *Faust II*, Acts I–III) and Wilhelm (in *Theatralische Sendung*), Emrich observes astutely that the child-genius figures 'haben kein "Gewicht" im realen, organischen Sinne. Sie sind Halbwesen, die erst "werden" müssen'. Goethe's "'hermaphroditische[...]" Wesen sind Frühformen des Geistes, radikal und unbedingt ins Ideelle spielende "Geister" [...]. Nie sind es biologisch vollentwickelte, ihre Geschlechtlichkeit widernatürlich ableugnende Entartungen' (*Die Symbolik von Faust II*, 3rd edn, Frankfurt a.M./Bonn 1964, pp. 253, 174).

<sup>13</sup> *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 3rd edn, Tübingen 1972, pp. 277f.

<sup>14</sup> Conversation with Friedrich v. Müller, 29 May 1814, in Gerhard Gräf, *Goethe über seine Dichtungen*, Frankfurt a.M. 1901–14, II, Part I, p. 930.

The active hero's central and essential role for every aspect of the work therefore cannot be overemphasised.<sup>15</sup> All other figures either derive their significance from Wilhelm's experiences, his sufferings, thinking, and creative processes, or they represent – much more comprehensively than he – universal phenomena. Goethe, for example, regarded 'Vernunft' and 'Verstand' as such universals, of which the hero becomes increasingly cognisant and in which he partakes.<sup>16</sup> Novalis encapsulated this poetic procedure, which is executed by many authors during the 'Goethezeit', in the phrase 'die Verteilung Einer Individualität auf mehrere Personen'.<sup>17</sup>

Finally and above all, the reason for Wilhelm's vacillation has to be explored: his wavering, roving and roaming about, especially in the first five books. Furthermore, if we assume that Wilhelm 'Meister' has been conceived as an intentional opposite and counterpart to Faust's overall decisiveness, then there is sense in those detours which ultimately lead to his goals. Goethe's epic hero, although starting Werther-like, develops his talents and charts his own unmistakable path through two novels, finishing each one with great gains in insight and constructive accomplishments. The often criticised so-called character 'weakness' of the protagonist produces one of the most useful keys to unlocking the enigma of his identity. It adds essentially to the understanding and appreciation of *Lehrjahre* as an 'artist's bildungsroman'. (The terms 'artist' and 'poet' will be used interchangeably here just as 'Dichtung' is called 'Kunst' by Goethe and by many contemporary and later authors of artist novels and novellas.<sup>18</sup>)

#### THE STRUCTURAL RELATIONSHIP OF BOOKS ONE AND TWO TO BOOKS SEVEN AND EIGHT

Wilhelm's innermost, largely hidden feelings of hope and despair are articulated in some of the most beautiful lyrics of the German language by his singing companions, Mignon and the Harpist. The latter, changing from old bard to deranged beggar to restored youth to suicide, adapts, like Mignon, his age, shape and songs according to the transformations of Wilhelm's two most painful memories. These are the traumatic loss at age

<sup>15</sup> Responding to Goethe's high praise of Körner's interpretation of the novel and feeling the need to criticise the latter's characterisation of Wilhelm as the 'eigentliche[...] Held des Romans', Schiller made a rather misleading statement which has had a negative effect on the reception of the novel. He wrote: 'Meister ist zwar die nothwendigste, aber nicht die wichtigste Person; [...] An ihm und um ihn geschieht alles, aber nicht eigentlich *seinetwegen*' (Letter to Goethe, 28 November 1796, Gräf I, 2, 871 (emphasis in the text)). Schiller's more insightful portrayals of Wilhelm largely contradict the above, see e.g. his letters of 5 and 8 July 1796, Gräf I, 2, 824ff. and 831ff.

<sup>16</sup> 'Der Verständige regiert nicht, aber der Verstand; nicht der Vernünftige, sondern die Vernunft', *Maximen und Reflexionen* 1055, HA XII, 514.

<sup>17</sup> Paralipomenon, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, in Novalis, *Schriften: Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, ed. Paul Kluckhohn and Richard Samuel, Stuttgart 1960ff., I, p. 346.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Novalis, Hölderlin, Eichendorff, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Hesse, Thomas Mann.

twenty-two of his first love, the actress Mariane, and, twelve to thirteen years earlier, the parallel loss of the marionette theatre. For the ten-year-old boy the surprise present's sudden disappearance, after it had made that Christmas Eve magical and uniquely memorable, meant nothing less than a 'verlorne Liebe' (17). The creatively 'adopted' Mignon in Book Two, reminding him of both, of the woman *Maria-ne* as well as of childhood's 'little Mary-figures' (= ital.: 'marionettes'), is deemed to be 'zwölf bis dreizehn Jahre' (98). Mignon's age thus symbolically links these two decisive events. They provide the cornerstones of essential structural and emotional elements for Wilhelm's 'Belebung der Vergangenheit' and thus the creation of Mignon and the Harpist – also in Book Two – on the stage of his imagination.

If Mignon's and the Harpist's poetic 'existences' are so existentially important for the hero, one wonders why both reach their peak and end their lives in the Uncle's castle under the purview of Natalie and the Tower Society. Has Wilhelm in Book Eight attained a plateau which means that he no longer needs his two emotional and poetic 'Doppelgänger'? The question also arises as to when he becomes fully conscious of the meaning and consequence of these two figures – whom he had created semi-consciously – and what Mignon's obsequies in the castle's 'Saal der Vergangenheit' (574) signify. This final and supremely artistic transformation of Mignon's 'life-like' dead body can only occur with the help of the Tower and its principal members, who are now Wilhelm's permanent friends and strengths, his collective identity. 'Mastering' one's painful past, distancing even the deepest emotions and thereby 'objectifying' one's poetic visions into a work of manifest art, also implies a sacrifice of the '*Liebings-Gestalt*' for the poet-creator. Not surprisingly, it is accompanied by a deep-felt sadness of separation which Wilhelm experiences during this 'Feierlichkeit', in which 'das Wunder der Kunst und Sorgfalt' is praised by the Abbé (576f.).<sup>19</sup>

Wilhelm had earlier observed that one could name the 'Saal der Vergangenheit', in which this artistic transformation occurs, 'ebensogut den Saal der Gegenwart und Zukunft' (541). The narrator confirms and substantiates Wilhelm's observations by stating that 'everyone' entering it, seeing the 'reinen architektonischen Verhältnisse', the whole and the parts of this 'zusammentreffende Kunst', would experience for the first time, 'was der Mensch sei und was er sein könne' (540f.). Great art thus not only reflects human reality but transcends particular historical periods. It deals with archetypal constellations and perennial truths, and envisions possibilities of the future. Mignon's enduring relevance for Wilhelm, as a unique

<sup>19</sup> 'Liebling' – 'favourite', 'darling' with the attribute of daintiness – corresponds to the French name Mignon in eighteenth-century usage (Fritz Lachmann, 'Goethes Mignon. Entstehung, Name, Gestaltung', *GRM*, 15 (1927), 100–116, see 103f.).

poetic creation, reaches its artistic culmination in these exquisite and long-lasting surroundings.

With features such as these assuming pivotal functions in the novel, one cannot avoid asking why Goethe specifically introduces essential works of art, such as Wilhelm's favourite picture of the 'sick prince', into the revised version, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. Here this particular painting plays an important role, not only in conjunction with Wilhelm's encounter with the first emissary from the likewise newly incorporated Tower Society, but it also assumes structural and symbolic significance throughout the novel as the author devises a new narrative plan for his poet-hero's 'Bildungsroman'. The grandfather's art collection was sold during Wilhelm's childhood and replaced by the marionette theatre. Then, and even in early manhood (cf. Book 1, chapter 17), when the inexperienced questor figure proved incapable of seeing more than his emotions of empathy and loss reflected in the picture of the 'kranke Königssohn', artistic form was not yet perceived as important. At the end of the novel, the mature Wilhelm rediscovers these treasures because he is finally able to recognise and appreciate their artistic value. He has thus truly 'earned' them as his proper inheritance.<sup>20</sup> This art collection is integrated into the Uncle's 'exemplary' castle. It was built by Italian architects and is filled with more artistic masterworks. Natalie now owns and inspires it.

It seems logical in view of these thematic, symbolic and structural features to revisit the question of genre: Should the items just mentioned not properly belong in the first version of the book, entitled *Wilhelm Meisters theatralische Sendung*, which according to the traditional view is Goethe's 'only' artist novel? Since they are absent there, and the *Lehrjahre*, in contrast, provides far superior documentary evidence for this claim, a re-evaluation seems in order. Likewise it must be observed that Wilhelm's productive creativity, his extensive critical analyses of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, his successful dramaturgy, role-playing and direction of theatrical performances become more solidly founded in the revision. They are delineated with greater concentration and succinctness. The last three books emphasise the hero's further learning experiences through Italian architecture, appreciation of choral music as performed in the 'Saal der Vergangenheit', and his introduction to the Uncle's world view of self-determination, interest in natural history and his 'Naturalienkabinett' (409). All this and Wilhelm's participation in the Tower members' very specific talents and realms of expertise, complementing his creative imagination, thus point to the fact that the hitherto vaguely defined *Bildungsroman* is concerned with much – much – more than what has been regarded as and reduced to 'eine *allgemeine Bildung*'.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Faust: 'Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern hast,/Erwirb es, um es zu besitzen', *Faust I*, vs. 682f.

## ARTISTIC 'BILDUNG' AS DEPICTED ON THE 'REAL-' AND 'BEDEUTUNGSEBENE' OF THE NOVEL

Wilhelm's exciting encounters and quasi-picaresque adventures, especially in the first five books of the novel, possess at first glance the typical ingredients of similar contemporaneous prose fiction of high quality. They are brimming with varied and generally realistic representations of eighteenth-century life. When read merely as mimetic fiction, no probing thought as to higher or deeper levels of significance is required. The author points this out when he speaks of an audience of the 'ändern [Leser]'.<sup>21</sup> If we, however, insist on answers to the legitimate questions posed above, and if we aim for non-contradictory results, it will help to take Goethe's life and letters, the documents of his other literary and scientific pursuits, his aesthetic and epistemological insights into account when interpreting the novel. Those factual documents serve as fitting tools and superior pathfinders. In analysing the novel's themes, figures and highly symmetrical artistic structures, we discover that Goethe used a broad range of experience, familiarity with the arts and their history, as well as his epistemological and psychological insights, as part of the building blocks that constitute the rich substance and life of the novel.

Last but not least, justice has to be done to the intriguing network of symbols covering figures, objects, constellations, and actions. These symbols, with their multi-dimensional layers of meaning, turn out to be as challenging in their own intricacies and comprehensiveness as those found in *Faust II*. Goethe himself repeatedly emphasised, when speaking about *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* and his wished-for readership, 'dass der ganze Roman durchaus symbolisch sei, dass hinter den vorgeschobenen Personen durchaus etwas *Allgemeines, Höheres* verborgen liege'.<sup>22</sup>

In spite of the disguises and masks Goethe creates for his ironically yet lovingly portrayed fictional hero, the following facts are unmistakably obvious. Even after he has temporarily renounced his poetic dreams, recognised the imitative nature and the insufficiencies of his early dramatic works, and sacrificed many of them to the fire upon Mariane's loss, Wilhelm is depicted on the 'Realebene' in the *Lehrjahre* as writing poems, a prologue for the Prince and 'ein ganzes Schauspiel mit allen seinen Akten, Szenen, Charakteren und Verwicklungen' (123f.). Newly added to the *Lehrjahre* is the description and far-reaching impact of a longer poem of Wilhelm's, 'Der Jüngling am Scheidewege'. While Jarno correctly observes

<sup>21</sup> 'Ändern [Lesern] mag das gezeichnete Leben als Leben genügen.' For context and reference see the end of the next note, below.

<sup>22</sup> Conversation with Kanzler v. Müller, 22 January 1821, Gräf I, 2, 953. Emphasis in the text. Cf. also: 'Den anscheinenden Geringfügigkeiten des "Wilhelm Meister" liegt immer etwas Höheres zum Grunde, und es kommt bloß darauf an, dass man Augen, Weltkenntniß [sic] und Uebersicht genug besitze, um im Kleinen das Grössere wahrzunehmen. Ändern mag das gezeichnete Leben als Leben genügen' (Conversations with Eckermann, 25 December 1825, Gräf I, 2, 1019).

that Wilhelm has no talent to become a good actor on the stage, none of his later poetic productions in the novel are denigrated. As Wilhelm outgrows his early attempts, the necessary learning phases and exploratory stages in the 'apprenticeship' of practising his talents, and strives towards 'Meisterschaft', the term 'dilettante' certainly no longer applies to him, if ever it rightfully did. According to Goethe's definition, the dilettante lacks form consciousness, 'scheut allemal das Gründliche, überspringt die Erlernung notwendiger Kenntnisse [und ...] verwechselt die Kunst mit dem Stoff'.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, it is the acquaintance with Shakespeare's works, already in Book Three, that fosters the resolve in Wilhelm, 'in der *wirklichen Welt* schnellere Fortschritte vorwärts zu tun' and 'aus dem großen Meere der *wahren Natur* wenige Becher zu schöpfen' (192 – emphasis added).

The more complex manifestations of the artist theme and Wilhelm's poetic creativity, however, reveal themselves to their full extent only in the symbolic language, figural and structural constellations, and in the novel's inherent poetology. In them Goethe discovers the most appropriate artistic means of adequately representing and fulfilling his objectives.<sup>24</sup> To the consternation of his critics, even after the novel's revision between 1794 and 1796, Goethe continues to bestow on his hero the last name and designation 'Meister' – which is 'negated by dilettantism'<sup>25</sup> – and the first name of his poetic paragon, William Shakespeare, in reference to whom he had expressly called Wilhelm his own 'geliebte[s] dramatische[s] Ebenbild'.<sup>26</sup> Would he have done this if his epic protagonist, who for a while identifies with the melancholic drama prince Hamlet and sings about his own supposedly tragic fate in the songs of his 'Doppelgänger', was not meant to be, or had ceased to be, a budding poet?

The narrator endows Wilhelm not only with high intelligence, warm-hearted generosity, amiability and genuine morality and compassion, but with one leading talent which is so predominant that we must consider Wilhelm the symbolic personification of it. This gift, which rules Wilhelm's life, is the vigour and inventiveness of the creative imagination. From his own experience Goethe knew that it has the potential of becoming either regressive and destructive or life-enhancing as one of mankind's greatest

<sup>23</sup> 'Schriften zur Literatur': 'Über den Dilettantismus', *Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Gespräche* (GA), ed. Ernst Beutler, Zürich 1948ff., XIV, p. 733. In Book Five the protagonist is clearly juxtaposed as 'Künstler' to the two 'Liebhaber' associated with Serlo's theatre. The author explicitly states that as dramaturge and director of *Hamlet* Wilhelm wanted 'alles aus den *Begriffen* [...] entwickeln, [...] *die Kunst in einem Zusammenhang behandelt* haben' and 'ausgesprochene *Regeln festsetzen*' (273 – emphasis added). That does not exactly characterise a dilettante!

<sup>24</sup> For an analysis of the four different levels on which Goethe portrays Wilhelm's relationship to his 'Doppelgänger' and his/their songs see Hellmut Ammerlahn, 'Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*: An Apprenticeship toward the Mastery of Exactly What?', *Colloquia Germanica*, 30/2 (1997), 99–119.

<sup>25</sup> Riemer in July 1810 reports Goethe as saying: 'Der Dilettantismus negiert den Meister', GA XXII, 597.

<sup>26</sup> Letter to Charlotte von Stein, 24 June 1782, Gräf I, 2, 712.

inner endowments. While for the titanic figure of Faust the desire to know, to strive, and to accomplish is all too obvious and depicted as extraordinary, Goethe to a large extent hides Wilhelm's talent on the realistic surface level, but reveals it indirectly through the novel's elaborate symbolism on the 'Bedeutungsebene' of the novel. However, there also exist several direct statements and carefully phrased allusions to the hero's active imagination. Its repercussions pervade the *Lehrjahre* from beginning to end.

To give but a few examples: Wilhelm's desire and love for the actress Mariane rose aloft 'auf den Flügeln der Einbildungskraft' (14). Misled by deceptive outer appearances and by his exaggerated fantasies, Wilhelm suspects Mariane of disloyalty. This causes him to abandon his first love, resulting in a physical illness of 'einige Jahre' (76) and an almost unending grief, as is clearly demonstrated in words and actions reaching into Books Five<sup>27</sup> and Seven.<sup>28</sup> Love, memory, and imagination, however, also save Wilhelm's life. He is able to create soothing songs for his aching heart and give them shape and voice in the figures of Mignon and the Harpist, who initially become his 'Schutzgeist[er]' and 'wunderbare[...] Familie' (129, 187).

Not only does Wilhelm lecture his friend Werner about what he considers a poet's ideals and tasks, he also professes to Melina's wandering troupe of actors his experiences with the 'innern Reichtum' bequeathed by nature to the artist, and he speaks of the profound 'Innigkeit' the artist must maintain in order to produce something 'Vollkommenes' (212f.). Wilhelm then states:

[...] es ist mit den Talenten wie mit der Tugend: man muß sie um ihrer selbst willen lieben oder sie ganz aufgeben. Und doch werden sie beide nicht anders erkannt und belohnt, als wenn man sie, *gleich einem gefährlichen Geheimnis, im Verborgenen üben kann.* (213 – emphasis added)

An almost identical passage appears in *Wilhelm Meisters theatralische Sendung*<sup>29</sup> where Wilhelm is unequivocally identified as a poet. Unless one would want to claim a contradiction between Wilhelm's statement and the rather obvious activities associated there with his talent and goals, this statement refers, as it does in the revised novel, first and foremost to

<sup>27</sup> Wilhelm pleads with Philine assuming that her secret visitor is Mariane: 'Es ist meine Mariane! Sie, nach der ich mich alle Tage meines Lebens gesehnt habe, sie, die mir noch immer statt aller andern Weiber in der Welt ist! [...] Sagen Sie ihr, [...] daß der Mensch hier ist, der seine erste Liebe und das ganze Glück seiner Jugend an sie knüpfte' (338).

<sup>28</sup> Learning about Mariane's death from old Barbara, Wilhelm speaks about his 'Schmerzen über ihren unersetzlichen Verlust' (473). His guilt is assuaged by her forgiveness and by her gift to him: The name of their son 'Felix' in Latin suggests felicity or good fortune. Felix symbolises Wilhelm's happy future resulting from increasing closeness to nature and the acceptance of the laws of recognisable reality.

<sup>29</sup> Nach der Schultheß'schen Abschrift, ed. Harry Maync, Stuttgart 1911 (TS in the text), pp. 339f.

Wilhelm's secret songs of his heart<sup>30</sup> and the creation of his 'Doppelgänger', Mignon and the Harpist, who sing them. Alluding not very secretly to the 'offenbares Geheimnis' of his own (and his narrator's) artistry, Wilhelm had told Werner in the *Sendung*, when asked where his poetic figures originated:

Woher? Aus meiner *Einbildung*, die wie ein *lebendiges Rüsthaus* von *Puppen* und *Schattenbildern* war, die sich immer durch einander bewegten. [...] Was in *früheren Zeiten* bloß Puppe, Theater, Maske gewesen war, wurde nun mit einem *sanften Geiste* angehaucht, die *Gestalten wurden schöner, reizender*, und du kannst denken, daß es der *Geist der Liebe* war, der hier auch seine *belebende Kraft* zeigte. [...] Ich fing nun an mich selbst zu fühlen, mir *Mährchen* [*sic*] *über mich selbst* zu erzählen, und nun *ging es damit in's weite Land*.<sup>31</sup>

FROM THE 'KÜNSTLERROMAN' OF THE *THEATRALISCHE SENDUNG* TO THE  
'KÜNSTLER-BILDUNGSROMAN' OF THE *LEHRJAHRE*

While the first half of *Lehrjahre* makes use of the original fragment, and Wilhelm's inner and outer adventures there qualify him as a hero for an artist novel, the author became dissatisfied with the product in more than one respect. Not only did the original 'Theaterroman' get shortened by one third in the revision of 1794–6,<sup>32</sup> but Goethe also abolished the leading concept of his hero as an actor and the founder of a national theatre. And he did this not just for the historical reason that the idea of a national theatre as a unifying force for an as yet non-existent nation had become obsolete by then. Pursuing the question of what makes art and literature great, Goethe studied their premises and history particularly during what he calls his own 'Lehrjahre' and 'Lehre' in one of the most influential periods of his life, the Italian journey of 1786–8.<sup>33</sup> There he intensified his own search for a more solid basis than self-absorbed subjectivity could provide for his literary discoveries and productivity. He indefatigably pursued scientific, historical, and anthropological studies to acquire the knowledge which must complement the inner world of creativity. For the revised novel this requires that the hero likewise be transformed by what his author has

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Goethe's statement in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* that 'meine Gedichte mir noch ans Herz geknüpft waren, und nur selten über die Lippen kamen', except in the 'Seelen- und Geistesverein' of his closest friends (HA X, 34).

<sup>31</sup> TS 85f (emphasis added). Being too direct and obvious, this passage is eclipsed in the *Lehrjahre*. For a veiled and yet revealing confession of other similar methods used in the composition of his novel see Goethe's letter to Schiller, 9 July 1796, Gräf I, 2, 836f. There his practices of understatement and disguise are 'excused' as 'realistische[r] Tic' and 'muthwillig[e] [...] Additionsfehler'.

<sup>32</sup> Letter to Schiller, 18 June 1795, Gräf I, 2, 774.

<sup>33</sup> Informing his friends in Weimar about extending his Italian studies for another six months, Goethe uses the revealing wording: 'Ich kann jetzt nicht aus der *Lehre* laufen' (emphasis added). He explains the major benefit: 'Die Kunst wird mir wie eine zweite Natur [...]', *Italienische Reise*, 'Korrespondenz', 11 August 1787, HA XI, 382f.

experienced and learned. Referring to “Wilhelm Meister” und [...] dessen Fortsetzung’, Goethe writes in one of his Italian letters:

Unter diesem Himmel möchte sie wohl möglich sein, vielleicht läßt sich von dieser Himmelsluft den letzten Büchern etwas mitteilen. Möge meine Existenz sich dazu genugsam entwickeln, der Stengel mehr in die Länge rücken und die Blumen reicher und schöner hervorbrechen. Gewiß, es wäre besser, ich käme gar nicht wieder, wenn ich nicht wiedergeboren zurückkommen kann.<sup>34</sup>

Without using morphological metaphors for this artistic ‘Wiedergeburt’, another letter says it in most direct terms: ‘Ich habe Gelegenheit gehabt, über mich selbst und andre, über Welt und Geschichte viel nachzudenken [...]. Zuletzt wird alles im “Wilhelm” gefaßt und geschlossen.’<sup>35</sup>

It is during and after the Italian journey that Goethe discovered basic structures and ideas of what Wilhelm Dilthey would take from him and define as the ‘typische[.] Form’ of the ‘Bildungsroman’.<sup>36</sup> The experiences and insights led to the ‘Umgestaltung’ of the original ‘Künstler-’ and ‘Theaterroman’ of the *Theatralische Sendung* into the ‘Künstler-Bildungsroman’ of *Lehrjahre*. The necessary revisions, a ‘Steigerung’ in the artistic sense, are particularly obvious – and disconcerting for many readers – in regard to Wilhelm’s ‘Doppelgänger’, Mignon and the Harpist. The question as to why they must undergo such drastic transformations leading eventually to their deaths and, in Mignon’s case, to her ‘Kunstwerdung’, can be analysed most meaningfully in the context of the new paradigm created by Goethe.

Helpful as Mignon and the Harpist are initially, eventually it dawns on Wilhelm that the exclusively subjective phase of an unregulated imagination is problematic and has to be changed and ‘corrected’. According to Goethe’s own experiences, the imagination can become dangerous if it roams wildly in the realm of hopes and fears, in the traumatic past or in an idealised never-never-land. It can become fatal if it is not firmly rooted in reality. To give but one example: even in the very last chapter of the novel, the solipsistic Harpist insists against clear and incontrovertible evidence that Felix had drunk the poisoned beverage. In contrast to Wilhelm, he cannot be cured of his illusions, and this leads to his suicide. In regard to the ending of the novel, the symbolism of these events signifies that the Harpist as ‘Doppelgänger’ has ceased to be a potential threat to the hero:

<sup>34</sup> *Italienische Reise*, Naples, 22 March 1787, HA XI, 217.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, Frascati, 2 October 1787, HA XI, 411.

<sup>36</sup> *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung*. Lessing, Goethe, Novalis, Hölderlin, 9th edn, Leipzig 1924, pp. 394f. Karl Morgenstern coined the term in several essays at the beginning of the nineteenth century, now easily accessible in Rolf Selbmann (ed.), *Zur Geschichte des deutschen Bildungsromans*, Darmstadt 1988. However, as Selbmann affirms: ‘mit Dilthey (1833–1911) beginnt die eigentliche Geschichte der Bildungsroman-Forschung’ (*ibid.*, p. 20).

Wilhelm is healed, no longer a 'kranker Königsson'. 'Einbildungskraft' for Goethe remains immature as long as it is isolated and separated from the faculties of clear sensual perception, of critical and synthesising thinking, represented in the novel by Philine (as 'ennobled' by her association with Friedrich), by Therese, and by the members of the Tower Society. Without these and the enrichment of hands-on knowledge gained through involvement in life's activities, the 'produktive Einbildungskraft' has not been mastered.

Wilhelm's artistic 'Bildung' in the novel, linked to his maturation from primarily narcissistic self-absorption to self-knowledge as a 'denkender Dichter', consists in his increasing ability to control the perilous potential of his subjective fantasies and to recognise the importance of the outer world of phenomena and laws, not only for his cognitive but also for his creative faculties. He slowly learns to overcome what binds him regressively to the past, the memory of his abandonment of Mariane based on false impressions and premature judgments. By the fifth book he has made sufficient progress to separate himself from the guilt-ridden Harpist with his fatalistic songs, who embodies this handicap in the extreme. Furthermore, by analysing and playing the role of Shakespeare's melancholic prince, Wilhelm conquers his Hamlet-identification and his mistaken belief in a Hamlet- and Harper-like tragic fate of his own.

#### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BOOKS THREE TO FIVE FOR WILHELM'S AESTHETIC AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Insights into the interconnections of power, life of luxury, ceremonial traditions and more than occasional ignorance found in the 'Stände-Aristokratie', which Goethe himself had gained while accompanying Duke Karl August on his trips to diverse principalities, provided the background for Wilhelm's experiences of the Count's shallow courtly life in Book Three. But there he also educates himself about the range and limits of courtly beauty and appropriates its quintessence in the blend of natural and artificial/artistic refinement as personified in the figure of the Countess. The novel's revision during 1794–6 adds major, previously lacking dimensions to the character of the 'schöne Gräfin'. Wilhelm's attraction to her is clearly on a different level from that of Philine's erotic appeal. The acquisition of a wide range of factual and specifically aesthetic knowledge becomes a mandatory tool for Wilhelm to train his productive imagination.

Goethe's much maligned retention of parts of the original theatre novel for the *Lehrjahre* makes sense and gains a higher dimension of significance when we see his *Bildungsroman* as specifically that of an artist. Where better and more directly than in the theatre do fundamental issues of aesthetics such as the complex relationship of nature and art, of 'appearance' and beauty as manifestations of either insight, illusion or a mix of both, present themselves? Lessing and Schiller in theory and dramatic practice dealt

prolifically with the theatre as a moral and aesthetic institution; so too did Goethe. This is why becoming involved in the realistic trivialities of Melina's wandering troupe of actors as well as in the sophisticated ambiguities, the highs and lows of Serlo's character and professional theatre continues to prove absolutely indispensable for Wilhelm's education as an artist. Through Aurelie, Serlo's otherwise highly intelligent sister, the hero encounters the tragic ending of a person who refuses to acknowledge the necessary separation between the world of living and the realm of art. Aurelie with self-destructive 'Einseitigkeit' drags the emotional pain of her lost love onto the stage and exposes her tortured soul to a bemused audience. Wilhelm learns from her and moves beyond his own broken heart: further steps of this 'kranker Königsson' towards inner health.

Other concrete examples of how Wilhelm's faculty of the imagination, his perceptivity through exercising the senses, and his ability to think not only intuitively but critically, mature step by step will corroborate this. He becomes aware of alternatives to denial and sorrow. He slowly learns to affirm life's pleasures in the richly diverse present that surrounds him via his association with Laertes and Philine. For Wilhelm's non-tragic future it might be noteworthy that these figures emerge together with Mignon and the Harpist in Book Two. Later on, Philine's song about sensual love and her successful seduction prove to be a most helpful therapy in balancing the hero's introversion and the regressive tendencies of his psyche, and they begin to defeat the shadows of the past. Mignon's sudden metamorphosis of growth and the Harper's incipient madness in Book Five are the logical consequences of Philine's embrace as well as of Wilhelm's Hamlet-premiere, in which he drops his identification with Shakespeare's doomed 'sick prince'. Hamlet in the novel plays the role of a *literary* 'Doppelgänger' for the hero who is successfully overcome as a former and no longer valid 'Vorbild'. After Philine's night visit some of the artifacts and residues of the past burn in the outer and inner fire as a symbol of his rebirth. Mignon now calls Wilhelm three times 'master', 'Meister' (330, esp. 331), pointing not only to the omen of his last name but to important steps and accomplishments in that direction.

#### THE TOWER SOCIETY'S SYMBOLISM IN REGARD TO THE HERO'S COGNITIVE AND CRITICAL CAPABILITIES

It takes Wilhelm longest to train his faculties of judicious analysis and synthesising reasoning since they seem to interfere with his fantasy life. Analytical thinking, when not yet integrated, as Jarno represents it in Book Three, has a tendency to be suspicious of the extra-ordinary products of the creative imagination. This can easily be seen in his utter contempt for the 'Harfner' and Mignon, the figures of Wilhelm's aching and hopeful heart. Jarno calls them a 'herumziehenden Bänkelsänger und [...] ein albernes, zwitterhaftes Geschöpf' (193). Enraged initially, Wilhelm eventually realises

that he needs Jarno. It is Jarno's astute judgment which introduces the aspiring young poet to Shakespeare's works. Upon the death of his biological father in Book Five, 'unser' 'Held[.]' (14, 555) adopts Shakespeare as his 'spiritual father', after having distanced himself from his formerly appropriated tragic double, Prince Hamlet.

Poetologically, then, the novel as self-conscious metafiction and semi-masked artistic confession of Goethe's own development presents a double perspective: the perspective of the poet as an accomplished master narrator providing meaning on multiple levels of comprehension, and the perspective of the poet and his prime talent as objects of scrutinising investigation. The goal for both narrator and protagonist is the same: that their imagination will no longer vacillate and waver – which is the distinguishing characteristic of fantasy without direction – but become free and sovereign while firmly rooted in discernible reality.<sup>37</sup>

Symbolic for the constitution and development of Wilhelm's mental make-up, most of the members of the Tower Society, with the exception of Jarno in Book Three, appear merely sporadically – as the hero's intermittent insights – in Books One to Five. In Books Seven and Eight, after Wilhelm has left the theatre's transitional and partially illusory realm and discovered the solid foundation for his talents, they become permanent companions of his life. Wilhelm's symbolic ennoblement in the last two books and membership in the formerly 'geheime' – i.e. unrecognised – Tower Society demonstrate that he has acquired the 'aristokratischen', i.e. (in Greek) 'best' faculties of the mind which they symbolically represent. These developed human capabilities are not only beneficial but are as indispensable to the master artist as they are for the 'good society', found at the end of the novel. Such a society, Lothario's 'Reform-Adel', is characterised by a life of culture and closeness to nature, based on thoroughly trained and clearly distinguishable faculties.<sup>38</sup> The second part of the 'Lehrbrief' elucidates:

Jede Anlage ist wichtig, und sie muß entwickelt werden. Wenn einer nur das Schöne, der andere nur das Nützliche befördert, so machen *beide zusammen* erst *einen Menschen* aus. [...] Eine Kraft beherrscht die andere, aber keine kann die andere bilden; in jeder Anlage liegt auch allein die Kraft, sich zu

<sup>37</sup> Cf. the sonnet 'Natur und Kunst' (1800), HA I, 245: 'So ist's mit aller Bildung auch beschaffen:/ Vergebens werden ungebundne Geister/Nach der Vollendung reiner Höhe streben.//Wer Großes will, muß sich zusammenraffen;/In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister,/Und das Gesetz nur kann uns Freiheit geben.'

<sup>38</sup> It is no coincidence that the intelligent conversations about progressive issues of economics, taxation, social justice and security, education, art, and general humanitarian concerns take place among the well educated and level-headed members associated with the Society of the Tower. In the 'Oheim' (who among all figures of the novel – and by general scholarly consensus – resembles the classical Goethe with his 'Welt-' and 'Kunstanschauung' the most), the author furtively introduces himself as the 'Baumeister' of the 'Musterschloß' (symbolically=his novel?) and the founder of the 'noble family' as well as of the Tower Society (see Book Six).

vollenden; das verstehen so wenig Menschen, die doch lehren und wirken wollen. (552 – emphasis added)

In addition to Jarno, who personifies analytical incisiveness, the members of the Tower include the Abbé, who represents pedagogical guidance, higher intuition and reasoning power, and Lothario, who embodies the dynamic combination of thought and far-reaching activity.<sup>39</sup> The members of the Tower, in complementing their faculties with Wilhelm's matured productive imagination, become themselves integrated and complete. That is why epistemologically the strengths of the Tower need Wilhelm as much as he needs them. Goethe's theoretical works, conversations and letters support this claim and interpretation. For example, in a letter to the archduchess Maria Paulowna, Goethe writes that the other higher human faculties, namely perception, critical analysis, and synthesising reasoning ('Vernunft'), if *lacking* the important function of the imagination ('beleb[ende]' 'Phantasie'), would become sterile and incompetent – that 'die sämtliche Menscheneinheit [...] ohne sie in öde Untüchtigkeit versinken müßte'.<sup>40</sup>

The 'Lehrbrief' which Wilhelm receives upon his initiation into the Tower Society deals in its first half, in Jarno's words, with the 'Ausbildung des Kunstsinnes' (548). It is not the second half pertaining to matters of life in general that is presented as an uninterrupted text in the novel, but only the first significant section. This long uninterrupted paragraph (496f.) – Wilhelm's Certificate of Apprenticeship – is considered one of the most beautiful pieces of Goethean prose, even though it is written in a compact, almost aphoristically dense style. It begins with a rearrangement of Hippocrates's famous Latinised dictum 'vita brevis, ars longa', recording first what is important for this novel: 'Die Kunst ist lang.' It ends not coincidentally with the word 'Meister', Wilhelm's last name, another indicator of the novel's primary content and the goal the hero is striving for.<sup>41</sup>

The Tower Society's 'Lehrbrief' for Wilhelm axiomatically summarises the narrator's insights about art and the artist that reverberate in action and symbolism throughout the 'Künstler-Bildungsroman'. Wilhelm will need time to incorporate them all in his 'Kopf und Herzen' (548). Schiller, participating as a most welcome correspondent in the novel's revision,

<sup>39</sup> Epistemologically, the specific talents of Therese, the Physician, and the 'Geistliche' would also qualify them to belong to one of the ranks or inner circles of the Tower Society. Their range of most helpful and needed activities is seen in Books Five to Eight.

<sup>40</sup> Attachment to a letter dated 2 January 1817, *Goethes Briefe* (HA-Br), ed. Karl Robert Mandelkow and Bodo Morawe, Hamburg 1964, III (1965), p. 385.

<sup>41</sup> Just as the 'Lehrbrief' certifying Wilhelm's integration into the Tower Society contains in its first part major tenets of Goethe's classical aesthetics, his 'Künstlergedichte' of 1773–4 (so named by Erich Trunz) express the young poet's creativity, 'Bildungsdrang' and his cogitations about such experiences. Wilhelm's artistic development mirrors these two cornerstones of beginning and advanced stage, albeit hidden in the novel's symbolism.

makes the following astute observation about Wilhelm's thinking processes, although in his tendency to nail down and clarify concepts he overlooks Wilhelm's creative and dynamic activities:

Jetzt, da ich das Ganze des Romans mehr im Auge habe, kann ich nicht genug sagen, wie glücklich der Charakter des Helden von Ihnen gewählt worden ist [...]. Nicht nur der *Gegenstand* verlangte ihn, auch der *Leser* brauchte ihn. Sein Hang zum Reflectiren hält den Leser im raschesten Laufe der Handlung still und nöthigt ihn immer vor- und rückwärts zu sehen und über alles, was sich ereignet, zu denken. Er sammelt so zu sagen, den Geist, den Sinn, den inneren Gehalt von allem ein, was um ihn herum vorgeht, verwandelt jedes dunkle Gefühl in einen Begriff und Gedanken, spricht jedes Einzelne in einer allgemeineren Formel aus, legt uns von allem die Bedeutung näher, und indem er dadurch seinen eigenen Charakter erfüllt, erfüllt er zugleich auf's vollkommenste den Zweck des Ganzen.<sup>42</sup>

Is it any wonder that Goethe in retrospect repeatedly pays tribute to Schiller and describes the initial period of their close friendship in the imagery of renewed creativity and fruitfulness? 'Für mich war es ein neuer Frühling, in welchem alles froh nebeneinander keimte und aus aufgeschlossenen Samen und Zweigen hervorging.' His friend's stimulus meant for Goethe 'ein unaufhaltsames Fortschreiten philosophischer Ausbildung und ästhetischer Tätigkeit'.<sup>43</sup> It is safe to say that the combined creative and critical activities resulting from this like-minded friendship characterise *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* as much as they do the period known as Weimar Classicism.

The 'Lehrbrief' reflects not only the more general results of aesthetic thought, but meta-critically certain methodological particularities of Goethe's artist novel. Thus Wilhelm's earlier reference to exercising his poetic talent in clandestine seclusion, which pertains especially to his 'Doppelgänger' and his/their songs, is found echoing in the statements in the 'Lehrbrief':

Nur ein Teil der Kunst kann gelehrt werden, der Künstler braucht sie ganz. Wer sie halb kennt, ist immer irre und redet viel; wer sie ganz besitzt, mag nur tun und redet selten oder spät. Jene haben *keine Geheimnisse und keine Kraft* [...]. Die Worte sind gut, sie sind aber nicht das Beste. Das Beste wird nicht deutlich durch Worte. [...] Des echten Künstlers Lehre *schließt den Sinn auf*; denn wo die Worte fehlen, spricht *die Tat*. (496 – emphasis added)<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Letter to Goethe, 5 July 1796, Gräf I, 2, 824.

<sup>43</sup> *Tag- und Jahreshäfte*, HA X, 444.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Goethe's distich 'Der Meister': 'Jeden anderen Meister erkennt man an dem was er ausspricht, / Was er weise verschweigt zeigt mir den Meister des Stils', MA IV.1, p. 769. Artistically, 'Stil' for Goethe 'ruht [...] auf den tiefsten Grundfesten der Erkenntnis, auf dem Wesen der Dinge, insofern uns erlaubt ist, es in sichtbaren und greiflichen Gestalten zu erkennen' ('Einfache Nachahmung der Natur, Manier, Stil', HA XII, 32).

It thus becomes mandatory both poetologically and epistemologically for the critical reader of the *Lehrjahre* who wants to discover the 'offenbare Geheimnis' of Wilhelm's true identity to include Books Seven and Eight, not just the revised sections of the *Theatralische Sendung*, as essential ingredients in Wilhelm's education and development as an artist. In fact, they represent the highest and most significant levels of insight the poet, 'unser Held', can gain and achieve within this work.<sup>45</sup>

SUBJECTIVITY AND THE QUEST FOR 'WAHRE KUNST': STRUCTURAL PARALLELS  
BETWEEN BOOK SIX AND THE NOVEL AS A WHOLE

Other persistent questions asked by scholars pertain to Goethe's inclusion of a religious 'autobiography' in the novel which *seems* to have little to do with its major themes of 'Bildung' and 'Kunsterkenntnis'. A brief look at structural analogies will help to determine whether such seeming discrepancy has any rhyme or reason to it. The specific placement of the 'Bekenntnisse' turns out to be important not only for the explanations Goethe himself provides in a letter to Schiller but again for epistemological and poetological reasons.<sup>46</sup> The narrator as epic 'Baumeister' incorporates the confessions of the 'Schöne Seele' between the first five books, which deal primarily with Wilhelm's inner life and aspects of the theatre, and the last two books, in which a cultured society, the larger world of reality as well as masterworks of art dominate the hero's surroundings. Wilhelm's transition out of a theatre milieu with its recognised insufficiencies – which also can no longer satisfy the hero's artistic motivations and aspirations – is more like a leap to a well-founded and nobler realm, akin to what the Beautiful Soul had already discovered in her Uncle's model of a castle. Just as the sixth book in its first two-thirds focuses on the subjective experiences of the fictional writer and relates her religious life story (which mirrors in structure and related themes Wilhelm's own fears, hopes and quests in Books I–V) the third part of the 'Bekenntnisse' deals with the Uncle's world of art, his '[m]ustermäßiges' 'Schloß' (410), built by Italian architects, and the 'noble family' into which the hero will mature in the last two books of the novel. Only after he has left the theatre, joined the Tower Society in Book Seven, and in Book Eight recognises in Natalie his highest guide and

<sup>45</sup> In his commentary as co-editor of the *Frankfurter Ausgabe* of *Wilhelm Meisters theatralische Sendung* and *Lehrjahre*, Wilhelm Voßkamp calls Books One to Five of Goethe's Bildungsroman 'Lehrjahre des Künstlers', thereby questioning earlier prevailing views of Wilhelm as dilettante – see vol. I, 9 of *Sämtliche Werke. Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, ed. Dieter Borchmeyer et al., Frankfurt a.M. 1992, p. 1365. In a recent publication, Voßkamp acknowledges the significance of art and the role of the poetic imagination for Book Eight, when he remarks on the 'Feierlichkeiten' in the 'Saal der Vergangenheit': 'Mignon als dichterisches Symbol wird nun vollständig in den Kontext von Kunst gerückt' ('*Ein anderes Selbst*'. *Bild und Bildung im deutschen Roman des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts*, Göttingen 2004, p. 45).

<sup>46</sup> 18 March 1795. Gräf I, 2, 764f.

love, will Wilhelm find the permanent foundation and the essential support for his talent.

NATURE, SCIENCE, AND ART: NATALIE AS THE NOVEL'S STRUCTURAL AXIS, 'GESTALT ALLER GESTALTEN', AND THE GOAL OF WILHELM'S QUEST

To understand Natalie, this almost supra-human figure in Wilhelm's cognitive and artistic search, Goethe's scientific discoveries and his 'Natur-' and 'Kunstanschauung' at the time of the novel's completion become relevant. Space does not allow detailed analysis here,<sup>47</sup> but the following quotations and comments may be helpful. Goethe expected that 'auf der Höhe seiner Verstandesvernunft' a natural scientist would easily grasp 'daß es auch eine *exakte sinnliche Phantasie* geben könne'.<sup>48</sup> For Goethe this is one of the prerequisites for creating great art. He deplored that only 'wenige Menschen [...] eine Phantasie für die *Wahrheit des Realen* besitzen',<sup>49</sup> another prerequisite for the mature artist and poet. This takes us to the final question, one which many a baffled reader and severe critic has asked with good reason: why does Goethe's hero then continue to vacillate and waver throughout most of his apprenticeship, even in the last book, until he is sure of being guided by the noblest, most active and important symbolic woman figure in the novel?

A very brief look at Natalie's character and function will conclude this introduction to the paradigmatic genre of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. Natalie is so perfect that no normal man would want her for his wife or could live with her, if she were made of flesh and blood. As symbolically powerful as Mignon, she represents the genius-child's complete opposite. Natalie plays such a significant role for the revision of the novel that Goethe makes her the determining *agent* for the structural reorganisation of his artist's *Bildungsroman*. She establishes its central axis as well as represents Wilhelm's ultimate goal. Natalie first appears to the severely wounded protagonist as an Amazon, the symbol of undifferentiated wholeness, in the forty-ninth chapter of the novel (Book Four, chapter six) after the robber attack in the forest glade. Counting the book chapters sequentially, exactly forty-nine chapters follow. Since the 'Bekanntnisse' of the sixth book are not divided into chapters, Wilhelm's artistic apprenticeship covers seven books divided into twice seven times seven chapters.<sup>50</sup> In the

<sup>47</sup> They are to be found in Hellmut Ammerlahn, *Imagination und Wahrheit. Goethes Künstler-Bildungsroman Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre: Struktur, Symbolik, Poetologie*, Würzburg 2003. For the monograph's 'Begriffs-, Figuren- und Sachregister' as well as 'Namen- und Werkregister' see <http://www.faculty.washington.edu/ammerlan/> [sic].

<sup>48</sup> Essay on Ernst Stiedenroth, *Psychologie zur Erklärung der Seelenerscheinungen*, HA XIII, 42 (emphasis added).

<sup>49</sup> Conversations with Eckermann, 25 December 1825, MA XIX, p. 151 (emphasis added).

<sup>50</sup> Goethe hides the consciously composed structure of his *Lehrjahre* in contrast, e.g., to Thomas Mann, whose multiple usage of the number seven is made rather obvious in *Der Zauberberg*.

middle of the novel, Wilhelm's 'vision' of Natalie has the impact of an epiphany and starts the hero's healing process toward manhood and artistic maturity. In the last, the ninety-eighth chapter, when Wilhelm has fully recognised Natalie's nature and her significance for him, she gives him her hand for life with the full support of the other members of the Tower.

As we see in the sequel, *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, completed thirty-three years later, the hero is still 'married' to Natalie, 'der ich auf ewig geeignet bin' (VIII, 11), travelling and accomplishing 'immer an deiner Hand, mich mit dir über alles besprechend' (VIII, 78). His diaries, letters and narratives are composed for her. Yet Natalie is totally absent in the sequel, having disappeared just as Helena has for the second Faust after Act III. Among all of Goethe's fictional women figures, only Natalie and Helena are accorded the supreme designation: 'Gestalt aller Gestalten'.<sup>51</sup> The search for them and their supreme 'Gestalt' is reserved for the titular heroes of the two works that accompany the author throughout his creative life, Faust and Wilhelm Meister.

While Helena represents ultimate beauty in history, mythology and art, Natalie emerges as the product of Goethe's studies of nature. In her he symbolically personifies recognised natural laws, his idea and ideal of archetypal nature as well as the model of dynamic and flexible equilibrium in nature and mankind. Natalie's perfection, her intrinsic harmony of being and doing, extends to the ethical and social realms. She is symbolically associated with the father's bride in the 'Gemälde' of the 'kranke Königssohn', whom the royal father bequeaths to his son thereby curing him. Thus this formerly sick prince, with whom Wilhelm sympathises throughout the novel, becomes qualified to reign over the kingdom as heir to his father.

Goethe admired 'den größten Wanderer[.]', Shakespeare, from youth to old age. Just as he found 'Natur' herself speaking in Shakespeare's works,<sup>52</sup> so he makes his 'Ebenbild', Wilhelm, named after the 'Freund', 'Pate', and the spiritual 'Vater' of both of them,<sup>53</sup> obtain the kingdom of poetry based on the firm foundation of insights into the 'Königreich' of nature. Earlier and more explicitly, the dramatist Goethe had arranged for Wilhelm's counterpart, Faust, to convey thanks to the Earth Spirit for the same gift in those parts of the scene 'Wald und Höhle' which were most likely written while Goethe was in Italy or shortly thereafter:

Gabst mir die herrliche *Natur zum Königreich*,/[...]  
Vergönne mir, in ihre tiefe Brust,  
Wie in den Busen eines Freundes, zu schau'n. (vs. 3220–4 – emphasis added)

<sup>51</sup> *Lehrjahre*. HA VII, 445; *Faust II*. vs. 8907.

<sup>52</sup> 'Zum Shakespeares-Tag', HA XII, 224. Cf.: 'Natur! Natur! nichts so Natur als Shakespeares Menschen', *ibid.*, 226.

<sup>53</sup> *Lehrjahre*, HA VII, 210, 495. *Dichtung und Wahrheit*: 'unser Vater und Lehrer Shakespeare', HA IX, 582.

Natalie stays with Wilhelm for the rest of his fictional life, just as Goethe continued to pursue his scientific studies to the end of his days. These and other parallels, based on linking Goethean factual biography with the novel's structure and symbolism, allow further inferences and conclusions. Our multiple approaches finally support the claim that *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* can also be regarded as an ironically distanced and veiled inner autobiography revealing what Goethe himself desired, confronted and mastered. A separate comparison of the stages of Wilhelm's development with entries in Goethe's own letters, diaries and other documents shows amazing similarities.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to the previously discussed intrinsic reasons for calling Goethe's first completed *Wilhelm Meister* novel the 'bildungsroman of the creative, reflecting and increasingly knowledgeable artist', two chronologically and thematically related works in Goethe's oeuvre, both of which have always been recognised as artist dramas, in whole or in part, can be drawn upon to support the claim for the prototypical paradigm of the author's central work of prose fiction. While Goethe during his Italian 'apprenticeship' rediscovered the artist in himself<sup>55</sup> and writes from Rome: 'Ich habe über allerlei Kunst so viel Gelegenheit zu denken, daß mein "Wilhelm Meister" recht anschwillt',<sup>56</sup> his first concern after his return to Weimar was the completion of his artist drama, *Torquato Tasso*. Having done this, the author must have felt that the artist theme demanded continued, more detailed and sophisticated treatment. In spite of Tasso's failings at the court of Ferrara, he was driven by the unbending desire to flee to Rome, which was for Goethe the centre of learning, paralleling Goethe's own flight from Weimar to Rome and his prolonged stay there after his return from Sicily.

Leaving the Tasso drama open-ended<sup>57</sup> Goethe worked on the next 'große[...] Konfession'<sup>58</sup> of his own artistic metamorphoses. No longer in the historical costume of a well-known Italian poet, but in the incognito of a contemporary German figure, Wilhelm becomes an 'Ebenbild' of the author secretly bearing the first name of Shakespeare. Goethe had frequently engaged in the practice of hiding his true identity, as for instance the two 'Sesenheim' masquerades described in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (IX, 430–46) reveal. His incognitos in Italy are legendary.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>54</sup> See 'Schlußwort' in Hellmut Ammerlahn, *Imagination und Wahrheit*, pp. 415–26.

<sup>55</sup> Requesting an extension of his stay in Italy, Goethe's letter of 11 August 1787 provides Duke Karl August with details about *Wilhelm Meister*, other works to be completed, and the significance of his studies in Rome for his development as an artist (HA-Br, II, pp. 62–4).

<sup>56</sup> *Italienische Reise*, 'Zweiter Römischer Aufenthalt', 5 July 1787, HA XI, 366 (emphasis added).

<sup>57</sup> For an analysis of this claim see Hellmut Ammerlahn, *Aufbau und Krise der Sinngestalt: Tasso und die Prinzessin im Kontext der Goetheschen Werke*, New York 1990, pp. 136–42.

<sup>58</sup> For the wording used in an autobiographical context see *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, HA IX, 283.

<sup>59</sup> He travelled as a German painter and used pseudonyms such as Filippo Müller, Miller, Milleroff. Cf. Roberto Zapperi, *Das Incognito: Goethes ganz andere Existenz in Rom*, Munich 1999.

The years during which he revised and completed *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* and shortly thereafter must be re-evaluated as one of the most productive periods of the author's life. In addition to his enormous creative output he writes theoretical essays on art, aesthetics, literature and science and collects a large amount of materials on Italian art and art history in preparation for a revisit which does not take place. A comparative reading of these non-fictional works discloses that Goethe says in them in discursive and theoretical language what is frequently generalised and expressed symbolically and poetologically in the novel.<sup>60</sup>

The return to *Faust I* and the beginning of *Faust II* just four years later again demonstrate Goethe's continued preoccupation with the foundations and parameters of creativity, knowledge, poetry and art. He augments his explorations by probing the relationship of the creative imagination to the political and economic world, to nature, history and mythology. The second Faust in Acts I–III is the poet, possessing riches as Plutus does, and his son, genius-child and guiding spirit, explicitly addresses him as such. Although it took more than a hundred years of research to grasp the significance of most of the symbolism of *Faust II*, the deeper identity of the magician Faust as 'the poet' in Acts I–III was never an issue, because the symbolism had its conceptual counterpart in Knabe Lenker's unequivocal words. For unlocking the 'offenbare Geheimnis' of his 'Meisterroman' Goethe did not provide such an easy key. His letter to Schiller enumerates some of the reasons.<sup>61</sup> However, when we take the structural, symbolic and poetological components of the work into account; when, furthermore, we acknowledge the overall thematic and chronological continuity that exists between it and the two artist dramas, *Torquato Tasso* and *Faust II*; then the genre of the first *Wilhelm Meister* reveals itself as a paradigm no longer in disguise.

<sup>60</sup> Selected examples from 1795–9: 'Inwiefern die Idee: Schönheit sei Vollkommenheit mit Freiheit, auf organische Naturen angewendet werden könne'; 'Erster Entwurf einer allgemeinen Einleitung in die vergleichende Anatomie, [...]'; 'Metamorphose der Insekten'; 'Erfahrung und Wissenschaft'. Work on the 'Farbenlehre'; 'Baukunst'; 'Literarischer Sansculottismus'; 'Anmerkungen zu "Diderots Versuch über die Malerei"'; 'Einleitung in die Propyläen'; 'Über Wahrheit und Wahrscheinlichkeit der Kunstwerke'; 'Der Sammler und die Seinigen'.

<sup>61</sup> 9 July 1796, Gräf I, 2, 836f. For previous reference see note 31, above.