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WILHELM MEISTER'S HOMECOMING

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Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre has generally been considered the most influential specimen of the German "Bildungsroman." Much has been written about Wilhelm Meister's "development" as representing, at the end of the novel, a pinnacle of the harmony attainable by the individual. This view has been justified most often by appealing to the ideology of the German classical "Humanitätsidee," thus making Wilhelm Meister an exemplary figure rather than merely a well-developed individual character. This view of the novel places undue emphasis on a "harmony" that is not essential to Wilhelm Meister, and thereby obscures the development of his perception and understanding of the world which does much to explain the structure of the last two books of the novel.¹

In the "worthier" characters of the novel it is possible to recognize a certain ideal of knowledge and insight into Nature. Above all Lothario and the Oheim are confronted, either intellectually (the Oheim) or through intuitive experience (Lothario), with the fundamental law of continuity and recurrence in Nature and the life of man. Their "superiority" to others as portrayed by Goethe rests on their consequent ability to live in accordance with this knowledge. Thus it does not seem to be unreasonable to suspect that this same confrontation with Nature's law is essential to the progress of Wilhelm Meister himself, and that the insight he gains through this experience is a main goal of his "development" during the course of the *Lehrjahre*. We shall find that Wilhelm's development is exemplified in his passage from a purely subjective appreciation of the world and exclusive preoccupation with himself and his own feelings, to a plateau of objective knowledge at the end of the eighth book of the novel, where he has become a partner worthy of Natalie.

Wilhelm's development is reflected not only in his relationship to the world around him, but even more clearly in his relationship to works of art, both as objects of observation and contemplation, and

¹ For a fuller discussion of "development" in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* I refer the reader to my article "Über Wilhelm Meisters 'Bildung'" in the recent *Lebendige Form. Interpretation zur deutschen Literatur, Festschrift für Heinrich E. K. Henel*, ed. by J. L. Sammons and E. I. Schürer (Munich, 1970), pp. 63-81.

as symbols of his own condition. At the end of the novel Wilhelm is not and has not become a harmonious person in accordance with the classical "Humanitätsidee," as so often maintained by the interpreters, but rather he attains a harmonious relationship to himself and his own past by once again being blessed with the possession of something which he had lost before the beginning of the novel. The recovery of his grandfather's art collection as a "reinheritance" through the betrothal to Natalie at the end of the *Lehrjahre* is nothing less than a "homecoming." Wilhelm leaves the home of his youth, proceeding through a series of adventures and mistakes to a metamorphosis, then returns to a new home, Natalie's castle, situated on a higher level than the home he leaves in the beginning. It is this process of homecoming that we wish to follow at present.²

It seems remarkable that the actress Aurelie, herself no longer able to relate objectively to the world, is precisely the person who most perceptively describes Wilhelm's character in the first five books of the novel when she compares him to the "Paradiesvögel" of the fable: "Man sagt, sie hätten keine Füße, sie schwebten in der Luft und nährten sich vom Äther."³ Wilhelm's relationship to the world, until very near the end of the novel, is indeed very much of this sort: instead of standing with his feet firmly on the ground, he is nourished by the "Äther" of his own dreams and feelings. His belief in fate, his subjective relationship to art and his blindness to what happens around him are the attributes of the "Paradiesvögel."

Wilhelm's life, as we see it in the first five books of the novel, is nothing but a series of crossroads, each and every one decided according to a questionable view of reality.⁴ When Wilhelm is in a situation where he must decide what is to be done next, he looks for omens and abandons himself to an optimistic belief in fate. For him there is nothing accidental in the world ("Zufall")—everything becomes a sign of Providence, which he then proceeds to relate to his own situation.

Thus, when his father is about to send him on a business trip for

² My interpretation assumes that the end of the *Lehrjahre* is—at least temporarily—in Goethe's mind, the end of the adventures of Wilhelm Meister. It disregards any connection between the *Lehrjahre* and the much later *Wanderjahre* as irrelevant to the understanding of the *Lehrjahre* as written and published in the 1790's.

³ *Goethes Werke*, Hamburger Ausgabe, ed. E. Trunz, 5th ed. (Hamburg, 1962), VII, 318. Further references to this volume will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses in the text.

⁴ The motif of "der Jüngling am Scheideweg" appears very early in the novel, when Wilhelm discovers among his papers one of his early poems about the battle between the mistress of business and the goddess of poetry for the soul of the young man (p. 37).

the first time, he decides to use this opportunity to escape bourgeois tedium and go off to the theater: "Er erkannte den Wink eines leitenden Schicksals an diesen zusammentreffenden Umständen" (p. 42). When his dreams are dashed by what he takes to be Mariane's infidelity, however, he is equally capable of giving up his goal of becoming an actor and consoles himself by believing that it is his "fate" to become a businessman. It takes some effort, to be sure, but he is industrious in learning his father's business and gives up his poetry for the prosaic world: "Auf diese Weise hatte Wilhelm eine Zeitlang emsig fortgelebt und sich überzeugt, daß jene harte Prüfung vom Schicksale zu seinem Besten veranstaltet worden" (p. 79). Yet he displays on the whole remarkably little determination to pursue this "fate," for while collecting debts for his father he yields again to his theatrical urge; at the point where he must decide whether or not to accept Serlo's offer of a favorable theater contract, his belief in fate and the memory of his previous desires together convince him that it is indeed his destiny to sign the contract: "Alles, was ich mir vor jener unglücklichen Nacht, die mich von Marianen entfernte, nur träumen ließ, steht vor mir und bietet sich mir selbst an. Hierher wollte ich flüchten und bin sachte hergeleitet worden . . ." (p. 277).

In such a situation he imagines himself again at the crossroads between business and poetry, and although he has had some experiences in the meantime that tend to show the theater in a worse and business in a somewhat better light than before, he does not find it at all difficult to enunciate a criterion that will allow him to follow his inclinations, thus making them correspond to what "fate" has in store for him. He feels, to be sure, a certain inclination toward commerce and its rewards, but is quick to convince himself that this inclination is due to the influence of "äußere Umstände," whereas his "innerstes Bedürfnis" tends in his eyes toward a worthier goal: "Aber dein innerstes Bedürfnis erzeugt und nährt den Wunsch, die Anlagen, die in dir zum Guten und Schönen ruhen mögen, sie seien körperlich oder geistig, immer mehr zu entwickeln und auszubilden. Und muß ich nicht das Schicksal verehren, das mich ohne mein Zutun hierher an das Ziel aller meiner Wünsche führt?" (p. 276). In Wilhelm's dichotomy of "äußere Umstände" and "innerstes Bedürfnis" we find expressed a type of value judgment which, as we shall see, regularly governs his conception of the polarities self: world and sentiment: reason.

This is not to say that the ultimate purpose of the novel is to expose Wilhelm's superstitions and disprove altogether the existence of

Providence. On the contrary, it becomes clear that there is a Providence which, through the agency of the narrator, guides Wilhelm to his destination, the happy end. But this Providence is not the same as the "Schicksal" which Wilhelm constantly invokes to justify his inclinations. It is not dependent for its working on any person or group of persons in the novel itself, such as the Tower Society (who try to play "fate" for Wilhelm); and it turns all the happenings of the novel, as well as Wilhelm's own belief in "Schicksal," to good account in achieving its purposes. Something ultimately inexplicable and unfathomable is responsible for the liaison with Natalie and the recovery of the grandfather's collections—from their first meeting in the forest after the robbery to the night in which they keep watch over the "poisoned" Felix, the relationship between Wilhelm and Natalie is nothing but a series of meaningful accidents fashioned by Wilhelm's particular Providence.

We should thus take care to distinguish between what we shall call the "Providence" of the novel and what Wilhelm continually considers to be omens of "fate." The tension between Providence and Wilhelm's purely subjective conception of "fate" runs through the entire novel, and Wilhelm's "fate" is already a main theme of the conversation with the Abbé in the first book of the novel. The Abbé is not at all opposed to the idea that there may be something inaccessible to man's reason, something instrumental in the fulfillment of higher purposes and thus deserving of the name of Providence: "Hier ist nur die Frage, welche Vorstellungsart zu unserm Besten gereicht. 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" (p. 71). In view of this conception of man's proper attitude toward the world, it must be read as a devastating criticism of Wilhelm's subjectivist conception of "fate" when the Abbé concludes his homily with the injunction: "Wehe dem, der sich von Jugend auf gewöhnt, in dem Notwendigen etwas Willkürliches finden zu wollen, der dem Zufälligen eine Art von Vernunft zuschreiben möchte, welcher zu folgen sogar eine Religion sei."

The Abbé advocates here the reasoned attempt at responsibility for one's fate, in contrast to Wilhelm, who passively accepts acci-

dental experience as “fate” and appeals to the Abbé to agree with him: “Waren Sie niemals in dem Falle, daß ein kleiner Umstand Sie veranlaßte, einen gewissen Weg einzuschlagen, auf welchem bald eine gefällige Gelegenheit Ihnen entgegenkam und eine Reihe von unerwarteten Vorfällen Sie endlich ans Ziel brachte, das Sie selbst noch kaum ins Auge gefaßt hatten? Sollte das nicht Ergebenheit in das Schicksal, Zutrauen zu einer solchen Leitung einflößen?” (pp. 71–72). The Abbé might agree that such is indeed sometimes the case, but since he sees every man as the creator of his own happiness and unhappiness, he cannot be reconciled to such faith in “fate,” which he interprets as abdication of moral responsibility: “Heißt das etwas weiter, als seinem eignen Verstande entsagen und seinen Neigungen unbedingten Raum geben? Wir bilden uns ein, fromm zu sein, indem wir ohne Überlegung hinschlendern, uns durch angenehme Zufälle determinieren lassen und endlich dem Resultate eines solchen schwankenden Lebens den Namen einer göttlichen Führung geben” (p. 71). The Abbé is certain that no one would retain either his money or his virtue with such principles as Wilhelm advocates. Looking backward from the happy end of the novel, one can with Friedrich be reminded of Saul, who went out to seek his father’s asses and found a kingdom (p. 610)—but it is one of Wilhelm’s failings that at every step of the way, with no clear view of either the beginning or the end, he thinks in terms of having won or lost his “kingdom” through one isolated act of “fate.”

As Wilhelm continually sees his own inclinations realized in events willed by “fate,” as it were, so does he tend to observe everything and everybody else in the world in relation to his own sentiment, without making any attempt at perceiving them objectively “in reality.” The world is not an object for his reason, but for his heart, an outlook he shares with Mignon, who puts it in its most pessimistic terms, “die Vernunft ist grausam, das Herz ist besser” (p. 489); and his heart is satisfied most readily not by “reality,” but by representations of his own ideal world. Again it is Aurelie, herself so much like Wilhelm, who most perceptively describes this trait of his character: “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. . . von außen kommt nichts in Sie hinein; ich habe nicht leicht jemanden gesehen, der die Menschen, mit denen er lebt, so wenig kennt, so von Grund aus verkennt wie Sie” (p. 257).

Aurelie is perceptive, but she is unwilling and unable to try to change Wilhelm by helping to enlighten him about his misconceptions of the world. She is too much like him to want to condemn him. On the contrary, she wishes to strengthen him in his subjectivity, for in her (and in Wilhelm's) opinion subjectivity is the prerequisite for being a true artist. Wilhelm is quite ready to admit his naiveté with regard to the world ("Ich habe von Jugend auf die Augen meines Geistes mehr nach innen als nach außen gerichtet, und da ist es sehr natürlich, daß ich den Menschen bis auf einen gewissen Grad habe kennen lernen, ohne die Menschen im mindesten zu verstehen und zu begreifen"); but to his plea for enlightenment and instruction Aurelie opposes the view that he should be in no hurry to occupy himself with the world around him: "Zum Lichte des Verstandes können wir immer gelangen; aber die Fülle des Herzens kann uns niemand geben. Sind Sie zum Künstler bestimmt, so können Sie diese Dunkelheit und Unschuld nicht lange genug bewahren; sie ist die schöne Hülle über der jungen Knospe; Unglücks genug, wenn wir zu früh herausgetrieben werden" (p. 258). Aurelie, who speaks here for herself as much as for Wilhelm, is like Mignon and the harper a victim of her heart—and so long as Wilhelm remains preoccupied with himself and his own feelings, rejecting the world around him as something crass and unworthy of objective observation, he is in danger of ending tragically like them.

At this stage of his development extreme "Innigkeit" is seen by Wilhelm not as a danger, but as happiness and a treasure, in spite of any uneasiness he may feel at times about his ignorance of the world. The harper's songs appeal to him from the beginning, because he sees in them an expression of his own feelings and they allow him to escape his worries by transporting him into a completely different world. He imagines the harper is especially to be envied because of his "Selbstgenügsamkeit," as he says, "daß du dich in der Einsamkeit so angenehm beschäftigen und unterhalten kannst und, da du überall ein Fremdling bist, in deinem Herzen die angenehmste Bekanntschaft findest" (p. 137). It is quite a while before Wilhelm realizes that the harper's heart is hardly an "angenehme Bekanntschaft," that the harper is in fact driven by guilt and fear, that he is a person not to be admired but pitied, and in dire need of spiritual assistance.

The harper's "Innigkeit," this product of guilt and fear, is in Wilhelm's eyes instead the sign of the true artist and the source of all creativity. The more the artist is occupied with himself and his intuitions, the more "truth" will be embodied in what he creates; in Wilhelm's view, for example, the "Weltmann" can only be pitied

because he is so preoccupied with the real world that he can neither create nor appreciate true art: "Es geht in der Kunst wie in der Liebe. Wie will der Weltmann bei seinem zerstreuten Leben die Innigkeit erhalten, in der ein Künstler bleiben muß, wenn er etwas Vollkommenes hervorzubringen denkt, und die selbst demjenigen nicht fremd sein darf, der einen solchen Anteil am Werke nehmen will, wie der Künstler ihn wünscht und hofft" (p. 213).

Wilhelm's admiration for the harper is not the only instance where we see that his subjective ideal has wrongly influenced his perception of reality. There are many passages in the *Lehrjahre* where the irony of the situation or an observation by the narrator himself explicitly serves to demonstrate how Wilhelm, alone in the "Äther" of his own thoughts and feelings with no feet on the ground, like the "Paradiesvögel," pays no attention to his surroundings and fails to observe or misinterprets things that should be of prime concern to him. The paradigmatic instance of his inattention to the "real world" is of course his discovery, when he sits down to begin the travel diary he promised his father, that he knows nothing whatsoever about the things he has seen: "[Er ward] leider gewahr, 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" (p. 266).

If Wilhelm has "Erfahrungen des Herzens und Geistes," about which he has something to say, then it is most often only of himself that he seems to know something. Rarely in the course of the novel is he able to perceive or understand the spiritual state of the persons with whom he associates. Thus, his relationship to Mignon and the harper is characterized by sentiment without, sometimes even against, the dictates of reason. Thus, inexperienced and carried away by his love for Mariane, he puts her to sleep with his stories of childhood and is unable to discern that her emotional reaction to his advances, so attractive and flattering to him, is in fact the result of a very impure mixture of love, embarrassment, and guilty conscience. It is the narrator who must point this out and who calls Wilhelm's dream of becoming happy with Mariane "ein Gemälde auf Nebelgrund, dessen Gestalten freilich sehr ineinander flossen" (p. 35). It is quite the same when Wilhelm first makes the acquaintance of Aurelie. When introduced to her, he finds her conversation so pleasant "daß er nicht einmal einen entschiedenen Zug des Kammers gewahr

wurde, der ihrem geistreichen Gesicht noch ein besonderes Interesse gab" (p. 243). This "Zug des Kammers" is central to Aurelie's character, and yet, when Wilhelm later interprets for her the character of Hamlet's Ophelia, he is quite unable to notice that Aurelie in her situation has identified herself completely with Ophelia and that she listens to him enraptured, as though he were interpreting her to herself.

Considerable effort is expended by some of the characters in the last two books of the novel to show that Wilhelm's wanderings and enterprises in the world of the theater are nothing but a series of errors, although his handsome appearance at his meeting with Werner (Book VIII, 1) would at least seem to show that his experiences in this "lower" sphere have not harmed him in any significant way. Despite his mistakes, his questionable perspective of the world around him and his immature judgment concerning much of what befalls him, Wilhelm is by nature open not only to bad but to good influences, and even his mistakes are able to augment his moral stature. However strong the temptation to judge unfavorably his theatrical life and ambitions, these are a necessary stage of his development and as such are not entirely worthy of the scorn heaped on them by a rationalist such as Jarno.

Jarno is of course entirely correct when he intimates that Wilhelm has been successful on the stage only when portraying a character largely congruent with his own, that is, when Wilhelm has not had to act, but only to be himself (pp. 550-51). From his earliest childhood, as we learn from Wilhelm himself in the first book of the novel, his attempts at acting have succeeded best with characters into whose situation he can put himself, consciously or unconsciously, characters with whom he can empathize with the least effort. The crucial quality of acting, however, that of being able to think oneself into *any* situation and transform oneself instantaneously (as represented by Serlo, the consummate actor), has been absent from Wilhelm's own attempts at acting.

The high point of the first five books of the novel is the production of *Hamlet*, a production remarkable for the impersonators of Hamlet, Ophelia, and the ghost of Hamlet's father. The ghost is played by a mysterious actor unknown to the company, who has never rehearsed the play with them. Wilhelm, more or less playing himself, is Hamlet, and Aurelie, also playing herself, is Ophelia, but each of them plays not with or for the other, but imagines a different partner. Wilhelm's Ophelia is Mariane, Aurelie's Hamlet is Lothario. In the sense that

Wilhelm's portrayal of Hamlet serves to bring a facet of his self to its fullest expression, it can hardly be called a triumph of art over life. He would be in grave danger if he were to misinterpret his success with Hamlet and thereby consider himself irrevocably destined for the theater. The person who plays the ghost, knowing full well the true nature of Wilhelm's acting, leaves behind a scarf with the message to flee—the only proper advice, even if Wilhelm is long puzzled by its meaning.

That the vigor of Wilhelm's Hamlet is to be attributed more to his character than to his art is effectively symbolized by the circumstances of the performance and the role played in it by the unknown "ghost," who appears at the proper moment and throws the whole company into confusion through the authenticity with which he plays his part. The *theatrical* horror and trepidation with which the actor of Hamlet and the others are meant to confront the ghost is replaced entirely by the real fright of the confrontation with this ghost who is to them an apparition intruding from outside their stage world. All the players, Wilhelm perhaps most of all, fall out of character and, through the shock of this unintended verisimilitude, are turned into actors playing themselves playing a role: "[Wilhelm] 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. . . 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" (p. 321).

The irony resulting from this intrusion of reality into the performance is all the greater when Wilhelm, straining to catch a glimpse of the mysterious "ghost's" face under the visor, hears him identify himself, "Ich bin der Geist deines Vaters," and is struck, momentarily at least, by the similarity of the ghost's voice to that of his own father (who has died recently). Being thus himself directly affected by the appearance of the ghost makes his portrayal theatrically (i.e., for the audience) even more effective: "Er veränderte während der langen Erzählung des Geistes seine Stellung so oft, schien so unbestimmt und verlegen, so aufmerksam und so zerstreut, daß sein Spiel eine allgemeine Bewunderung, so wie der Geist ein allgemeines Entsetzen erregte" (p. 322). The audience, of course, not knowing the true circumstances of the performance, is impressed by Wilhelm's "acting" and applauds him and the other actors all the more for falling out of

character, which leads them after the play to savor the acclaim with which they have met and to forget how little they have deserved the applause through their art.

The confrontation with this "ghost," played so convincingly by one of the members of the Tower Society, was intended to be a moment of self-knowledge for Wilhelm, a moment to make him ponder his situation and realize that he is unfit for the theater. At this particular point of his career, however, he profits from the experience only as it enhances his experience of himself, without troubling to think much about the significance of the event. He is puzzled only by the meaning of the ghost's message; even as late as the first evening at Lothario's castle, he imagines that the ghost should have warned him, not to flee, but to return into himself ("Kehre in dich selbst zurück!" p. 425), as though he had sinned by externalizing himself through his performance of Hamlet. He must still undergo a "metamorphosis" before he is able to understand that his "Innigkeit" and preoccupation with himself are not necessarily an advantage, but instead a hindrance to perceiving the world.

Wilhelm's metamorphosis⁵ takes place only after he has accepted Felix as his son, left the theater for good and returned with Felix to Lothario's castle. It may seem incongruous that it is Lothario, who can hardly have had much experience with children, who states the moral of Wilhelm's relationship to his son (even before he knows he has a son!): "Was sogar die Frauen an uns ungebildet zurücklassen, das bilden die Kinder aus, wenn wir uns mit ihnen abgeben" (p. 469)—but we are left with little doubt of the significance of this event. Wilhelm's return to the castle with Felix marks the beginning of a new stage in his own development, because it is the moment at which, rather abruptly, he is forced to turn his attention from himself to the outside world, as he realizes that he is no longer responsible only for himself, but also for a son who must be educated, and as he feels his inadequacy to the task.

Wilhelm's decision to take Felix and try to educate him symbolizes in a way his own rebirth, and it is typical of the Goethe of the 1790's with his dedication to morphological studies, that Wilhelm's metamorphosis expresses itself in a heightened appreciation of Nature: "[Wilhelm und Felix] gesellten sich. . . zum Gärtner, der die Namen und den Gebrauch mancher Pflanzen hererzählen mußte;

⁵ For a discussion of the meaning of metamorphosis in the *Lehrjahre* and of Wilhelm's particular metamorphosis see *Festschrift für Heinrich Henel*, pp. 70 ff.

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. An diesem Tage, dem vergnügtesten seines Lebens, schien auch seine eigne Bildung erst anzufangen" (p. 498). With this insight, Wilhelm must be considered to have discovered the way to a more realistic appraisal of the world and reached a stage of awareness denied him during his period in the theater (although it would seem that he often does not act accordingly in the remainder of the *Lehrjahre*). The confrontation with the "ghost" was not sufficient to shock Wilhelm into seeing the inadequacy of the theater and the misdirection of his desire for knowledge of the world. The confrontation with his son, however, soon leads him to the insight that eluded him in the theater. Now he sees, in the microcosm, as it were, what he was unable to get into focus before: "So schien ihm. . . die menschliche Natur erst durch die Beobachtung des Kindes deutlich zu werden. Das Theater war ihm, wie die Welt, nur als eine Menge ausgeschütteter Würfel vorgekommen, deren jeder einzeln auf seiner Oberfläche bald mehr, bald weniger bedeutet, und die allenfalls zusammengezählt eine Summe machen. Hier im Kinde lag ihm, konnte man sagen, ein einzelner Würfel vor, auf dessen vielfachen Seiten der Wert und der Unwert der menschlichen Natur so deutlich eingegraben war" (p. 502).

We see that here Wilhelm is on the way to knowledge, and yet analysis of the novel leads in the end to the conclusion that it is not through study of Nature and his fellow man that Wilhelm is led to an insight that would correspond to the Oheim's philosophy of life or Lothario's intuitive experience of the recurrence and oneness of Nature. When we consider the stages of Wilhelm's reception of and attitude toward art we shall find, instead, that his insight is gained after his "metamorphosis" only through a changed relationship to art and a new ability to perceive its ultimate meaning.

In the *Theatralische Sendung* Wilhelm is endowed with a considerable artistic talent. In the *Lehrjahre*, on the other hand, the conclusion becomes inescapable that Wilhelm, in his attempts at writing and acting, is a dilettante who does not realize for a long time that he cannot transcend his dilettantism simply by continuing to regard himself as an artist. Although he is contemptuous of the mere dilettante, he does not consider himself to be one, except in a few moments of despair which he eventually forgets and puts behind him;

but there is always a discrepancy between his wishes and intentions on the one hand and his capabilities on the other. He continually confuses the roles of artist and connoisseur in his artistic endeavors. He is so stimulated by art, or rather by his feelings about art, that he deceives himself and imagines himself destined to produce the same feeling in others. His reaction to his first reading of Shakespeare is symptomatic of this misunderstanding of his own capabilities: "Diese wenigen Blicke, die ich in Shakespeares Welt getan, reizen mich mehr als irgend etwas andres, in der wirklichen Welt schnellere Fortschritte vorwärts zu tun, mich in die Flut der Schicksale zu mischen, die über sie verhängt sind, und dereinst, wenn es mir glücken sollte, aus dem großen Meere der wahren Natur wenige Becher zu schöpfen und sie von der Schaubühne dem lechzenden Publikum meines Vaterlandes auszuspenden" (p. 192). He will never succeed in this wish, of course, because, as we have already seen, it is at most himself and his own "fate," never the world, that he ultimately portrays. The "wirkliche Welt" remains strange to him to the very end of his stay in the theater.

The problem of the dilettante occupied Goethe repeatedly through the years, at first with regard to his own unfulfilled ambitions in other arts than poetry, but increasingly in the 1790's in broader, more theoretical terms. In the sketches on dilettantism of 1799, Goethe attempts to develop a pathology of dilettantism in which we may find some clarification, *ex post facto*, to be sure, of Wilhelm's relationship to art in the first five books of the *Lehrjahre*. It is almost as though Goethe, in summing up the unfortunate results of dilettantism in the theater, had had Wilhelm Meister in mind. In the general sketch of 19 May 1799, he lists under the heading of "harm to the individual": "Karikatur der eigenen Fehler wegen der Rollenwahl nach der Individualität." And in the more detailed sketch devoted to "Schauspielkunst" on 26 May he adds other disadvantages for the individual, the most important of which is "Aufwand alles Interesses und aller Passion, ohne Frucht, ewiger Zirkel in einer einförmigen, immer wiederholten und zu nichts führenden Tätigkeit." The "ewiger Zirkel" of repetition is exactly the danger that awaits Wilhelm under the influence of Aurelie, not only in the theater, but also in life. He is saved from this danger only by association with Lothario and Natalie. Similarly, Wilhelm's urge to write and act is well described in psychological terms in the sketch for an "Abhandlung über den Dilettantismus": "Weil der Dilettant seinen Beruf zum Selbstproduzieren erst

aus den Wirkungen der Kunstwerke auf sich empfängt, so verwechselt er diese Wirkungen mit den objektiven Ursachen und Motiven und meint nun, den Empfindungszustand, in den er versetzt ist, auch produktiv und praktisch zu machen, wie wenn man mit dem Geruch einer Blume die Blume selbst hervorzubringen gedächte. Das an das Gefühl Sprechende, die letzte Wirkung aller poetischen Organisationen, welche aber den Aufwand der ganzen Kunst selbst voraussetzt, sieht der Dilettant als das Wesen derselben an und will damit selbst hervorbringen.”⁶

In spite of the dangers of dilettantism, which Goethe always considers to be greater than any compensating benefits, there is one potential consolation. If the dilettante recognizes in time that he is no true artist and abandons his artistic aspirations, he is on the way to becoming the true connoisseur, the person most capable of understanding and appreciating the work of the true artist: “Wenn er [als Dilettant] abtreten will, [bereitet er] sich den sichersten Weg zur Kennerschaft.”⁷ Or we should rather say, “den Weg zur Kennerschaft” of some particular type of art, for Goethe’s attempts to develop a typology of the artist imply for every type of artist a corresponding type of connoisseur who comprehends and shares the achievement of that artist and has eyes for his value. The intention to include the connoisseur in the typology is not explicit in the first typological essay, “Über einfache Nachahmung der Natur, Manier, Stil,” but emerges prominently in the later set of letters on art, “Der Sammler und die Seinigen.” In several passages of these letters, the various types of “Kunstliebhaber” or “Kenner” are circumscribed by the same categories and are analogous to the different types of artist, for example: “Es gibt Künstler und Liebhaber, welche wir die *Nachahmer* genannt haben. . . .”⁸ Or we find that there are “gelehrte Künstler, deren Werke man nicht ohne Kommentar versteht; gelehrte Liebhaber, die auch das einfachste natürlichste Werk nicht ohne Kommentar lassen können.”⁹ Finally, in the last letter, the young philosopher constructs an elaborate scheme of six qualities, in themselves “Einseitigkeiten,” but which “alle zusammen verbunden den wahren Künstler sowie den wahren Liebhaber ausmachen würden.”¹⁰ If we keep in mind the theoretical relationship between artist and con-

⁶ *Schriften zur Kunst*, I, new Cotta edition (Stuttgart, 1961), xvi, p. 420–21.

⁷ *Schriften zur Kunst*, p. 420–21.

⁸ *Schriften zur Kunst*, p. 357.

⁹ *Schriften zur Kunst*, p. 359.

¹⁰ *Schriften zur Kunst*, p. 387.

noisseur we may find that the short essay on "Nachahmung, Manier, Stil" can throw some light on Wilhelm's developing relationship to art.

The subjectivity which we have already noted in Wilhelm's perceptions of art, in his appraisal of the harper and his conception of the true artist, corresponds closely to the characteristics of the mannerist as Goethe describes him in the essay "Einfache Nachahmung der Natur, Manier, Stil": "Er erfindet sich selbst eine Weise, macht sich selbst eine Sprache, um das was er mit der Seele ergriffen, wieder nach seiner Art auszudrücken, . . . ohne . . . die Natur selbst vor sich zu haben, noch auch sich geradezu ihrer ganz lebhaft zu erinnern."¹¹ Goethe does not necessarily condemn the mannerist as such—but he is persuaded that the mannerist lacks the final objectivity which would allow him to attain to an art higher than mannerism, namely "Stil."¹² There are degrees of mannerism for Goethe, some relatively harmless and even helpful as an intermediary stage in the development of "Stil." But the danger of pure subjectivity devoid of Nature and reality is always present for the mannerist artist (and connoisseur)—and Wilhelm, as he is portrayed in the early part of the *Lehrjahre*, personifies the mannerist "Liebhaber" in the highest degree.

As with Wilhelm's belief in fate, his discussion with the Abbé in Book I exposes an attitude which he must transcend. Art for Wilhelm is essentially a stimulus to his feelings and not insight into Nature, as we must suppose Goethe conceives art in the 1790's. Such is precisely the basis of his love for the painting of the sick prince, not a very great work of art, as the Abbé tries to convince him: "Es war eben nicht das beste Gemälde, nicht gut zusammengesetzt, von keiner sonderlichen Farbe und die Ausführung durchaus maniert" (p. 70). To this criticism of his favorite painting Wilhelm can only reply by citing his feeling without giving any reason: "Das verstand ich nicht und versteh' es noch nicht; *der Gegenstand ist es*, der mich an einem Gemälde reizt, *nicht die Kunst*" (my emphasis). The appeal and, finally, the value of the work of art is thus a correlative of the emotional appeal of its "Gegenstand." Wilhelm does not yet understand—he thinks of the artist as creating from within himself, independently of reality, not as recreating Nature, and he is not yet ready to embrace the Abbé's teaching that the artist is one who has "rohe Materie [unter den Händen], die er zu einer Gestalt umbilden will" (p. 72).

¹¹ *Schriften zur Kunst*, p. 296.

¹² Goethe's conception of "mannerism" and "mannerist" and its relationship to any accepted usage of art historians, while interesting in itself, is a matter which cannot be discussed here.

It is enlightening to see the connection between the Abbé's criticism of Wilhelm's belief in fate and the criticism of his attachment to an art work that is "manieriert": both these traits in Wilhelm are expressions of an immature "Neigung" as yet uninformed by contemplation and true understanding. The Abbé imagines that if the grandfather's art collection had not been sold after his death, Wilhelm's reaction might have been different from what it is now: "Wahrscheinlich würde Ihnen . . . nach und nach der Sinn für die Werke selbst aufgegangen sein, so daß Sie nicht immer *nur sich selbst und Ihre Neigung in den Kunstwerken gesehen hätten*" (p. 70, my emphasis). Since, however, events seemingly have conspired against Wilhelm and the collection was sold, it could not be an instrument of his education, but has become instead a symbol of his loss (but something which is to be regained at the end of the novel). Instead of being educated by art for life, he must be educated by life for insight into art. His "metamorphosis," accomplished after his induction into the Tower Society, the turn from preoccupation with his own feelings to the world around him, becomes the crucial prerequisite for appreciating the art he encounters in the sphere of the Oheim, which we are to interpret as representing "Stil."

"Stil," as Goethe formulates it in the essay on "Nachahmung, Manier, Stil," is the result of intensive observation and contemplation of Nature—it is the art of one who has first learned to imitate Nature, then to express Nature in his own way, and has finally become a morphologist: "Gelangt die Kunst durch . . . genaues und tiefes Studium der Gegenstände selbst endlich dahin, daß sie die Eigenschaften der Dinge und die Art, wie sie bestehen, genau und immer genauer kennenlernt, daß sie die Reihe der Gestalten übersieht und die verschiedenen charakteristischen Formen nebeneinandersetzen und nachzuahmen weiß: dann wird der *Stil* der höchste Grad, wohin sie gelangen kann. . . ."¹³ "Stil" has not only artistic value, it is an epistemology providing knowledge on a par with the highest metaphysics: "So ruht der *Stil* auf den tiefsten Grundfesten der Erkenntnis, auf dem Wesen der Dinge, insofern uns erlaubt ist, es in sichtbaren und greiflichen Gestalten zu erkennen." Thus "Stil" represents the level at which art "sich den höchsten menschlichen Bemühungen gleichstellen darf."

By the time Natalie conducts him into the "Saal der Vergangen-

¹³ *Schriften zur Kunst*, p. 297.

heit," Wilhelm has given up all pretensions of being an artist and is no longer a dilettante. He has also left that stage at which he had eyes only for the mannerist artist and is ready for a supreme moment of enlightenment. As he gazes at the works of art with which the philosophical Oheim had the room decorated, he recognizes in the archetypes portrayed here the "Reihe der Gestalten," the "verschiedenen charakteristischen Formen nebeneinander," which together make up the world of Nature. He has reached the highest level of connoisseurship, the appreciation of "Stil." It is an ineffable experience, but he feels the claim of this art on his soul: "Es spricht aus dem Ganzen, es spricht aus jedem Teile mich an, ohne daß ich jenes begreifen, ohne daß ich diese mir besonders zueignen könnte! Welchen Zauber ahn' ich in diesen Flächen, diesen Linien, diesen Höhen und Breiten, diesen Massen und Farben!" (pp. 541-42). There is a world of difference between this new appreciation of lines and surfaces and his earlier fascination with the mannerist "Gegenstand." In this realm of death devoted to the symbols of life he is purified, and when he emerges from the "Saal der Vergangenheit" he is prepared to deserve the love of Natalie and regain his inheritance. The fact that Mignon collapses and dies on the steps of the "Saal der Vergangenheit" as Wilhelm emerges, cannot be interpreted as a mere coincidence; it is a symbol that he has left the world of feeling represented by her and has entered a world of higher knowledge and insight.

We set out at the beginning to show that the end of the *Lehrjahre* can be considered a homecoming on a higher level, as though Wilhelm were some analogon of the prodigal who, having seen the error of his ways, returns, greatly matured, to a home which has taken on a greater luster than it had when he left. Now that we have sought to clarify the changes in Wilhelm's attitudes during the course of his wanderings, we are prepared to consider the evidence that in the end he has only come home to his own.

First we must consider again the role of Felix in the novel. We have already pointed out that through his presence Wilhelm is forced to turn to the outside world, to educate himself by educating his son. But this does not exhaust Felix's significance for Wilhelm's homecoming. He has also a symbolic role in joining Wilhelm and Natalie at the end of the novel, a role which has been noted by other scholars, especially Erich Trunz in his introduction to the Hamburg edition of the *Lehrjahre*. Felix's role is suggested symbolically in at least three significant passages: the appearance of Natalie in Wilhelm's dream

his first night at Lothario's castle, where she saves Felix from the dangers of fire and water and then walks hand in hand with Wilhelm away from his father and Mariane (that is, toward life, since the father and Mariane are dead); the arrival at Natalie's castle, where Felix is so tired he falls asleep almost immediately ("das Kind lag zwischen ihnen beiden auf dem Teppich und schlief sanft," p. 513); and the anxious night spent watching over Felix after he has supposedly drunk a fatal dose of opium: Wilhelm "hatte die Füße des Knaben auf seinem Schoße, Kopf and Brust lagen auf dem ihrigen, so teilten sie die angenehme Last und die schmerzlichen Sorgen und verharrten, bis der Tag anbrach, in der unbequemen und traurigen Lage; Natalie hatte Wilhelmen ihre Hand gegeben, sie sprachen kein Wort, sahen auf das Kind und sahen einander an" (p. 602).

The role played by Felix in uniting Wilhelm and Natalie at the end of the novel, however, can be seen as a highly developed repetition, enhanced by its explicit symbolism, of the role that Felix, as yet unborn, should have played in the first book of the novel. There Wilhelm's belief that he has made Mariane pregnant is his most compelling reason for trying to persuade her to marry him. Mariane in turn feels that the child she is carrying should tie her more closely to Wilhelm, but events—Werner's determination to protect Wilhelm during his sickness by returning Mariane's letters unopened, and above all Wilhelm's special Providence, as we have called his guiding genius—put an end to the liaison. At the end of the novel, through his misfortune, Felix brings to realization the alliance which he could not produce at the beginning of the novel because Wilhelm was not yet ripe enough to find himself by remaining at home. In the beginning Wilhelm loses his love, Mariane, and goes out into the world, vaguely hoping to find her again; instead of Mariane he finds his son, Felix, who reminds him of her love and proves her worthiness beyond a doubt; but he also leads Wilhelm to his true love, Natalie, and his true home among Lothario and his friends.

A most striking indication that the end of the novel is in reality a return on a higher level is the role played by the painting of the sick prince.¹⁴ When Wilhelm talks with the Abbé in the first book about his grandfather's collection, we find that he was so attached to this par-

¹⁴ See the perceptive and revealing article by Christoph E. Schweitzer, "Wilhelm Meister und das Bild vom kranken Königssohn," *PMLA*, LXXII (1957), 419-32. Schweitzer examines this painting in its allegorical function in the *Lehrjahre* and the *Wanderjahre*; we are interested here in the picture as a symbol of Wilhelm's life, without reference to its allegorical meaning.

ticular painting because it was hung in the outermost vestibule, where the children were allowed to play, and where Wilhelm could thus become familiar with it. That the painting was hung in the vestibule and not in the inner rooms was, according to the Abbé, a sign that the grandfather recognized its inferior worth and would not allow it to be hung with the more precious pieces among his collection. When, in the eighth book, Wilhelm arrives at Natalie's castle, he sees immediately, while climbing the stairs to her apartments, statues and busts which seem familiar to him ("Jugendeindrücke verlöschen nicht," explains the narrator), and it is "als wenn er ein Märchen erlebte" (p. 513).

After the first moment of wonderment at finding these works of art here, so unexpectedly, he reaches the top of the stairs and is shown into the apartment: "Er trat in den Vorsaal, und zu seinem noch größern Erstaunen erblickte er das wohlbekannte Bild vom kranken Königssohn an der Wand." The painting is hung in the same way, in the same relative place as when he was a child, but this time he is shown into the innermost rooms, where the greatest treasure is to be found. Whereas when he was a child he spent hours admiring the sick prince because he was not allowed past the vestibule, this time "er hatte kaum Zeit, einen Blick [auf das Gemälde] zu werfen, der Bediente nötigte ihn durch ein paar Zimmer in ein Kabinett. Dort, hinter einem Lichtschirm, saß ein Frauenzimmer und las." It is of course Natalie, of whom he has dreamed so long, whose door is guarded by the painting of the sick prince.¹⁵

Wilhelm realizes the next day, at the very latest, the significance of Natalie's castle for him, as he relates to her his feelings of the night before: "Es ist kein Haus, es ist ein Tempel, und Sie sind die würdige Priesterin, ja der Genius selbst . . . Diese Bilder hatten nicht über mich zu trauern, sie sahen mich mit hohem Ernst an und schlossen meine früheste Zeit unmittelbar an diesen Augenblick" (p. 519). Wilhelm could not help but find a foretaste of happiness in Natalie's

¹⁵ It seems to me that Schweitzer errs in his comment on the fact that the painting of the sick prince occupies the same place of prominence in Natalie's castle as formerly in the grandfather's house: "Dasselbe Gemälde hatte Wilhelms Großvater seiner Wertlosigkeit wegen in den äußersten Vorsaal verbannt. . . . Es handelt sich hierbei also um einen kleinen Mangel an Folgerichtigkeit des Romans, der nur darin seine Erklärung finden kann, daß dieses Gemälde eben eine so wichtige Rolle in Wilhelm Meisters Leben spielen sollte" (Schweitzer, p. 424). There is of course no inconsistency involved here—in both cases the peripheral location of the painting with respect to the other treasures is only one of seeming prominence. The difference is that when he arrives at Natalie's castle Wilhelm is allowed to advance beyond the vestibule where the painting is displayed.

castle. The thought of having to leave this temple, of being expelled from Paradise, is most painful to him when he begins to suspect that all of Lothario's and Natalie's friends are conspiring to send him away, when he loves Natalie and yet does not dare declare himself: "Die Gegenwart der alten bekannten Kunstwerke zog ihn an und stieß ihn ab. Er konnte nichts, was ihn umgab, weder ergreifen noch lassen, alles erinnerte ihn an alles; er übersah den ganzen Ring seines Lebens, nur lag er leider zerbrochen vor ihm und schien sich auf ewig nicht schließen zu wollen" (p. 570). He becomes so lost in his anguish that he even begins to doubt his own existence: "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" (p. 571).

Of course the narrator, having brought his hero this far, does not intend to dismiss him from this Paradise. While climbing the stairs to Natalie's apartment, it seems to Wilhelm "als wenn er ein Märchen erlebte." This is in truth a most pertinent way of describing what takes place in Natalie's castle between the time of Wilhelm's arrival and the betrothal at the end of the novel. The painting of the sick prince guards the door to the innermost sanctum of Natalie, the priestess, and once having entered, all is yet a mystery to Wilhelm. He is living as though under a charm, experiencing the magic power of "all das Gefundene und Wiedergefundene," not knowing how to deal with his situation and unable to speak because his lips are sealed by the mystery—until finally the spell is broken by Friedrich, who teases Wilhelm for pining after his love; and the spell once having been broken, the happy ending of the fairy tale ensues.

This ending was in fact anticipated many years previously. The "schöne Seele" relates at one point concerning the Oheim: "Wegen des kleinen Gutes, auf dem wir uns befanden, schien er besondere Gedanken zu hegen: 'Ich werde es', sagte er, 'nur einer Person überlassen, die zu kennen, zu schätzen und zu genießen weiß, was es enthält, und die einsieht, wie sehr ein Reicher und Vornehmer besonders in Deutschland Ursache habe, etwas Mustermäßiges aufzustellen'" (p. 410). After the Oheim's death, it is Natalie who seems to have inherited this castle. But she cannot possibly be the person meant by the Oheim in his conversation with the "schöne Seele," for she herself admits to Wilhelm that she has no great appreciation for the treasures stored in the castle, the works of art, the library, the

scientific collections. She hasn't even a sense for the architecture and beauty of the castle itself. She has no need to appreciate these things—she is Nature herself, in its most beautiful, its truest representation, and cannot be beautified still further through any enrichment of her soul by art. The priestess is not the owner of the temple, but only its custodian until the rightful owner arrives to take possession. The Oheim, acting as the agent of Providence in buying the collection of the grandfather—and thus seemingly depriving Wilhelm of what should have been his—has guarded it well, enriched it greatly by adding to it other treasures, and left it in the custody of Natalie, until Wilhelm, the little sick prince, arrives, is healed, and takes possession of his own.