

Authorship and Its Resignation in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* 6

The transition from Pietist autobiography to the Bildungsroman might seem to be a natural and easy one. To be sure, these novels are written in the third rather than the first person, but they reveal the inner experience of a single protagonist and thus retain much of the feel of a first-person narrative. Moreover, Pietist confessions and conversion narratives might be written in either first or third person, with the latter following the established genre of saints' lives. Both Pietist life-writing and Bildungsroman dealt with the lives and experiences of ordinary people; both explored the nuances of subjective feeling—indeed in a letter to Herder Goethe referred to *Wilhelm Meister* as a “Pseudo-Konfession,” a pseudo-confession.¹ But the discontinuities are nonetheless dramatic. For however attentive Pietist life-writing was to the subjective life of the individual, this attention was directed toward discerning in the midst of irreducible particularity and meaningless contingency a familiar pattern, of encountering in the depths of personal feeling and apparent coincidence the hand of God. Insofar as early German models took their point of departure from Pietist life-writing, they were governed by a distinctive problematic: How could one narrate the individual's course of Bildung in the absence of authoritative exemplars, a preestablished path of Bildung, a recognized endpoint for ethical formation? If we are not to be remade after the image of God in Christ, after whose image, then, and how can any form or norm that is *imposed* on the self become what the self truly *is*? If we are to form *ourselves*, in what relation does this self-forming stand to the circumstances in which we find ourselves, the relationships in which we stand, the experiences we undergo—

that is, to the ways in which we are formed prior to any forming we may be said ourselves to undertake?

For Goethe, the central challenge was finding a form or order for one's life that brings it into harmony with the natural and social worlds and that is not merely contingent, alien, or heteronomous but native to the self and so embraced freely.² He took some hints toward a solution from Pietism. By delving within, into the inner experience and feeling of the subject, one could hope to distinguish between what was native and what was adventitious to the self. The task, as Goethe conceived it, was not to discover the workings of a transcendent deity, but neither was it simply to discover one's unique authentic self. Rather, with an understanding of *Bildung* clearly indebted to Paracelsus's understanding of entelechy and filtered through "a Spinoza transposed into life-categories," Goethe hoped to discern an immanent teleology in nature.³ There was, he believed, no deity external to the universe, guiding its workings or providentially watching over individual creatures. Rather, each organism had an immanent form and a drive to realize that form by way of successive phases of metamorphosis.⁴ In so doing, that organism also contributed to the self-realization of the larger wholes of which it was a part, from the species up through the universe itself, also conceived of as a kind of organic entity. While there was in this sense a harmony between self-realization and the realization of the whole, this did not mean that the realization of immanent form was a process free of conflict and uncertainty; it required struggle against disorder, against inertia, and in particular instances there was no guarantee of success, no pre-established harmony.⁵ Moreover, the development of human character could not simply be assimilated to the metamorphosis of plants, influential as his study of the latter was for Goethe's understanding of organic transformation.⁶ For consciousness and agency transform this process: On the one hand, human moral agents form intentions and act for the sake of ends, they are not simply vessels for the unfolding of inbuilt tendencies.⁷ On the other hand, neither can they transparently grasp and so actively realize their immanent form. Rather, they struggle through experience, through acting on the world and experiencing the consequences of their actions, through trying on various identities, through admiring and emulating others, grasping how they are perceived by others, and engaging and relating with others. Only in the course of this messy concrete experience, full of conflict

and failure and confusion, do they move toward understanding of self, others, and the world.

Goethe clearly did not understand Bildung as something achieved through a straightforward self-assertion of the will. Nor did he regard the endpoint as self-sufficient autonomy. Nevertheless, the earliest reception of the novel helped to cement a distorted view of *Wilhelm Meister* and, subsequently, of popular conceptions of the Bildungsroman and of Bildung itself: Wilhelm was alternately praised for having successfully formed himself and arrived at a point of independent activity, on the one hand, or criticized for his passivity and therefore viewed as having failed at the task of Bildung. In one of the most influential statements about the novel, Schiller wrote that Wilhelm was stepping “from an empty and undefined ideal into a defined active life, but without losing his idealizing power in the process.”⁸ There is truth in this depiction of Wilhelm’s movement from indeterminacy to determinacy, but it is important to add that Wilhelm himself is depicted throughout the novel less as active and self-assertive than as sensitive and responsive; in the rare moments in which he seeks to impose his life-plan on the world, his efforts consistently backfire. He sets out to become all things and learns that he must become something specific and therefore limited; he sets out to realize himself and learns that he must serve others; he sets out in adolescent rebellion against the life of commerce to which his father summons him, and learns that technical rationality is not simply to be dismissed in favor of dreamy ideals but to be placed in service of the common good. He learns, further, that the process of becoming himself is inherently social and relational, that he cannot narrate his own identity without the help of other narrators and narrations, and cannot meaningfully act without interacting with, and finally acting together with, other agents.

Goethe shared Humboldt and Schiller’s sense that art had a critical role to play in reversing the emerging dominance of instrumental reason and restoring the possibility of integral personal and social fulfillment in harmony with nature. Among the various artistic genres, narrative fiction could best both display and foster the messy process of discerning—primarily through the experience of failure and conflict—one’s given talents and capacities and how these could be realized in service to the common good, the realization of humanity.

To grasp the character of this process was also to see, however, that

the artist's contribution could not be simply a matter of finding the right sensuous clothing for pre-given abstract ideas. Resisting Schiller's advice to make his philosophy of *Bildung* more explicit within the novel, Goethe sought instead to take a backseat to the immanent unfolding of the characters and circumstances he had set in motion. This suggests that Goethe grasped that his understanding of *Bildung* rendered his own role as author problematic. On the one hand, he clearly brought his understanding of immanent teleology and of organic *Bildung* to the task of writing. On the other hand, he shied away from taking on the role of an external Providence, determining the characters from without. Even if this is in some sense necessarily the place of the author of a novel, Goethe set a question mark over the author's authority to assume such a role. As we shall see, he thereby also set a question mark over the adequacy of his own theory of *Bildung*. The novel itself succeeds where the theory fails, however. It succeeds by way of its very refusal of tidy closure. In repudiating claims to final authority and remaining ever open to dialogical encounter, Goethe grasps that genuine *Bildung* requires resisting the temptation to self-authorizing human autarchy.

Fate in *Wilhelm Meister*

The plot of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* is long and complex but can nevertheless be summed up briefly: Wilhelm, growing up in a bourgeois household where he is expected to follow his father into the life of commerce and thereby become a productive middle-class citizen, instead entertains aspirations of helping to cultivate a cultured public through the establishment of a German National Theater. Sent on a business trip, he falls in with a traveling theatrical troupe and indulges his acting fantasies, only to realize after some time that he has idealized the tawdry reality of theatrical life. Groping around for a sense of direction, Wilhelm discovers that a mysterious Tower Society has intervened at various stages of his journey to influence the course of events and offer him veiled guidance. When Wilhelm seeks direction, they retreat, yet when he attempts to act independently, he discovers that they have anticipated and outmaneuvered him. Via a series of dramatic reversals and unexpected revelations, the tale ends happily: Wilhelm is extricated from a misguided engagement to the capable

but unimaginative Therese, becomes involved in the noble Lothario's enterprise of dismantling feudalism on his estates, and wins the heart and hand of the benevolent and aristocratic Natalie. But instead of settling down into some specific form of active life, he sets out on yet another journey, postponing marriage and settled adult life.

It is obvious that *Wilhelm Meister* places the ideal of a useful, productive business life in question. Like Schiller in the *Letters on Aesthetic Education*, Wilhelm Meister rebels against becoming a cog in a wheel or having his varied talents and capacities reduced to a means to profit, an end that itself is an empty means. To his friend Werner, whose end in life is to accumulate cash, he says, "You are treating form as though it were substance, and in all your adding up and balancing of accounts you usually ignore the true sum total of life."⁹ Wilhelm resists doing what is socially expected of him, but he is much less clear about what he should do or become. Before leaving home, he experiments with writing fiction, but Werner points out that he never finishes the projects he undertakes. Even midway through the novel, having experienced firsthand the tawdry side of theatrical life and looking on bourgeois business life with new respect, he remains unsure which direction to go. He asks himself whether it was simply rebellion against bourgeois respectability that led him to the theater, or whether it was something higher and more worthy; he works to disentangle a sense of inner vocation from external occasion. He thus grapples with the question of what constitutes genuine self-determination. What distinguishes a whim from an authentic sense of inner vocation? What if a sense of calling turns out to be self-deceptive illusion? Or manipulation from without? Hanging in the balance, he wishes that some outer force would tip the scale, and in the next moment he hints at the thought that it already has. His most central need is to develop and form his inner predispositions to the good and beautiful, and the opportunity to do so, in the form of an offer to go on stage with the troupe he has been accompanying, has fallen into his lap. "Must I not respect the power of Fate for having, without any cooperation on my part, brought me to the goal of all I wish?"¹⁰ What he most hoped for has happened by coincidence, without his having actively brought it about.

There is a certain irony when a character in a novel wonders aloud whether his or her development is being determined by some outer force, since of course the author providentially determines not only

the inner capacities of all of the characters but also the outer circumstances in which these come to expression. But Goethe sharpens this point and thus induces the reader to reflect on agency in ethical formation, in a variety of ways.¹¹ Most dramatically, he embodies this external guiding hand in the form of the Tower Society. But he also uses an extended discussion of Hamlet in the novel's fourth and fifth books as an opportunity for meta-level reflection both on literary genre and on fate.

Different as their external circumstances are, Hamlet is in an important sense Wilhelm's double. He is, at least in Wilhelm's eyes, defined not by his action but by his sentiments; he is passive and is determined by Fate.¹² *Hamlet* is thus peculiar in uniting characteristics that Wilhelm associates respectively with the novel and with drama. The hero of a novel, he argues, is typically passive, he undergoes the action of the novel rather than acting, and in so doing his sentiments are revealed as they develop through the play of contingency. The hero of a drama, in contrast, is typically active, yet his action is governed, often tragically, by Fate.¹³ Hamlet is passive and delves into his sentiments rather than acting, yet the course of events, as is typical in dramatic fiction, is determined by Fate. *Wilhelm Meister*, meanwhile, represents the same idiosyncratic combination of characteristics in novel form, for here too what appears to be mere coincidence turns out to be Fate—or at least the guiding hand of the Tower Society.

Wilhelm argues with conviction that *Hamlet* is a work of genius even if it refuses to deliver what the audience expects—a hero with a sharply defined character whose action is energetically directed at a particular goal. Here “the hero has no plan, but the play has” (HA 7:4.15, 254; E 151). Serlo, actor and manager of a quality standing theater that agrees to employ the vagabond actors, is not persuaded that Wilhelm has in fact succeeded in capturing the meaning of the play: “You don't much compliment providence by thus elevating the poet. You seem to be assigning to the glory of the poet what others attribute to providence, namely a purpose and a plan that he never thought of.”¹⁴ Heavily ironic as Serlo's comment is, it underscores an important point: that the poet, Goethe as much as Shakespeare, stands in for Providence in the artistic work—or, perhaps, on Goethe's view, offers the model on which the whole notion of Providence has been constructed; a hidden hand operating at a level outside the actual action of the plot, which nevertheless determines its course and out-

come. Goethe thus deliberately disrupts the artistic illusion at which the novel can so excel—of suggesting how meaning and form emerge out of mere contingency and accident. Goethe rubs the reader's nose in the fact that an authorial mind stands behind this appearance of contingency, working to introduce characters and plot developments in a natural way and leading them to a satisfying conclusion.

Looking back on the novel thirty years after its publication, Goethe suggested that “the whole seems to want to say nothing other than that the human being, despite all stupidity and error, is led by a higher hand and does arrive finally at a happy end.”¹⁵ Yet this judgment is not left unproblematized, either. He clearly does not mean simply to assert that his authorial role as Providence was successfully achieved in the novel and that this summary statement reflects his intention for the work. For he several times calls *Wilhelm Meister* one of the most “incalculable” (*inkalkulabelsten*) productions, declaring himself almost unable to assess it.¹⁶ Goethe seems thereby to identify himself with Wilhelm, who knows full well that he has not earned his good fortune and who can hardly believe that it is real. That is, Goethe himself seems to suggest that the novel was hardly mere putty in the hands of its creator and that it rather became something he had never quite intended. In calling it “incalculable” Goethe seems to confess that he, its author, cannot in any straightforward way be identified with the higher hand that led it to a happy end, even if by rights he ought to have been. In the midst of writing *Wilhelm Meister*, he communicates to Schiller, hardly sounding sovereign over his artistic production: “I have just held tight to my idea and will rejoice, if it leads me out of this labyrinth.”¹⁷ Reading the novel again in 1821, he finds it highly symbolic, speaking through the various characters of something more general and higher.¹⁸

Wilhelm himself is eager throughout the novel to attribute the course his life takes, whether of a happy or tragic cast, to Fate. He takes the fact that his first love, Mariane, is an actress as an indication that he is indeed destined for the theater: “Fate, he decided, was extending its helping hand to him, through Mariane, to draw him out of that stifling, draggle-tailed middle-class existence he had so long desired to escape.”¹⁹ When the reader becomes aware of the Tower Society, it seems natural to conclude that it has served as a natural substitute for Providence, working behind the scenes to influence Wilhelm's development, sending emissaries at various points who in

“chance” encounters with Wilhelm slip him veiled bits of advice. It is therefore particularly significant that these mysterious strangers repeatedly take it upon themselves to warn Wilhelm against a passive faith in Providence. So, for instance, the stranger who meets him in the first book, and who turns out to know more about his family background than he himself, declares himself troubled to hear the word *fate* in the mouth of a young man who instead of using his reason and understanding to negotiate his own path in life, ascribes to pure accident a kind of reason “and accepts this religiously.”²⁰ But when Wilhelm presses the stranger, asking whether he really denies that there is any power that reigns over us and directs everything to our benefit, the man refuses to be pinned down. What matters at the moment is not what he himself thinks but what is productive for Wilhelm’s development: “Here it’s just a question of which way of picturing it [*Vorstellungsart*] is for our best [*zu unserm Besten gereicht*].”²¹ The phrase Goethe uses here, “zu unserem Besten gereicht,” is commonly used in Pietist circles to speak specifically of the character of God’s providential care of the individual. While the Tower Society is acting as Providence in Wilhelm’s life, it can do so successfully only insofar as Wilhelm remains unaware of the society’s machinations and takes responsibility for his own life.

The stranger Wilhelm meets in book 1 does not merely warn against a passive acceptance of Fate. In its stead he offers an understanding of how it is that human beings can “deserve to be called an earthly divinity”: “The fabric of this world is formed out of necessity and chance. Human reason situates itself between the two and knows how to master them: it treats what is necessary as the ground of its existence; it knows how to direct, lead, and use what is contingent.”²²

In order to master necessity and chance in this way, one must of course properly distinguish them; but this is just the problem: how to do so? The necessary lies both within and without, in both subjective and objective forms—in the natural laws of matter and motion, of course, but more importantly for the purposes of this novel, in the subjective necessity of one’s inner being. The individual’s central talents and capacities are regarded as given, constituting a kind of law for that person, constraining his or her possibilities. To attempt to become someone else, to realize a form of life alien to oneself, is an enterprise bound to be frustrated. But it is also a mistake to confuse contingency with necessity—that is, to take some passing impulse

as an expression of one's deepest being, or some external constraint as unalterable. Wilhelm is repeatedly depicted as confusing these; he rightly senses that he has an inner need to help others but thinks that he must accomplish this through the theater. Or again, at some level he senses his need for Natalie, but he wrongly assumes that their union is an impossibility.

How successful is the society in its efforts to assist Wilhelm? The whole idea of the Tower Society is bound to be resented by most contemporary readers as an alien, even far-fetched element. Within its own historical context, however, it was no more an artificial intrusion than the voice given to Pietism in the person of the Beautiful Soul. The Freemasons and other secret societies enjoyed a considerable vogue in the closing decades of the eighteenth century, as one expression of the effort to construct a kind of transnational brotherhood and a naturalistic substitute for inherited religious traditions. Indeed Goethe plays throughout the novel with some of the conceits of Masonry, centrally with the very idea of Wilhelm Meister's "apprenticeship," following the Masonic degrees of initiation from apprentice to journeyman to master. Within *Wilhelm Meister*, however, the society is more than this; it is a way of grappling with the role that external guiding forces or authorities can take when the very notions of external providence and external authority are problematized in favor of organic, internal teleology. On the one hand, Goethe uses the society as a mouthpiece for his own philosophy of ethical formation. On the other hand, he treats the society and its efforts with a light irony that invites the reader to further test and probe that philosophy rather than simply taking it as authoritative.

The Tower Society and Its Limits

It seems excessive to term the society's interventions "bumbling," as one critic would have it, but it is certainly the case that the society, however it seeks to employ the props of transcendence, remains thoroughly human and fallible.²³ It becomes clear, for instance, that the Abbé, the doctor, and Jarno, the three leading lights of the Tower Society, are not of one mind when it comes to the best means by which to further Wilhelm's development.²⁴ Nor is Natalie, though perhaps the most unqualifiedly successful "product" of the society's efforts,

uncritical of the approach they have taken; certainly she does not herself emulate it, and she hints that the Abbé's own ideas may have undergone some transformation over time.²⁵

The Abbé is obviously the leader of the *Turmgesellschaft*, and it is thus his educational philosophy, Rousseauian in inspiration, that holds the greatest sway. The key to education, in his mind, is identifying an individual's central inborn talents and creating an environment in which these can flourish. While he concedes that following one's instincts and drives can lead into error, he insists that learning through one's own blunders is often the best path toward grasping the way of life that is truly appropriate to one's own nature.²⁶ The task of the educator is thus to work behind the scenes to manipulate external circumstances in a productive way so that nature can take its course; not attempting directly to change or even mold the individual's actions or character. Whereas the Pietist must discern God's hand in her life, Rousseau's educator can remain backstage. In this way individuals will quickly grasp the natural consequences of their actions and learn from their successes as well as failures how best to realize their inner drives within the world. "In order to promote a child's education [*Erziehung des Menschen*], one must first find out where its desires and inclinations lie, and then enable it to satisfy those desires and further those inclinations as quickly as possible. If someone has chosen a wrong path, he can correct this before it is too late, and once he has found what suits him, stick to this firmly and develop [*fortbilde*] more vigorously."²⁷

Natalie admits that she personally has no complaint to lodge against the Abbé's philosophy of education, since she considers herself to have been well guided by it. But she recognizes that the results are rather questionable in the case of her sister, the somewhat frivolous Countess, and her younger brother Friedrich, who seems incapable of taking anything in earnest (HA 7:8.3, 521). Within her own sphere of influence, among the peasants she takes under her wing, Natalie proceeds very differently from the Abbé. As her basic impulse is to respond immediately to every need she sees, she is not capable of watching from behind the scenes as someone goes astray. She insists on articulating clear rules and impressing (*einschärfen*) them upon the children in her care, to give their lives a certain support or security (*Halt*). She claims no infallible authority to discern these rules or laws; her point is the rather more skeptical one that "it is better to err because of principles than to do so from arbitrariness of nature, and my

observation of human beings tells me that there is always some gap in their natures which can only be filled by a principle expressly communicated to them.”²⁸ She sees in the idiosyncratic individual not a native law that must be discovered by delving within, but a gap that must be filled in order to give life a steady direction. Jarno, meanwhile, confesses that he can’t stand to watch people err, and so he has often argued with the Abbé over how best to foster Wilhelm’s development, with the Abbé insisting that Wilhelm has to learn from his own errors and Jarno wanting to confront him with the blunt truth in order to save him from wasting his energies on aspirations doomed to fail.²⁹ And in fact Jarno acts accordingly on occasion, telling Wilhelm bluntly that he is not cut out to be an actor and will never transform society through the theater. It is also Jarno who reveals the conflicts within the society and who describes how they have evolved over the years. So the Abbé’s philosophy does not go unquestioned. The Abbé’s approach clearly is nevertheless ascendant. Both Jarno and Natalie describe their own differences from that approach as stemming from their own peculiar personalities, and in various ways acknowledge the authority of the Abbé, Jarno by calling himself a very bad teacher (*Lehrmeister*) who has contributed the least to the society and to humankind, and Natalie by praising the Abbé’s tolerance of her own approach. But the novel does not offer any reconciliation of these tensions—by, for instance, suggesting that Natalie’s approach is appropriate for young children or that Jarno’s brisk honesty simply serves to underscore lessons already learned from experience.

Not only are there conflicts within the Tower Society that impede it from acting in a fully coordinated way; it is also clearly hampered by its lack of omniscience. When Jarno arrives to announce the good news that the seemingly unsurmountable obstacles to a match between Therese and Lothario have been cleared away, as Therese is not in fact the daughter of a woman with whom Lothario had a passing affair, he is shocked to discover that Wilhelm has in the meantime become engaged to the wonderfully able but prosaic Therese. The society apparently neither anticipated nor knew of this turn of events.³⁰ Even Jarno, despite the warnings he has delivered against relying on Fate, can now do little more than offer high-sounding words that ring empty in Wilhelm’s ears and hope for the best: “It is not our fault that we got ourselves into this muddle. . . . Let us hope that good fortune will get us out of it.”³¹

The Tower Society is humanized in a third way in that it is portrayed as itself a work in progress, continually reinventing itself, in process of development even as it seeks to influence the development of individuals under its survey. It employs some of the ritual trappings of speculative Freemasonry; at the key moment when the Tower Society decides to reveal itself to Wilhelm, it does so by summoning him to a ritual up in the tower of Lothario's castle, a space rendered mysterious and unfamiliar through the presence of darkness, tapestries, a cloth-covered table "instead of an altar," and figures who appear suddenly from behind curtains, speak, and again disappear. Clearly there is a deliberate attempt here to draw on the power of religious ritual to construct a sense of an alternate, deeper reality alongside ordinary mundane experience. It is in this context that Wilhelm is informed, "You are saved, and on the way to your goal," and presented with his certificate of completed apprenticeship.³² Yet a few pages later Jarno pokes fun at the ritual: "Everything you saw in the tower was the relics of a youthful enterprise that most initiates first took very seriously but will probably now just smile at."³³

Wilhelm is aghast: "So they are just playing games with those portentous words and signs? . . . We are ceremoniously conducted to a place that inspires awe, we witness miraculous apparitions, are given scrolls containing mysterious, grandiose aphorisms which we barely understand, are told we have been apprentices and are now free — and are none the wiser."³⁴

Jarno makes an effort to defend the practices, at least as props for the young, who "have an unusually strong hankering after mysteries, ceremonies and grandiloquence"; a young person wants "to feel, albeit dimly and indefinitely, that his whole being is affected and involved."³⁵ Jarno's own unusual passion for knowledge and clarity almost derailed the entire enterprise; aware now of the excesses of his own prosaic bent, he still regards disenchantment as salutary, even if he recognizes that it is destructive for most if it comes too soon. Wilhelm, meanwhile, is offended at having been subjected to yet another level of patronizing manipulation, although he certainly does want to feel that his whole being is affected and involved in discerning his path forward in life.

Much as Wilhelm has wished at various points in his journey that Fate would make his path clear, when it is revealed to him that the Tower Society has been working behind the scenes on the project of

his formation, he suffers under the knowledge. He feels himself to have been robbed of his independent agency, and his engagement to Therese issues out of his determination to initiate an act that is genuinely his own.³⁶ When the result of this act is a mess from which he sees no way of extricating himself, Wilhelm is close to despair; he resents the thought that he has been manipulated by the society but can only hope in desperation that they have some way of helping him out of the fix in which he finds himself. He is particularly aggrieved that they have already declared his apprenticeship over; he is now officially a “Meister” but has no clue what to do with himself.³⁷ By refraining from idealizing the Tower Society, Goethe refuses to offer a kind of closure that would falsify the genuine problematic of *Bildung*—the ordinary human being is not a fictional character created by an author and does not have a Tower Society looking over her shoulder. How is she to distinguish between the necessary and the contingent and so discover the inner laws according to which she can authentically live? It is not enough to be able to articulate this as a general principle. Hence Wilhelm’s anger when, in the midst of his anguish over his engagement to Therese and his painfully suppressed love for Natalie, Jarno reads to him from his *Lehrbrief*, instructing him that “a person who has great potentiality for development will in due course acquire knowledge of himself and the world.”³⁸ This pronouncement further confuses Wilhelm; despairing equally over himself and over the prospect of help from the society, he is on the brink of trying to lose himself in aimless travel when he discovers that Natalie loves him and that Therese has secretly made his engagement with Natalie the condition of her own engagement with Lothario. The novel thus offers a happy ending, but without implying either that the society is sovereign or that Wilhelm has arrived at mature self-confidence; Wilhelm is just as dumbfounded as before. He never seems to realize the ideal laid down by the mysterious stranger in book 1, for he is never shown as sovereign in his employment of reason, situating himself confidently between chance and necessity. His general attitude throughout and his final words in the novel seem rather to instantiate the attitude roundly chastised by the stranger: “We imagine [*bilden uns ein*] we are God-fearing people [*fromm*, pious] if we saunter through life without much thought, we let ourselves be carried along by happy chance, and then finally declare that our wavering existence was a life governed by divine guidance.”³⁹

Wilhelm's Theatrical Apprenticeship

This is not to say that Wilhelm has learned nothing about himself or has made no progress in his task of self-formation. By the end of the novel he has given up his dream of elevating humankind through the theater. He has discovered that he has a son, Felix, and has accepted responsibility for raising him. He has declared himself willing to collaborate with Lothario by managing an estate in a way that will promote freedom and equality. And he has discovered the importance of finding a mother for Felix who can at the same time be his genuine soulmate. Thus there is much to be said for interpretations that read Wilhelm's *Bildung* as having been successfully accomplished by the end of the novel:

Wilhelm's superficially wayward and inconsequential history of errors and perplexities figures as the inevitably complex and apparently untidy process of clarification and expression of the immanent form of his unique personality, and of the concrete possibilities of bringing that personality into fruitful engagement with the outer world available to him. What we follow in all its sometimes tortuous detail is the working-out through experience of just what is necessary and just what is contingent in Wilhelm's initially given selfhood and in the given world in which he finds himself.⁴⁰

The genius of the novel is that it displays this process of gradual self-realization and reconciliation with reality, but without offering the kind of closure that would falsify the ongoing existential challenge facing both Wilhelm and the reader.

What does Wilhelm learn by way of his lengthy detour through the world of theater? To some extent, the dominance of this theme reflects the earliest form of the novel, in which Goethe envisioned that Wilhelm's theatrical ambitions would be realized. Goethe worked on the novel from 1777 to 1785, and it reflected his own involvement in the Weimar court theater and the hopes of many of the time to transform society by establishing National Theaters throughout Germany. The notion of a "National Theater," while reflecting the ideal of a national literature rooted in the special character of the German language, was not quite what the name indicates. These were the-

aters, the first of which was established in Hamburg in 1767, that performed plays in German, but many of the plays were translated from French and Italian, as there was not an adequate supply of original German material. The idea was that court-subsidized theaters would raise theater to cultural respectability, improve the lives of actors by giving them a steady income and taking them off the road, and by relieving these economic pressures also release the inherent power of theater to form sounder, more elevated public taste.⁴¹ In a 1784 lecture to the German Society at Mannheim, Schiller expressed the aspirations of the day: "The stage is the channel, open to all, into which the light of wisdom pours down from the superior, thinking part of the people, to spread from there in milder beams through the whole state. More correct ideas, sounder principles, purer feelings flow from here through all the veins of the people. The mists of barbarism, of dark superstition vanish, night gives way to victorious light."⁴² When Goethe picked up work on *Wilhelm Meister* nearly a decade later, he retained but extensively reworked the material from the original sketch in *Wilhelm Meister's Theatrical Mission*, which now helps to make up the first five books of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. Thus Wilhelm's involvement with theater remains a strong element in the novel, even if its significance for the whole is transformed; it becomes, as for Anton Reiser, an avenue more for self-realization than for public transformation.

In childhood, Wilhelm is entranced by the puppet theater. He first encounters it as something transcendent and mysteriously powerful, and uncovering its secrets and learning himself how to bring the puppets to life gives him a sense of divine power: echoing Genesis 1, he relates how, "[his] imagination brooding over that little world," he played with the puppets.⁴³ Together with this sense of creative power comes an experience of self-discovery as he imagines himself in a colorful panoply of roles; he memorizes all of the parts in the puppet comedy of David and Goliath, though most often he casts himself as the young hero.⁴⁴

Later, leaving behind the puppets, Wilhelm indulges the wish to inhabit these roles bodily and animates his friends to put on amateur theatricals, in which they acquire a certain facility of expression; self-discovery is paired with self-cultivation.⁴⁵ Already at this point of his youthful development, he identifies a deep tension between the world of commerce and the world of theater, which he personi-

fies in a poem written at the age of fourteen; commerce is an old housewife, always busy and scolding, while the muse of tragic poetry is a beautiful goddess, daughter of freedom—"her sense of herself gave her dignity without pride."⁴⁶ His infatuation with Mariane is deeply intertwined with his theatrical aspirations; in her presence all of his childhood dreams are revived and strengthened, and in the unbounded confidence of first love he imagines himself as already the creator of a future National Theater (HA 7:1.10, 35; E 17). All of this is treated with droll irony: Wilhelm's imagination is stronger than his persistence, and most of his theatrical projects remain mere fragments: he creates a set and costumes for *Das befreite Jerusalem* but forgets to teach his cast their lines; he begins to write dramas, but only isolated scenes. All of this gives the reader not just a sense of the typical characteristics of childhood but a glimpse into Wilhelm's character: imaginative, eager, enthusiastic, but with an energy that is not channeled in a clear, focused direction.

As we have already seen, through his involvement first with Melina's traveling troupe and then with Serlo's standing theater, Wilhelm is by book 5 well on the way to becoming an accomplished and well-received actor. In the meantime his aspirations seem to have shifted slightly or become clarified. As he writes to Werner, rejecting his friend's offer to improve and manage a newly acquired estate, "Even as a youth I had the vague desire and intention to develop [*auszubilden*] myself fully, myself as I am."⁴⁷ Now the means have become more evident. A focus on personal formation and cultivation ("eine . . . allgemeine . . . personelle Ausbildung") is possible only for the nobility; the middle classes are expected to be useful.⁴⁸ No one asks who he is but only what he has; his capacities, insights, and knowledge are means to external ends, not organic components of a personal whole. Irresistibly drawn to the kind of harmonious development (*Ausbildung*) of his nature denied to him by class, Wilhelm finds it possible only in the world of theater.

This ideal of harmonious personal development has often been lifted out of its book 5 context as a clear statement of Goethe's own conception of *Bildung*. Certainly it echoes Schiller's complaints about the mechanical, instrumentalized character of bourgeois existence and his vision of aesthetic education as therapy. But it has also rightly been noted that this ideal, as grasped and expressed by Wilhelm at this point, still betrays his own naiveté and a certain superficiality. For

Wilhelm dwells on particulars such as the nobleman's "formal grace" and "relaxed elegance," his sonorous voice and measured manner.⁴⁹ He himself has made progress in self-cultivation by devoting himself to physical exercise and overcoming his physical awkwardness, to training his voice and speech, so as to become presentable as a public person.⁵⁰ Such preoccupations with external appearances are placed incongruously side by side with Wilhelm's expectation that life in the theater will enable him finally to take as good only what truly is good and find beautiful only what truly is beautiful.⁵¹ "We can only understand the emphasis [Goethe] makes Wilhelm lay on these externals and Wilhelm's extraordinary expectation that as an actor he will, though a mere '*Bürger*,' find in displaying himself on the stage a similar satisfaction in his own all-round development, if we take Goethe's attitude toward his hero as ironical, here as in so many other places."⁵² Wilhelm has long since come face to face with the faults and foibles of actors, and in book 3 his first encounter with actual nobility (in the form of a count who invites the troupe to stay in his mansion and prepare a performance for his guests) has also made painfully clear that hereditary aristocracy does not necessarily bring with it either good taste or genuine cultivation. Nevertheless, at this particular crossroads, the point at which his father's death has freed him from parental expectations, and at which both the commercial possibilities represented by Werner and the theatrical life offered to him by Serlo lie equally open, Wilhelm opts for the theater.

It is only in book 7 that these dreams finally appear to him as illusions. Jarno, as usual, makes fun of Wilhelm's enterprise: "How is it now with that old fancy of yours of achieving something good and beautiful in the company of gypsies."⁵³ This time Wilhelm responds savagely. Actors are full of themselves. Each wants to be the one and only, and doesn't see that even as a band they can achieve very little. They expect to receive the utmost respect from others and cannot bear with the slightest fault in their fellows. They are self-deceived and utterly lack self-understanding. Jarno, overcome with laughter, for once takes the part of the actors. Wilhelm has offered a wonderful account of human nature itself, and these qualities are amply displayed by every social class. "I would gladly excuse an actor for any fault that arose from self-deception and a desire to please, for if he does not appear as something to himself and others, he is nothing at

all. His job is to provide appearances [*Schein*], and he must needs set high store on instantaneous approval, for he gets none other. He must try to delude and dazzle, for that's what he's there for."⁵⁴ But the same is not to be said of human beings as such: "I can readily forgive an actor all the human failings, but not humans for an actor's failings." Hard-nosed realism must not become an excuse for moral failing; off stage, Jarno's words imply, *Sein*, being, precedes *Schein*, shining appearances. Self-deception and egoism must be replaced by a genuine self-knowledge that allows also for genuine respect and concern for others.

The play here on *Sein* and *Schein* has been introduced earlier, back in Wilhelm's book 5 letter to Werner, defending his decision to opt for the theatrical life. Here *Schein* is seen as a special attribute of the nobility that the middle classes can cultivate only on stage. "A nobleman can and must be someone who represents by his appearance [*scheinen*], whereas the burgher simply is [*sein*], and when he tries to put on an appearance [literally 'to appear'], the effect is ludicrous or in bad taste. The nobleman should act and achieve, the burgher must labor and create, developing some of his capabilities in order to be useful."⁵⁵ Wilhelm here connects the right to shine, to cultivate an impressive appearance, with the opportunity to achieve a fully developed personality.

By book 7 he has learned to be more suspicious of outer appearances. They still appear to be revealing, as when Werner appears and marvels over the change in Wilhelm's appearance: he now looks positively noble. The changes seem to extend even to physical characteristics: "Your eyes are more deep set, your forehead is broader, your nose is more delicate and your mouth is much more pleasant."⁵⁶ Werner, in contrast, has become skinny and bald and round-shouldered, his voice shrill, his face pale. We hear echoes here of Lavater's influential theory of physiognomy (1775), according to which physical features expressed specific character traits. But it is telling that it is Werner who draws attention to these features and who sees them as significant. Even here, his focus is on the economic significance of these external characteristics, their instrumental rather than intrinsic meaning. "With your figure you should be able to get me a rich heiress."⁵⁷ Wilhelm has acquired the shining appearance he longed for, but he now more clearly sees that it is not this that guarantees the capacity

to find beauty and goodness only in the truly beautiful and good, any more than membership in the hereditary nobility guarantees the possession of true virtue.

Narrating Bildung

If acting offers Wilhelm the opportunity to cultivate the external appearance of nobility, life-writing—his own and others’—represents a pathway to a fuller form of self-discovery and development. The actor imaginatively inhabits a variety of roles, at least to the extent of being able to offer an external appearance (*Schein*) commensurate with audience expectations. But the task of narrating one’s biography is explored as a personally demanding one, a site of painful honesty and genuine discovery, and encountering the life stories of others is no less significant and revelatory. The multiplicity of narratives testifies to the uniqueness of the individual and to the absence of a single authoritative life narrative, a single exemplar of the fully human.

Wilhelm’s impulse to narrate his development appears very early in the novel, as springing from his desire to reveal himself fully to his new love.⁵⁸ The flaw in his relationship with Mariane, its asymmetrical character, is revealed in her failure to reciprocate; she knows him—his naive confidence that a childhood obsession with puppetry will lead naturally through an affair with an actress to the founding of a new National Theater—but he does not know her, and most centrally does not know that she is engaged to another. Variations on this theme recur throughout the novel. So, for instance, Serlo’s sister Aurelie relates her story to Wilhelm, confiding in him her anguish over losing Lothario’s love, but Wilhelm soon discovers that though her story is genuine, it does not give him adequate grounds for assessing Lothario’s character.⁵⁹ Each life story has its own integrity; knowing one does not give the audience the right to judge another. Therese, too, opens her soul to Wilhelm almost as soon as they meet, and he experiences her as the embodiment of trust and clarity.⁶⁰ By this point, though, Wilhelm has lost confidence in the narrative coherence of his own life. When Therese, picking up the thread of her story partway through, suggests that it is hardly fair that he has said next to nothing about himself to someone who has already revealed herself so fully to him, he replies, “Unfortunately . . . I have noth-

ing to relate except one mistake after another, one false step after the other, and I cannot think of anybody I would rather not tell about the constant confusion I was and still am in, than you.”⁶¹ He is sure that her life has contained no wrong turns, no uncertainties, no lost time, but she assures him this is not the case.

In fact, it is in good measure through the recognition that others have had dark and winding paths to follow that Wilhelm regains confidence in his ability to persevere in the search for his own narrative coherence. It is not through the provision of an authoritative narrative form or set of stages, nor a flawless exemplar, that Wilhelm is able to proceed. The very thought of such an exemplary biography had destroyed his confidence; now he takes comfort in the thought that others have been able to forge intelligible form out of experiences of failure and suffering.

Biographical narratives that are read rather than personally related also play an important role in *Wilhelm Meister*, most notably the *Confessions of a Beautiful Soul* (*Bekenntnisse einer Schönen Seele*), which makes up the whole of book 6. Like the narrations offered by Wilhelm, Aurelie, and Therese, this one plays an instrumental role within the novel, revealing background information crucial to making sense of the unfolding plot. The “Beautiful Soul” is an aunt of Lothario, Natalie, the Countess, and Friedrich, and her story gives the reader a crucial glimpse into their upbringing and thereby into the philosophy of the Abbé, who oversaw their ethical formation. But the *Bekenntnisse* is much more than this. The inclusion of a fictional Pietist autobiography within his novel gave Goethe a way of drawing attention to the deep connections between these two genres, in their shared attention to shades of inner feeling and focus on personal development. The framing of the *Bekenntnisse* subjects it to critique, but Goethe does not succumb to the temptation to simply parody a stereotypical Pietist conversion narrative. We have to do with a decidedly individualized character, one with an aspiration to transcendence that does not sit comfortably within any received categories. The Beautiful Soul tries to fit her experience within the “system of achieving conversion advocated by the pietist theologians at Halle,” but to no avail; where they demand an overwhelming sense of guilt and separation from God, she feels herself constantly in God’s comforting presence.⁶² She begins to be drawn into the circle led by Zinzendorf in Herrnhut, but here, too, after a brief period of feeling that she has found true

spiritual community, she becomes somewhat alienated from the other brethren, noting “how few of them understood the real meaning of delicate words and phrases.”⁶³ In her pursuit of undisturbed communion with God, she withdraws more and more from social contact and breaks off her engagement. From her cultivated, skeptical uncle (who is friends with the Abbé and thus closely linked to the Tower Society) she comes to appreciate the beauty of art to both express and speak to what is highest and best in the human soul. Through his emphasis on the importance of cultivating mind (*Geist*) and taste (*Sinnlichkeit*) in tandem with one another, she comes to feel that some of the little images (*Bildchen*) she has employed have been inadequate to express divine beauty and transcendence.⁶⁴ She never gives up her basic conviction that our attention should be directed not to creatures but to their Creator, and feels herself, in her separation from the world and focus on her inner life, to be following an inner drive given her by God and leading her to God.

The immediate significance of the *Confessions* is that reading it, rather inexplicably, allows Aurelie to die peacefully and forgive Lothario for having abandoned her. What makes this particularly intriguing is that Aurelie has not been depicted as a religiously inclined person at all, and moreover that the manuscript has been sent her by the doctor of the Tower Society. Within the *Confessions* this doctor is depicted as striving to correct the Beautiful Soul’s tendency to retreat within herself and cultivate the life of the soul to the neglect of that of the body.⁶⁵ His refrain is one that we also hear from the Abbé—that the purpose of human life is to be active, and to become familiar with all the outer things of the world that might prove to helpful for carrying out this activity. *Tätigkeit*, activity, is a key word in Wilhelm Meister; it can mean simply job, occupation, or work, but as used here it carries some of the connotations of vocation. It is a form of activity that is genuinely fitting for and expressive of the individual, not an inherited trade or social role, nor a mere means of subsistence or route to profit. For the task of *Bildung* is to achieve the harmonious integration of all of one’s faculties even while devoting oneself to some specific field of activity.⁶⁶ The Beautiful Soul does not contradict the doctor and indeed offers a partial echo of his teaching: “Only through our practical activity [*Praktische*] do we become fully aware of our own individual existence,” she notes; “and why shouldn’t we by this means demonstrate also to ourselves that there is a Being who

gives us this power to do good.”⁶⁷ Her own distinctively nonpractical activity, though, is directed at inward purification, and through this toward God. The doctor’s recognition of the at least partial legitimacy of her distinctive *Tätigkeit* comes in the form not of words but of deeds, and shows that she can indeed do good in the world even if her intention is to transcend it: he sends the manuscript to Aurelie, signifying that the life narrative of the Beautiful Soul can assist others to die well, if not to live.

Among the significant life narratives of Wilhelm Meister we must finally of course also include the scrolls Wilhelm is shown in the Tower, containing the *Lehrjahre*, literally the years of apprenticeship (but also termed at one point the confessions, *Konfessionen*, of Lothario, Jarno, himself, and many others unknown to him). While the reader is never allowed to read any of these, Wilhelm is authorized to do so once his apprenticeship is declared complete.⁶⁸ He does not actually read his own scroll until after he resolves to ask Therese to marry him. He must now, he knows, finally reciprocate her self-revelation to him. In setting out to tell his story, however, he is quickly at a loss, for “it seemed so totally lacking in events of any significance, and anything he would have to report was so little to his advantage that more than once he was tempted to give up the whole idea.”⁶⁹ It is at this point that he reads the Tower scroll account of his apprenticeship years, drawing on it in order to present himself to Therese, reciprocating her honesty if not, he reflects, her great virtue and purposeful activity (*zweckmäßige Tätigkeit*).

Why does Wilhelm need to read his scroll in order to narrate his life story? What does he learn from the scroll? It offers him a kind of a mirror, a reflection of himself that pulls various events and experiences into a meaningful shape, tracing errors and failures as sources of insight and development, and discerning a direction in what Wilhelm has often experienced merely as confusing change. The suggestion that Wilhelm’s relationship with himself is mediated through his relationships with others and through both their life narratives and his own surfaces repeatedly throughout the novel. “How unwilling we are, after we have been sick, to look at ourselves in a mirror!” (HA 7:8.1, 505; E 309). But in this case Wilhelm has been adequately prepared for the shock and is no longer suffering from delusions of grandeur. He is able to read his scroll with gratitude that others have lavished sustained attention on him, on discerning his individual character and

path of development: “he saw for the first time his image [*Bild*] outside of himself, to be sure not, as in a mirror, a second self, but rather as in a portrait, an other self: one recognizes oneself to be sure not in every detail, but one rejoices, that a thinking soul has grasped us this way, a great talent has wanted to portray us this way, that an image of that which we were still exists, and that it can endure longer than we ourselves.”⁷⁰ He does not give the narrative absolute authority to define him, but he regards it as an aid to self-definition. Even if the narrative does not offer him a second self, it does help him clarify his identity just by virtue of what in it he recognizes and what he does not.

The Social Character of *Bildung*

It is not only his own scroll that offers Wilhelm a *Bild* against which to define himself. In some sense, all of his relationships, not only with his father and his son but also with his friends and mentors and lovers, offer him “other selves,” images next to which his own can come into better focus, against which he can take his own measure. The painting of the sick prince is a reflection of Wilhelm that links him to his grandfather and the latter’s sense of the significance of artistic creativity. Or again, trying to convince himself that Felix is indeed his son, he lifts him in front of a mirror and searches for external resemblances. Mariane’s old maid advises him: “Observe his talents, personality and abilities, and if you don’t gradually come to see yourself in him, then you must have bad eyesight.”⁷¹ These other selves are significant despite the fact, or perhaps better in part *because* of the fact, that each person and each life narrative is unique and irreducibly personal. So the task of *Bildung* cannot be carried out in isolation from others. As Wilhelm’s *Lehrbrief* informs him, “words [including therefore the speech of which this *Lehrbrief* consists, and the conversation that he is having with the Abbé, and of course finally also the words of which *Wilhelm Meister* itself is constituted!] are good, but they are not the best. The best is not made clear by words.”⁷² In our search for and our desire to realize in ourselves the best, we must attend to others. This is not an easy task, for “imitation is natural to us all, but what to imitate is not easily ascertained.”⁷³ In part this is because there is much that we encounter that is not worth imitating; in part

also because we cannot imitate all of the goodness that we recognize but only that to which our own individual capacities are suited. We also have trouble properly perceiving others well. At first Natalie is for Wilhelm simply “the Amazon.” He knows only that she has acted the part of the good Samaritan, has stopped to care for him and his friends when she discovers that he and the troupe of actors have been set upon by highwaymen. When in book 8 Wilhelm finally meets her again as the sister of Therese and Lothario, he struggles to assimilate the image (*Bild*) of the Amazon with that of his new friend Natalie; “the former had been fashioned, as it were, by him, the latter seemed almost to be refashioning him.”⁷⁴ The images we construct of others serve our fantasies; when we instead attend to them as they truly are, their form has the power to re-form us. They chasten any temptation to autarchy and remind us of the intrinsically dialogical character of our own humanity. Goethe applies this idea to himself as well. Writing in gratitude to Schiller for his enthusiastic reception of the first books of *Wilhelm Meister*, which have given him renewed determination to finish the novel with dispatch, he exclaims, “How much more advantageous it is to contemplate [*bespiegeln*, i.e., mirror] oneself in others as in oneself!”⁷⁵

Not only the process but also the telos of *Bildung* turns out to be intrinsically social in character. As the conclusion of the novel makes clear, Wilhelm can be said to have finished his apprenticeship only because he has overcome the egocentric tendencies that seem to be built into the aspiration to self-formation. As he formulates this drive in book 5, it seems to concern merely himself. Yet what ends up being worth cultivating in himself is his concern for others—for Mignon and the Harper, for Felix, for Lothario’s plans for dismantling feudalism, for Natalie and her charitable enterprises.⁷⁶ Jarno suggests that this is a natural transition: “When a man makes his first entry into the world, it is good that he have a high opinion of himself, believes he can acquire many excellent qualities, and therefore endeavors to do everything; but when his development [*Bildung*] has reached a certain stage, it is advantageous for him to lose himself in a larger whole, learn to live for others, and forget himself in dutiful activity for others. Only then will he come to know himself.”⁷⁷ Jarno becomes a mouthpiece for the words of the Gospels: Wilhelm must lose his life in order to find it again.

Wilhelm learns this most evidently in his care for Felix. His desire

to guide and form Felix awakens in him a new interest in the world around him. Immediately after he is assured in the Tower that Felix is indeed his son, the two go out into the garden. It is in some sense clearly a new Eden, but Wilhelm cannot, like Adam, simply name the plants whatever he likes; in order to satisfy his son's curiosity he must turn to the gardener. Wilhelm shoulders the task of passing on to Felix a socially mediated reality he must first receive from others. Human creativity is not *ex nihilo*. A recurrent theme in the novel has been Wilhelm's failure to attend to the external world, and this seems finally to be overcome. Even if the Tower Society has long since declared his apprenticeship over, this day seems to Wilhelm the first of his true *Bildung*; "he felt the need to inform himself, being required to inform another."⁷⁸ He now desires his own *Bildung* not for its own sake but in order to pass it along; he becomes capable of his own self-determination only insofar as he recognizes himself as a member of a chain of inheritance, expressed most fully in the bonds of family.

Friedrich's closing words are later echoed by Goethe as the interpretive key to the novel: "You seem to me like Saul, the son of Kish, who went in search of his father's asses, and found a kingdom."⁷⁹ Saul, son of Kish, went forth to search for his father's missing donkeys and instead was anointed by the prophet of Yahweh to be king of Israel. Wilhelm goes forth ostensibly on a commission from his father but in fact in flight from the bourgeois commercial life represented by his father and in some sense in search of his grandfather's lost art collection. He is reunited with that collection and thereby with the notion of art as revealing the creative capacities of human nature, but at the same time finds a way to place the commercial management of estates in service of higher humanistic ideals, thereby redeeming his paternal inheritance.⁸⁰ Even as on a personal level Wilhelm finds a way of marrying romantic passion with commitment and parental responsibility, he also takes on a broader social role of contributing to a transformation of society that will enable each member to be a meaningful participant.⁸¹ As critics have noted, the political aspects of Wilhelm's vocation are underdeveloped and utopian in character, unsurprisingly so given the quagmire of German society at the time Goethe was writing.⁸² The impulse to social and political reform is distinctly present, though, even if the form it takes is more utopian than realistic.

Bildung in *Wilhelm Meister* turns out to be social in one additional respect. For the individual, the telos of the process is the develop-

ment of his or her particular capacities in a way that allows the individual to take a meaningful place in the world and be productive for others. But no individual constitutes a totality, is in him or herself the perfect human being.⁸³ Reading from Wilhelm's apprenticeship certificate, Jarno states that "all men make up mankind and all forces together make up the world."⁸⁴ All the various aptitudes and tendencies, "from the faintest active urge of the animal to the most highly developed activity of the mind, from the stammering delight of the child to the superlative expression of bards and orators, from the first scuffle of boys to those vast undertakings by which whole countries are defended or conquered," must be developed, but they can be developed only in the totality of humankind, not in a single individual.⁸⁵ There is a place for Therese's practicality as for Natalie's idealism, for Jarno's caustic honesty and the contrastive relief of Friedrich's light-hearted wit. The ideal of humanity can only be collectively, and indeed as we have just seen, only communally, realized. Wilhelm does not fall short of the ideal of *Bildung* inasmuch as he fails to become a Universal Man, but rather the inverse; he realizes that ideal, and with it the nobility that he initially sought through the theater, only insofar as he becomes a *particular* instantiation of the ideal of humanity.

Saul, Son of Kish

The understanding of *Bildung* captured in the *Lehrbrief* is essentially Goethe's own. Something from Goethe's understanding of plant metamorphosis is carried over here. This can be understood as an unfolding of inner principles, influenced and constrained by environmental conditions. Goethe had argued that this displayed a universal law of nature.⁸⁶ However, he recognized as well that no appeal to natural entelechy could give an adequate account of *Bildung* as the process by which a self-conscious moral agent is formed. *Bildung* is not a blind process of growth. As one of Goethe's most well-known maxims puts it, "aptitudes, to be sure, develop naturally, but they must be practiced intentionally and gradually improved."⁸⁷ Moral agency brings with it both creative power and responsibility. As the Uncle says, "within us there lies the formative power which creates what is to be, and never lets us rest until we have accomplished this in one way or another in or outside ourselves."⁸⁸ *Bildung* is not simply the realization of what

in some sense already is but the bringing about of what ought to be; it requires the discernment of which tendencies and drives are to be nourished and which to be neglected.

The words of wisdom read to Wilhelm by Jarno from his *Lehrbrief*, however closely they echo Goethe's own philosophy, simply drive him to distraction. He has puzzled over them before, but they have not helped him with the concrete task of discernment that faces him: "Since that moment of liberation I know less than ever what I can do, or what I desire, or should do."⁸⁹ Yet all turns out well for Wilhelm. As we have seen, Fate smiles on him, as on Saul, son of Kish. Not because of own exertions, which are until very late in the game egocentric and in other key ways misdirected, not because of the skill of the Tower Society, but somehow nevertheless Wilhelm has won a prize far greater than the one he sought—not just love but a form of purposeful engagement with the world, a way not just of recognizing but also of realizing goodness and beauty through service to others, even if the concrete form this will take remains sketchy. The references to Fate are not intended to fit within a coherent metaphysics so much as simply to draw attention to the fact that things often turn out well quite apart from any conscious exertion of agency, understanding of the process one is undergoing, or the vision of the goal to which the process is directed. Goethe described his own experience in just such terms, as having been shaped "through many levels of trial, of acting and suffering" (HA 10:307). It is thus not surprising that *Wilhelm Meister* has been described as "fairy-tale like" and "a bit garden-like."⁹⁰ As one critic has pointed out, the narrator's optimism is possible only "because the decidedly evil is missing from the world of the *Lehrjahre*."⁹¹

Yet even if this somewhat naive optimism is present both in the novel and in Goethe itself, what saves *Wilhelm Meister* from mere shallowness and preserves its compelling nature is the fact that the novel at the same time itself signals the unsatisfactory character of this stance. It does so in several ways. One is by refusing to paper over the fact that Fate does not smile on all as it does on Wilhelm. It is not the case that all predispositions, when developed, can harmonize with one another, and *Wilhelm Meister* points to this when it shows how the Harper's incestuous passion, however "natural," bears fruit in Mignon, a child naturally, and tragically, destined to die. Nor has either the frivolous Countess or Friedhelm, though like Lothario and Natalie

raised under the Abbé's supervision, found anything like a socially meaningful form of activity, *Tätigkeit*. Goethe recognized as much when he looked about himself; reading Moritz's *Anton Reiser*, for instance, he wrote to Frau von Stein, "He is like my younger brother, of the same nature, only that he was neglected and damaged by fate, where I was favored and preferred."⁹² Perhaps even more telling than these various admissions is the irony that characterizes the book. It is the members of the Tower Society, divided among themselves and hardly infallible, and helped out of a tight spot at the end only by the flighty Friedrich, who are made the mouthpiece of Goethe's own philosophy. And the *Bildung* that is supposed to be Wilhelm's own accomplishment is handed to him on a silver platter, more despite than because of his efforts. As I have already noted, this irony undermines the authority of the Tower Society's wise-sounding pronouncements.

We may in fact have Schiller to thank for the passages in which Jarno reads to Wilhelm from the *Lehrbrief*; at any rate, upon reading the draft of book 8, Schiller urged Goethe to make his philosophy more explicit, asking if Wilhelm does not perhaps himself need a bit of philosophical education: "If I could only clothe in your way of expression what I in my own way have said in the 'Kingdom of Shadows' and in the 'Aesthetic Letters,' then we would quickly be united."⁹³ The hints dropped here and there in the book are not sufficient, Schiller complains.⁹⁴ Goethe does not disagree with any of what Schiller has to say about *Bildung*, but he does resist making things too explicit: "The failing, which you rightly note, comes from my most inner nature, from a certain realistic tick."⁹⁵ He allows Jarno to read from the *Lehrbrief*, but he also gives Wilhelm a chance to express his resentment, his sense that these mysterious generalities don't really solve the riddle of his life.

The irony is no mistake; it is Goethe's way of insisting that the narrative form of the novel can do greater justice to the concrete particularities of the experience of ethical formation than can any theoretical statement, even one clothed in the sensuous flow of narrative. Beyond this, though, the irony is also Goethe's acknowledgment of the inadequacy of his own theoretical account of *Bildung*, of its lack of final authority, and of its inability to guarantee that individual self-realization will at the same time constitute the realization of social harmony and ethical ideal. Goethe's use of irony constitutes an aesthetic, but not a philosophical, solution to this problem.⁹⁶

Goethe hints to Schiller that a more adequate response will require the continuation of the novel. But *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* is hardly a continuation, to say nothing of a fuller resolution of the aporias of the *Lehrjahre*. While the title character appears in both, the *Wanderjahre* is no longer focused on Bildung but is rather what has been termed an “archival novel,” reflecting a commitment to representing in a single artwork disparate elements of contemporary life (including, in the *Wanderjahre*, a technical account of the cotton industry) accompanied by a lack of commitment to narrative unity.⁹⁷ Its subtitle, *Die Entsagenden* (The renunciants), refers to the forms of renunciation demanded by modern life. These extend into the realm of aesthetic possibility; the narrator is simply a fictional editor and the task of integration and assessment falls to the reader. If in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* Goethe ironically shifted authorial responsibility to Fate, here he goes further, adopting a “poetics of renunciation.”⁹⁸ Goethe resigns, then, the claim to authority, to being able to author a resolution to the problem of Bildung.

Wilhelm Meister as Secular Scripture

In offering a solution, but one framed ironically, meanwhile, *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre* pointed both beyond itself and beyond its author. In so doing, we might say, it indeed succeeded in becoming secular scripture, not just in the sense of constituting a book worthy of something like the intensive reading practices of the Pietists but also in a sense articulated by Nicholas Boyle as revealing truths “about our shared condition” that transcend the author’s own insights.⁹⁹ Boyle defines literature as “language free of instrumental purpose, . . . [which] seeks to tell the truth.”¹⁰⁰ Literature thus contrasts with other forms of discourse that are straightforwardly utilitarian, aimed at describing things in ways that allow us to manipulate them and thereby fulfill our needs and desires. Secular literature, for Boyle, is distinguished from sacred literature in that its truth-telling feature is subordinated to another aim, that of giving pleasure or entertaining through the use of the written medium (as opposed to simply employing writing as a tool to instruct us how to satisfy our desires).¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, secular literary works tell us truths about things, about

life, about natural, personal, cultural entities, and this renders them potentially revelatory.

The distinction between secular and sacred literature thus has nothing to do with the distinction between fiction and nonfiction. Indeed the fictional character of some literature supports rather than undermines its capacity to be truthful. Where fiction dominates a work, “it hypothetically but systematically postulates the nonexistence of its author.”¹⁰² This is not, as it might appear, a falsification, which presents a fictionally constructed world as if it were real; rather, it makes fiction more able to tell the truth:

In this set of truths, in this represented segment of the world we share, in these people and these their destinies, or, in the case of lyric poetry, in these now known and worded moments and moods and layerings of memory, there is revealed a truth, the truth, which only a text which is all but free of contamination by authorship can reveal: the truth that regardless of who, for example, Shakespeare or Dickens may have been or what they may have meant by, let us say, *Hamlet* or *Great Expectations*, there is life, and there is the wasting of it, and there is the fulfillment of it too—fulfillment gained or lost but always at least present in the redemptive assumption that it is all, however hurtful, or absurd, or even banal, worth putting into words for all of us to share.¹⁰³

By virtue of the way they faithfully attend to the particulars of reality, works of secular literature can reveal truths that transcend the insights of their authors. We might think in this connection also of Martha Nussbaum’s defense of the ethical significance of literature; she too regards literature’s key contribution as coming by way of resisting reduction into a utilitarian mode of relating to the world, and she emphasizes the truthfulness of literature, which comes by its loving attention to the particular. Resisting any attempt to transcend the risks and constraints of finitude and mortality that, she argues, make us human, she nevertheless leaves room for “a certain sort of aspiration to transcend our ordinary humanity,” rooted in the capacity to “soar above” the “dullness and obtuseness of the everyday,” by “delving more deeply into oneself and one’s humanity.”¹⁰⁴ For Boyle this is a possibility that is grounded theologically in the Incarnation:

the Word has become Flesh; God's truth is to be looked for everywhere.¹⁰⁵ Secular literature, even when it is hostile to Christianity or religion as such, can not only convey universal truths but actually participate in the divine act of redeeming a fallen creation. For there is, he argues, a kind of redemption involved even in the mere act of faithful representation, for this requires attending to things as mattering. "An event of representation" is thus "an event of forgiveness, a participation" in God's re-creation of the world. Even when it is actively hostile to God or Christianity, this very "point of trespass" can be read as at the same time the point of forgiveness: God crucified by the world, and in this redeeming the world.¹⁰⁶

Two points are worth noting here. First, literature's capacity to give pleasure is closely related to this act of redemption, since "you cannot enjoy everybody unless they matter to you as they matter to themselves and to each other."¹⁰⁷ The kind of truthfulness present in realistic fiction is a form of attention or, perhaps better, of love, of caring about others, and this loving vision is attended, insists Boyle, by a kind of enjoyment or appreciation. Second, there is an interesting, perhaps counterintuitive, relationship between particularity and universality expressed here; literature's capacity to convey universal truths does not stand in tension with its focus on particularity. Rather, it is its faithful representation of particularities of experience that enables the reader's identification, an identification that evokes awareness of a shared condition.

Bernd Auerochs has argued that *Kunstreligion* set out to take over the traditional responsibility of religion to articulate with authority final truth. "But works of art," he continues, "do not bring final truth to expression, but rather many different, individual obscure truths."¹⁰⁸ It was, though, precisely insofar as Goethe set aside *Kunstreligion's* totalizing ambitions that he succeeded in writing what with Boyle we might term secular scripture.¹⁰⁹ It is in its unfailing insistence on the task of *Bildung* as it confronts the individual, together with its resignation of final authority to determine the path this will take, that the novel *Wilhelm Meister* most succeeds. It is not through successful self-realization or harmonious development as such that Wilhelm Meister finally completes his apprenticeship, but in his yearning, as he puts it in a letter to Werner, "to see good only in what is good, and beauty only in the truly beautiful," a yearning to be *for* the good with all that he has and all that he is.

An additional chapter would be required in order to spell out how this differs from the ideal of striving as depicted in Goethe's later dramatic masterpiece, *Faust*. Put briefly, the latter is no longer a striving to be for the *good*, to discern and embody the admirable, but a striving to find and follow one's deepest *impulse* and, having found no end to the depths, no *there* there, to dissolve into willing itself.¹¹⁰ Whether this can still be intelligible *as* striving at all is the question posed poignantly by that work. In contrast, whatever Wilhelm's current grasp of the good, true, and beautiful, and of how he with his particular set of capacities and social circumstances can be for that good, he remains open to grasping it anew. He succeeds in becoming human insofar as he remains open to what lies beyond his selfhood as currently constituted, recognizing that whatever obscure truths he grasps, final truth lies beyond them.¹¹¹ Not only does the novel thereby rebuke the myth of domesticated Providence to which mainstream Pietism succumbed, but it finally refuses to substitute in its place Goethe's own theories of entelechy, metamorphosis, and art. It invokes, but places scare quotes around, Fate as well as Providence as well as ritual. It thereby embraces the kind of ontological indeterminacy that Charles Taylor regards as potentially open to reappropriation by those who inhabit the "immanent frame" of modern existence in an "open" rather than "closed" fashion.¹¹² More specifically, it opens the way to recovery of a noncontrastive understanding of divine transcendence, a transcendence that is beyond construal in terms either of identity or of simple contrast with anything within the created order, and with the created order as such.¹¹³ (It is because she assumes that divine transcendence must be contrastive that Nussbaum rejects it; in so doing, however, she robs herself of resources for articulating the question of the authority with which literature can articulate truth.) In *Wilhelm Meister*, Goethe renounces the authority of Providential (self-)authorship while continuing to embrace the project of *Bildung*, grasping its telos as dialogical humanity. In so doing he repudiates autocratic humanism. In its place emerges a space for listening, for being called into question by the otherness of one's fellows, a space for what we might, with Barth, name listening for the Word of God.