

APPRENTICESHIPS

THE *BILDUNGSROMAN* FROM GOETHE
TO SANTAYANA

By
THOMAS L. JEFFERS

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In Memoriam, C.E.J. (1915–1975)

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Acknowledgments

Early, often very different, versions of some sections of this book have appeared elsewhere as “‘We children were the in-betweens’: Character (De)Formation in *Sons and Lovers*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 43 (Summer 2000): 290–313; “Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, and the End of Sex,” *The Hudson Review* 52 (Summer 1999): 191–204; “Forster’s *The Longest Journey* and the Idea of Apprenticeship,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 30 (Summer 1988): 179–97; “Forms of Misprision: The Early- and Mid-Victorian Reception of Goethe’s *Bildungsreise*,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 57 (Summer 1988): 501–15; and “Maisie’s Moral Sense: Finding Out for Herself,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 34 (1979): 154–72. I thank the editors for permission to reprint this material.

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Prologue

The German critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) once noted that the story, a short work descending from the fairy tales and fables of the oral tradition, typically offers us “counsel”—a moral, some practical advice, a proverb, or a maxim—which we can use in the conduct of our own lives. The novel, a long work dependent on print culture, rather more ambitiously tenders us “the meaning of life.” Such a meaning, not reached until, and invariably summed up by, the moment of the hero’s death, transcends any particular dilemma that counsel might give a solution to. A solution may be repeatable: the dilemma can come up again, and the principle underlying the solution—for example, that the gods favor a younger brother’s risk-taking as often as they favor an elder brother’s prudence—can have a validity for sisters as well as brothers, black folk as well as white, and so on. But a statement about the meaning of life takes an exceptionally long view, covering not only the hero’s lifetime but also the lifetimes of people who resemble him. Further, the long view can in religious epochs go beyond temporality—the tick-tock of this world—to guess at the soul’s condition in the eternal silence of the next.

All of which was beginning to sound quaint even in 1936, when in “The Storyteller” Benjamin was introducing the Russian Nikolai Leskov’s tales to a German readership. As he fretted in another famous essay, an age of mechanical reproduction had little interest in the story’s counsel or the novel’s vision, partly because print was giving way to other media (phonographic, photographic, cinematic, etc.) and partly because the old beliefs about morality (risk-taking versus prudence, say) and eternity (which sort the divine favors) seemed as questionable as everything people had thought about military strategy, economics, diplomacy, and the value of the individual back before the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo, and all the woe that followed. The Great War had literally and figuratively exploded the lot, and for a time both story and novel, in their traditional forms anyway, seemed as evolutionarily challenged as the cavalry charge, *laissez-faire* capitalism, balance-of-power political science, and the idea of the warrior champion.¹ Looking back, of course, we can see that *non*-traditional forms of narrative were emerging from the war with a brilliance that, if unable to command the nineteenth-century writers’ large audiences (Charles Dickens and Fyodor Dostoevsky did not have to compete with the movies), was certainly able to represent the social and psychological realities of a new epoch. “On or about December 1910 human character changed,” as Virginia Woolf histrionically put it—by August 1914 her contemporaries understood what she meant—and novels such as D. H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love*, Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*,

or her own *To the Lighthouse* are evidence that writers with the requisite genius could yet bring us "news" of the event.

The narrative experiments of these high modernists between the world wars provoked some eminent scholars to trace the history of storytelling, and especially the novel, in order to understand where the modernists had come from. The greatest of these scholarly histories is undoubtedly Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1946), written during World War II in Istanbul, but for my present purpose the most suggestive history—or sketch toward a history—is by the Russian critic M. M. Bakhtin (1895–1975). Equating "novel" with long narrative, he posits three important kinds—the novel of ordeal, the biographical novel, the family novel—that culminated in a fourth, the *Bildungsroman* or novel of self-cultivation, which is the subject of this study. The novel of ordeal derives from those epics of Gilgamesh, Achilles, Odysseus, or Aeneas, which, through rigorous tests, seek to determine whether the hero qualifies as a conqueror, lawmaker, lover, artistic genius, immoralist, or emancipator of an oppressed group. Nineteenth-century novels such as Stendhal's *Red and Black*, Balzac's *Lost Illusions*, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, and George Meredith's *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* are all of this kind. The biographical novel, descending from medieval saints' lives, may be instanced by Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* or *Moll Flanders* or Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* or *Clarissa*, all careful to give the appearance of a tale grounded in what Woolf would call the "granite" of fact, but embellished and colored by the "rainbow" of art. In the later eighteenth century, the biographical merges with the family novel, of which Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* or Christoph Martin Wieland's *The History of Agathon* are prototypes. Here the hero's life is situated in the context of the lives of parents, siblings, relatives, and wider community, the plot often leading to the formation of a family of his or her own. The heroes of the biographical or family novel are not mere "moving points," as they are in the travel or picaresque novel (another, less interesting kind), nor, like the hero of ordeal, are they just passing through a series of tests. They strive "for actual results," by which Bakhtin means some form of happiness, satisfaction, or maturity. Only, in their quest for results, these heroes don't undergo any important changes: even after conversions—Augustine's being the inescapable model—they remain themselves, only more so. Hence the breakthrough represented by the *Bildungsroman*, which was created in the second half of the eighteenth century. Its crucial theme is precisely change—physical, psychological, moral. The hero is no longer "ready-made" and, through all his shifts in fortune or social position, stable. He is what Bakhtin calls "the image of man in the process of becoming," whether through an idealized "idyllic time"—a sort of hypostatized Seven Ages of Man from the "Mewling and puking" infant to the youth "Seeking the bubble reputation" and so on—or through actual historical time. In the event-racked revolutionary years of the late eighteenth century, the emergence of the hero's character increasingly mirrored the emergence—socially, economically, politically, ideationally—of the world around him.²

(The development of the *Bildungsroman* coincided with that of a particular educational ideal, articulated in France by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* and in Germany by Friedrich Schiller's *Aesthetic Education*. Rousseau helped Europe realize that children were not miniature adults but creatures with their own peculiar needs and capacities, which parents and teachers had to honor. Schiller concentrated on how, in growing up,

a child's needs and capacities might be shaped and directed. He thought of *Bildung* as the nurturing of an individual's many-sided potential—the development of the *uomo universale* (universal man: the Italian phrase bespoke the German adoration of Renaissance achievement).³ His great friend Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, for his part, was more realistic. True, he had as a young man written to Johann Gottfried Herder of the importance of all-round, harmonious self-mastery, which he likened to Pindar's charioteer guiding his four horses in rhythm toward the goal. True, he himself had gone a long way toward becoming a *uomo universale*.⁴ But he recognized that the achievements of modern civilization depended on specialization, his own being the writing of literary German, in which he had trained himself as he had not trained in drawing, building, or bureaucratic administration. Accordingly he gave his apprentice hero Wilhelm Meister the specific training, first in estate management and then in medicine, that his sentimental hero Werther had longed for but been denied. Only thus could Schiller's "aesthetic" sensibility—the individual's interest in all-roundedness—contribute to the common good. The desired universality would have to be attained through the aggregate of differentiated specialties—baker's work supplementing butcher's, builder's supplementing architect's, and so on.

Seen in the context of European history, this German humanism, culminating in eighteenth-century Weimar, appears as a late and largely fruitless flowering—"a purely intellectual preparation," in Georg Lukács' terms, "for a democratic revolution which never materialized, which never transformed the social structure as in France and England" (*Essays on Thomas Mann*, 95). Forced by his own political powerlessness to accommodate himself to the imperial state or principality, the German burgher had a worrisome tendency to confine his attention to the Schillerian self, and to let the organized Goethean aggregate go its own way. Caesar could render unto himself. Even Goethe, after all, had too often neglected Caesar's legitimate claims. In Part Two of his masterpiece *Faust*, the hero's quest for fresh opportunities to exploit his devil-heightened genius ultimately settles on a civil-engineering project in Holland, and Goethe's focus is less on the dike than on the complexly interesting mind of the man who designs it. In the *Wilhelm Meister* series, from the *Lehrjahre* (1795–1796) to the *Wanderjahre* (1829), the hero's several vocations seem but a quick answer to the "get a job" imperative. Politics, economics, sociology, and so on were important, yes, but Goethe's deeper preoccupations lay in questions about eros, parental responsibility, and freedom of choice.

Nevertheless, under his firm hand, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*), like *Faust* (1808, 1832), maintains some kind of balance—call it 60/40—between inward and outward concerns. In the *Bildungsromane* that in Germany came after *Wilhelm Meister*, the ratio slipped to 70/30 or worse, as novelists fixed their attention ever more burning, and resignedly, on the self: their heroes were wonderfully sensitive to ethico-religious matters, and appallingly obtuse to economic, political, and military matters, all emanating from the material power that protected, as well as exploited, their inwardness. Leaving material power to nobles, bureaucrats, and officers—the hereditary classes that for centuries had governed the nation—the burgher rarely tried, and was in any event never allowed, to become a self-governing citizen (or, as the West-facing liberal dissenters preferred to say, *citoyen*). As one such dissenter, Thomas Mann, later put it, the burgher complacently assumed

that politics was a Machiavellian realm of "falsehood, murder, deceit, and violence," an attitude that by 1933 meant that he didn't want to think about politics at all. He wanted folk fairy tales, which Benjamin claimed was what fascism, with its "aestheticized" politics, offered.⁵ Concentrated inward, most German novelists, like the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, may powerfully have equated truth and subjectivity, but their neglect of objectivity—the problem of how to arrange the human condition humanely—finally permitted the apotheosis of the impersonal state, and the isolation and submersion of the individual. In *Buddenbrooks*, *The Magic Mountain*, and *Doctor Faustus*, Mann, Goethe's twentieth-century successor, directed the art of fiction to tell this German story—to anatomize the nation's soul and state. His was a creative effort both plainly dangerous (the Nazis drove him into exile and almost certainly would have killed him if he had stayed home) and, it seemed amidst the rubble of World War II, utterly vain with regard to Germany itself. A darkness made visible by the luminous works of Goethe and Mann, but a darkness just the same.

In England and America the history of politics and the novel has been brighter. The idea of *Bildung* was translated by Thomas Carlyle, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Matthew Arnold, J. S. Mill, and Walter Pater into the idea of Culture, an idea concurrently and subsequently realized in fiction by Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, George Eliot, Meredith, Henry James, and (in the next century) by E. M. Forster, Theodore Dreiser, Woolf, George Santayana, Saul Bellow, Margaret Drabble, and other less remarkable authors. The liberal Anglo-American tradition—the relative openness and fluidity of the society, the Protestant interest in and respect for personal differences, the unfolding of the biographical and the family novel—helped these writers not only to sustain the Weimar classicists' case for the cultivation of the individual, but also to understand the problems of such cultivation in the context of vocation, courtship, and parent-child relations—always in crisis perhaps (no crisis, no novel), but always susceptible to analysis and to some measure of melioration. Among Anglo-American writers, soul-craft and statecraft, God and Caesar, inward and outward, have on average been kept in 50/50 balance. This equipoise may have made them (and us) less spiritually profound than Friedrich Hölderlin, Friedrich Nietzsche, or Rainer Maria Rilke in the Teutonic tradition, and less politically subtle and sage than Virgil, Dante, or Stendhal in the Latin. Still, we have reason to rejoice in the temperate, sensible-for-all-seasons nature of the *Bildungsromane* of the mixed Teutonic-Latin tradition that is our own—*Bildungsromane* that in telling ways epitomize our fiction as such. To go through such a novel is an occasion not only for a reader's individual cultivation (his vicarious growing up, or re-growing up) but for a generation of readers' collective cultivation (the coming of age of what Samuel Taylor Coleridge called "the clerisy," or simply the intellectuals, within a society). When the educated members of a generation read the early printings of *Wilhelm Meister* or Dickens's *David Copperfield*, for instance, their consciousness and conscience were, in the authentic Joycean sense, "forged." The novelist in question had helped to acculturate them, and if later readers make a good-faith effort, they will find that the novelist can acculturate them.

I don't carry the story of the German tradition of self-cultivation beyond *Wilhelm Meister*, since a generation ago W. H. Bruford and Michael Beddow, in brilliant complementary critiques, and most recently Michael Minden, with his gender-studies

approach stressing themes of incest and inheritance from the Goethean to the Freudian era, have done so already. Within the Anglo-American tradition, preemption is a smaller problem, sometimes, as on Forster's *The Longest Journey* or Santayana's *The Last Puritan*, because very little outstanding criticism has ever been offered; sometimes, as on *Copperfield* or Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, because much of what over the last few decades has been offered in spades seems to me, whether as critic or teacher, so unhelpful. Jerome Buckley's *Season of Youth* (1974) offers a reliable definition of the *Bildungsroman* as a subgenre, but it ranges so widely that its treatment of individual novels is too thin, and in any case was even in 1974 too regardless of theory to seize the audience that could truly have profited from the author's good sense. Franco Moretti's *The Way of the World* (1987) is, if anything, over-regardful of theory, mostly Marxist, but his temperament is such that a love for Stendhal seems to exclude even a tolerance for Dickens. The upshot is, again, a study that makes Gallic readers glad to be Gallic but that makes Anglo-American readers feel, at best, defensive. I could not find a book about the *Bildungsroman* sufficiently conversant with theory to get at least a hearing from readers wedded to this -ism or that, yet also grounded, as Buckley was, in the immediate, pre-theoretic experience of encountering a work of art. Therefore I have written it myself, preferring, when I have had to choose, the report of my immediate experience over any theorizing afterthoughts. Which is to say I endorse Robert Warshow's dictum: "at the center of all truly successful criticism there is always a man reading a book, a man looking at a picture, a man watching a movie . . . and the critic must acknowledge that he is that man."⁶

In the face of the theory explosion of the past quarter century and the night-follows-dusk decay of literary studies, it is tempting to turn away altogether and just be "that man," stubbornly intent on the book, the picture, the movie. But pedagogically, with one's best students, to turn away is to abandon hope. Many of them, finding theory opaque or irrelevant, have adopted a principled know-nothing attitude, promising to read *Emma*, *Middlemarch*, or *Anna Karenina* every five years, but for the nonce emigrating from "English" into law, business, or medical school—an emigration that so far has done nothing to change the minds, or even catch the attention, of the theoreticians who now run literature departments. A high-dudgeon, know-nothing rejection of theorizing *in toto* won't give such students any reason to stay with literary studies, even in spirit. So in this book I try to offer a *via-media* know-something approach, taking the theoretic terms of my argument as much as possible from the novelists themselves and their immediate contemporaries,⁷ while throughout addressing that mythic and indispensable person, the common reader, with whom Dr. Johnson rejoiced to ally himself.

Chapter 1, addressed primarily to an Anglophone not German audience, is about the foundational example of the *Bildungsroman*, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, to which successors, even in English, pay at least tacit homage. Here the recurring preoccupations of novels about growing up—for example, the young person's affective development, from his relations with parents to those with friends of both sexes, or the development of his particular talents, which may help him decide what sort of work he will do in the wider world—are enfolded if not for the first time then at the crucial time, the moment of the French Revolution. The commoner Wilhelm's claim to the right of self-cultivation chimed with the Third Estate's claim to the rights of liberty, equality,

and fraternity. It was a revolutionary prelude to a century of liberal reform that would benefit the representative heroes of the *Bildungsromane* that followed.

Chapter 2 goes back to the origins of the idea of *Bildung* among the Weimar classicists, describes some nineteenth-century English culture-critics' assimilation of Goethe's *Bildungsidee* or idea of self-cultivation (thus establishing the intellectual background for the five representative Anglo-American novelists I then devote my attention to), and, with Goethe's example in mind, sketches a working definition of the *Bildungsroman* as a type of fiction.

The *Bildungsheld* (hero of self-cultivation) in Chapter 3 is David Copperfield, whose "autobiography" is as central to the Anglo-American tradition as Goethe's novel is to the German. Among the several themes that Dickens explores—love, work, the common boy's assertion of the right to take himself seriously—is that boy's fatherlessness, a factor in his memorable neglected-and-abused-child nightmare, of course, and emblematic of what seems to me a crisis of paternity throughout all the novels I consider, even Goethe's. If we can again learn how to read Dickens's 1850 book, pivotal in more than just a temporal sense to nineteenth-century English civilization, then we have good prospects for a fruitful reading or rereading of the novels I have left on the shelf.⁸

Chapter 4 mainly concerns James's small heroine in *What Maisie Knew* (1897), but also reaches back to Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). Joining these figures, we can appreciate the American master's insights into the full cycle of development from childhood to girlhood to youth and beyond—insights especially into how the aesthetic sense contributes to the moral. These characters too are orphans, literally or figuratively, and must to a large extent find out things for themselves.

In chapter 5 the motherless, fatherless hero is Rickie Elliot of Forster's *The Longest Journey* (1907), a minor classic that, though the author's personal favorite, is usually passed over in favor of his bigger-themed *Howards End* and *Passage to India*. It deserves inclusion if only because of its exploration of same-sex affection. Without being an "out" queer propagandist, as he awkwardly is in *Maurice*, Forster enables us to think about the idea of brotherhood that was *there*, subtextually, in *David Copperfield* and would be there, explicitly, in Santayana's *The Last Puritan*.

Chapter 6, about Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913), is in one sense a more normal presentment of a hero's heterosexually oriented maturation, from mother to girlfriends, but in another sense it is a presentment, normal but not normative, of his being unable to break away from his loving mother, and this because his father is at best absently present. Lawrence brings the crisis of paternity into sharp focus, and does as much as any novelist to explain its social and economic causes.

The concluding chapter picks up *The Last Puritan* (1935) partly as a project in recuperation. I think it a noble achievement, self-consciously within the line of Goethe's *Bildungsroman* and a Mann-worthy novel of ideas, that was once exceptionally popular with general readers and ought to be so again. Santayana in any event expresses the philosophical dimension of what a psychologist would call identity formation, which enables us to describe the late- or post-Christian spiritual awareness not only of Oliver Alden, the (logically) last puritan, but of the earlier *Bildungshelden* too.

My epilogue celebrates these common tyros' labors to cultivate a self in the age of liberal reform; notes the imbalance between their affective and their vocational achievements (why are they better at loving than at working?); worries, effectively

I hope, about a major reason for this imbalance, namely the modern age's problematic life-without-father; and limns a historically informed but still somewhat platonic ideal of what the next great *Bildungsroman* might look like.

It could be objected that none of the heroes of these novels is a person of color, and only Maisie and Isabel Archer are female. There are studies available on the Latino/Latina, the Asian American, the African American, the cross-culturally female, and so forth *Bildungsroman*,⁹ and my own purposes have seemed ambitious enough without trying to compass those occasionally heuristic though often overspecialized and hyphenated subsets. And in any event, youthful white males have come to seem like the segment of our society that one needs to worry about, and precisely because they constitute a large segment that—often fatherless, guilt-heaped, and feeling undervalued—tests lower, goes to college less often, and gets into legal trouble more than white females do.¹⁰ But this is a sociological aside. The fact is that females are hardly a neglected focus in the *Bildungsromane* I have chosen to analyze: in addition to my Jamesian examples, there are prepotent femininities in *Wilhelm Meister*, *Copperfield*, and *Sons and Lovers*, indeed to the point of sometimes overwhelming the masculine leads, while in *The Longest Journey* and *The Last Puritan*, admittedly more homosocial stories, women are at least not uninterestingly present.

More pertinently it is fair to ask, very sweepingly, what these particular novels tell us about the fate of *Bildung* over the past two centuries. To anticipate, I suggest that an answer looks something like this: Goethe started out to see whether the life of a bright but fairly commonplace individual made any sense. Did it have a purpose, and if so, was that purpose bestowed from without, say by nature or by nature's God, or was it generated from within, by the person's own conscious choices and instinctive impulses? Or could it in some discernible way be the product of both, as in the Protestant concept of cooperative Grace? Goethe came to believe it *was* a product of both, and so, as the idea of *Bildung* was translated into the Anglo-American tradition, did Dickens and most of his contemporaries—Dickens himself along with Thackeray and Charlotte Brontë being more confident about the intervening solicitude of nature's God than Goethe could be, while George Eliot, Meredith, and Emily Brontë were typical of writers who, like Goethe, were confident only about the fortuity-plagued but still regulated selective processes of nature itself. How to define, describe, and regard "nature itself" was of course a contested question, and most of the mentioned writers were sometimes at odds with themselves, as well as with their peers, about the "how." Not that such philosophical inconsistencies mattered on every page; the novelistic tasks of dramatizing, narrating, and summarizing, or of notating the psychological goings-on of characters, were largely identical for the theistic Dickens, the agnostic Meredith or James, and the atheistic George Eliot—and ditto, half-a-century on, for the areligious Forster and the quasi-religious Lawrence. These Edwardian and Georgian novelists, intent like their Victorian forebears on their young heroes' relations with parents, siblings, friends, lovers, and the individuated strangers beyond, are recognizably Goethean, which is to say broadly romantic, insofar as they believe that a person's life has meaning. And this meaning, even if understood only retrospectively—grasping tomorrow what one is doing today—is cocreated by that person's particular choices, conscious or un-, and by the present but ineffable power that courses through all things. Human nature, in short, is for them no mere "social construct"; it is part of what

in the poverty of speech we call nature itself, which, verbal poverty notwithstanding, is no "construct" either.

This passionate conviction lifts our spirits at the serene close of *The Longest Journey* and even at the otherwise somber close of *Sons and Lovers*. The petering out of the hero of *The Last Puritan* seems, however, a more modernist kind of ending; his death in an auto accident shortly after the Armistice in 1918 being graver, more absurdly sad than, for example, the "good luck to you" valediction Mann gives Hans Castorp, charging amidst the exploding shells of 1914 at the end of *The Magic Mountain*. What had discouraged Santayana was more than the Great War, awful as that was; it was the feeling that, culturally, the times were out of joint either for the many-sided development of a bright though representative American youth, or for a productive integration of his specialization (it happens to be philosophy but could as well be painting, music, poetry, etc.) with the specializations of his compatriots (the businessmen, engineers, lawyers, doctors, etc.). And this because the culture, not just American but English and European, hadn't yet arrived at a new philosophical synthesis to replace the exhausted romanticism for which, as poet and novelist, Goethe had been the supreme figure, and which Dickens, Forster, and Lawrence too had variously expressed. *The Last Puritan* can then be seen to belong at the end of the *Bildungsroman* tradition, and at the end of the romantic movement of which that sort of novel had been paradigmatic.

Chapter 1

Goethe's Classical *Bildungsroman*: Mastering the Art of Living

"[E]ach reader becomes his own Wilhelm Meister, an apprentice, a traveller, on his own account; and as his understanding is large or small, will Wilhelm and the whole work be real or the contrary." Thus to the young Henry James—he was only 22—was Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* a high example of how a novelist could allow his hero to cultivate himself with wide open eyes and ears, and thereby could prompt us, his readers, to cultivate ourselves. The larger our understanding, the better, obviously, but a certain receptive blankness won't be amiss either. Goethe has endowed Wilhelm with such intelligence, well enhanced by the people he meets, that in most cases however smart we are when we open the book, we will be even smarter when we close it.

It isn't, of course, a question of letting Wilhelm's—or even Goethe the narrator's—ideas dictate our own, especially since the latter's are often subtilized to the point of disappearance. Some of the earliest readers indeed worried that the author hadn't been intrusive enough in labeling vice and virtue—"artistic Atheism," Novalis called it, the ought-to-be God-spokesman Goethe dangerously stepping aside to let the readers judge for themselves.¹ But that, as George Eliot correctly argued, was precisely the point, and a decided novelistic strength.² We are meant to first perceive the world as Wilhelm does, then entertain his ideas as imaginative possibilities, and finally formulate critical ideas for ourselves. We grow up—all over again, quite possibly—as we double the hero's apprenticeship. This would be the desired readerly response to all the *Bildungsromane* fathered by Goethe's astonishing original. James thinks such a growing-up-with-the-hero experience particularly educative for young readers, who, as he tenderly says, "feel that it behooves them to attach a meaning to life." The lesson *Wilhelm Meister* teaches is—well, less how to *take in* life's meaning than to *give* it meaning: "how the experience of life may least be wasted, and best be turned to account."³ Which, as in the "live all you can" preachments of James's own later novels (we look at two of them), is an ultimately anti-Calvinist matter of our seeing and knowing all we can, and not letting a too ascetic morality exclude the aesthetic, intellectual, and sensual pleasures that might be got along

the way. Puritan readers may, James conceded, be foolish enough to detest Goethe's "moral economy," but they will be made less foolish by having something "great" to argue against.⁴ I endeavor to define that greatness shortly, but first some preliminaries.

Background, Synopsis, and Plan

In this study I make some minimal assumptions about readers' knowledge of the lives of the novelists, and allude occasionally to salient episodes therein, but never, I hope, without a sufficient reminder as to what, when, and why. Beyond that, I advise readers as to the best biographies and get on to my chief business, which is the reading of the novels. These are classics, and I expect that my audience will have read them, if not recently than at some point in a busy lifetime. Which, I realize, is thoroughly unfair, for it is the expectation of all the works of criticism that I value highly, and I admit that I myself haven't always read every novel, poem, or play they discuss. Therefore I have determined to offer, near the beginning of each of my discussions of a novel, a short synopsis of its plot. The Anglophone audience I am positing will almost surely know enough about my English and American authors' careers to make sense of any biographical allusions I offer, or if necessary will have easy access to the *Oxford Companion to English* [and to American] *Literature*, or other standard reference works. With Goethe, however, a brief sketch of his life up to the years of composing *Wilhelm Meister* cannot be amiss.

Goethe (1749–1832) was born into a prosperous family in Frankfurt am Main, his father a retired lawyer who loved to travel and collect art, his mother the mayor's daughter connected with the city's patriciate. His happy childhood was marked by exceptional fondness for his sister (thence for pretty girls in general), Pietistic Christianity (thence for the Bible and religious music), and puppet shows (thence for the theater). Having been tutored at home, he went at age 16 to Leipzig to study law, but was soon occupied chiefly in letting the city's Parisian glamor remedy his provincial inadequacies. He committed himself to the theater—the best plays in Europe, mostly French, could be seen in Leipzig—and to reading, under the guidance of the poet and moralist Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, books by Englishmen such as Laurence Sterne and Samuel Richardson and by Germans such as Christoph Martin Wieland the novelist and Johann Joachim Winckelmann the art historian. Goethe began in Leipzig to write on his own—songs about wine and women in the Anacreonic mode and dramas in the Rococo—but in 1768 a serious illness forced him to return to Frankfurt, where he came under the influence of his mother's devout friend, Susanna von Klettenberg, whose life would be reflected in Book VI of *Wilhelm Meister*. Once recovered, Goethe went to Strasbourg, then part of France, where under Johann Gottfried von Herder's sway he began to discover, first, the primitive roots of literature—folk songs, the Hebrew Bible, Homer, Ossian—and second, the Gothic, whether in medieval cathedrals or in the poetry of Shakespeare. Germans were seizing on Shakespeare as an elemental, nonclassical, unregulated alternative to the French tradition of Racine and Corneille, and Goethe imitated him in *Götz von Berlichingen*, a prose play about an untamed sixteenth-century baron. He also began writing

Sturm und Drang (storm and stress) verse, a mood that ostensibly colored his first novel, *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (*The Sorrows* [more properly, the sufferings] of *Young Werther*, 1774), which famously started a European cult of suicide, prompted not merely by lovelornness but by *Weltschmerz*, a nameless discontent with the ways of the world. The author wasn't glorifying self-destruction; on the contrary, already beginning to distance himself from Gothic darkness, he was diagnosing the romantic source of the impulse to suicide and looking for a classical corrective.

Love affairs with various women—German students used to learn their names as medieval monks learned the stations of the cross—naturally inspired the creation of *Werther*, the storm-and-stress poems, and the serious plays, *Egmont* for instance. The latter was written in 1775, the year Goethe engaged himself to a patrician's daughter, Lili Schönemann, only to break off in the autumn when he accepted the young Duke Karl August's invitation to visit Weimar. It would remain his home for the rest of his life. The duke provided him ample opportunities to develop his talents on many fronts—from superintending mining and irrigation to issuing army uniforms and directing plays—while Charlotte von Stein, the formidable wife of a court official, taught him social graces and the value of platonic feminine stimulation. Eleven privileged years even of Weimar, however, could become routine, and in 1786 Goethe stole away to Italy, where for nearly two years he deliberately severed himself from his Gothic northern past and sought the archetypal world of Magna Graecia, the Hellenized Mediterranean culture before and beneath the Christian art of Venice, Florence, and Rome. The literary fruit of this journey, in addition to one of the best travel books ever written (*Die Italienische Reise* or *The Italian Journey*, not published till 1816–1818), were supreme dramas, *Torquato Tasso* and *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, and the *Römische Elegien* (*Roman Elegies*), verses that with classic Greek sensibility fuse eroticism and aestheticism.

Upon Goethe's return to Weimar in 1788, he began living with Christiane Vulpius, daughter of a lowly bureaucrat, to whom he was utterly devoted (she bore him several children, and in 1806 he married her). He also put aside most of his administrative duties in order to devote himself to science and literature, from which he was momentarily distracted when following his duke's counterrevolutionary army into France in 1792, an experience that, as a liberal anti-Jacobin, he soon recounted in memoirs, poems, and plays. The French Revolution would concentrate the mind of all Europe during the 1790s and beyond, but the key intellectual event in Goethe's life during these years was his friendship with Friedrich Schiller, who in a letter of 1794 characterized him as a consciously naïve poet—one who began in feeling, moved to abstract reflection, and then tellingly brought reflection back to feeling. Ideas, in short, were in Goethe's poems triumphantly embodied in things—natural objects, human speech and act. At this time Goethe began revising and extending the manuscript known as *Wilhelm Meisters theatralische Sendung* (*Wilhelm Meister's Theatrical Mission*), which dates from as early as 1773 (though not discovered and printed till 1910–1911) and which had petered out in 1786. The correspondence he had with Schiller about this new novel, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, is one of the most brilliant exchanges in German literary history.

This, omitting the final 36 years of Goethe's life, brings us to the plot of that novel, which is an unusual joining of realism and symbolism, the characters psychologically believable yet thematically grouped, as in a fable. The son of a successful businessman,

Wilhelm is in Book I much enamored of the theater and has an affair with the actress Mariana.⁵ Having gotten her pregnant, he resolves that they should run away and join an acting troupe. In Book II, shocked by what he supposes to be Mariana's unfaithfulness, he burns his literary manuscripts and tries to do his father's bidding by going into business. But a meeting with the actors Laertes and the lively, alluring Philina scotches his business career—the sort of work his friend Werner is more suited to—and, along with the tightrope dancer Mignon and the mysterious Old Harper whom he has rescued from a circus, he joins Melina's theater company. Throughout these chapters there is much serious discussion of the history and function of drama, which continues in Book III when the company takes up residence at the drafty castle of a count interested in German (as against French) plays, especially ones written by himself. The actual life of actors, plagued by envy of one another and by disdain from their aristocratic patrons, is balanced by the ideal realm of drama on the page. Jarno, Wilhelm's intellectual mentor, opens up the possibility that Shakespeare is superior even to the towering Racine. In Book IV Wilhelm's study of Shakespeare suggests first a wild-oats-sowing Prince Hal model to emulate, then more soberly a Renaissance-man Prince Hamlet model. Such abstract speculations are interrupted by concrete misfortune when the company, having left the count's castle, is attacked by marauders; Wilhelm is wounded and then nursed by a lovely Amazonian woman, whose grace makes Philina seem cheap. The marauders have actually been lying in wait for this Amazonian and her friends, and Wilhelm has in effect taken the blow for her. In any event, he and the rest of Melina's company are now absorbed into one headed by Serlo, who with his sister Aurelia is a genuine actor—a perfect interlocutor for the Hamlet-obsessed Wilhelm, and a representative type of the performer personality (authentic on stage, inauthentic off). Book V describes the company's production of *Hamlet*, with Wilhelm, starring in the title role, offering his famous interpretation during rehearsal. On opening night the Ghost is played by a stranger who so resembles Wilhelm's recently deceased father that the young man's fright is quite genuine, the performance a success. He gets drunk during the cast party and ends up in bed with Philina, with Mignon jealously witnessing outside the door. The Harper, gone insane, sets the house on fire and must be committed to an asylum. Aurelia, like Ophelia jilted and driven mad by her lover Lothario, recklessly catches cold and dies—but not before reading the consolatory *Bekenntnisse einer schönen Seele* ("Confessions of a Fair Saint" or, as I will call her, a "Beautiful Soul"), which comprise Book VI.

The first five books have been a poeticizing, symbolizing expansion of the *Sendung*, and so are sometimes called the "*Theaterroman*." Book VI was an entirely new departure, a portrait of a religio-intellectual *Bildung* that Goethe honors in cases as special as the Beautiful Soul's. Book VII brings Wilhelm to the castle of Lothario, whom he intends to charge with perfidy toward Aurelia. Lothario, however, can responsibly justify his actions, and Wilhelm must acknowledge his own bit of sexual waywardness: the dead Mariana, he finds, is the mother of his son, the three-year-old Felix. Other women whom Lothario has known—Theresa and Lydia—are introduced, enabling Wilhelm to assess the full worth of that Amazonian beauty, now revealed to be Lothario's sister Natalia. Introduced too is the *Turmgesellschaft* (Society of the Tower), a secret organization that Lothario, Jarno, and various mysterious strangers in Wilhelm's life belong to, and that has been watching over his development. His initiation à la Mozart's *The Magic Flute*—a promotion from apprentice to master (*Meister*)—is at hand. That is the burden

of Book VIII, the final part, along with a discussion of different theories of education, the initiate's purpose in life, the freedom of the will, and, with Mignon's death and funeral (it turns out she is the Harper's daughter, conceived incestuously), the proper attitude toward mortality. Scarcely believing his luck, Wilhelm marries Natalia, and is told he must now set out on his travels—the *Wanderjahre* of Goethe's last novel (*Wilhelm Meister's Years of Wandering or Travels*, 1821).

Those hitherto unfamiliar with *Wilhelm Meister* now have a rough knowledge of what is in it, but I don't expect any such person to want to read it—not till I have done my best to make it interesting. Those hitherto familiar with it already know it is interesting. Reading on, for them, will be a matter of remembering just how interesting it was when they first read it, and (I hope) how interesting in new ways it might be if they were to read it again.

A word in any case about method—the important question of how we engage with and then emerge from *Wilhelm Meister*. We get some valuable hints from the first critical reading the novel had, when Schiller went through the manuscript chapter by chapter and, as I have indicated, traded letters with the novelist. Events happen to Wilhelm, Schiller says of the recast chapters, "not actually *for his sake*" but for ours. Therefore Goethe, without seeming pushy, had to be sufficiently directive to bring the resistant reader at least into dialogue with his own ideas and if possible into agreement with them.⁶ Concrete, lucid presentment of things, acts, speeches, and psychological goings-on will, as always, be the literary artist's principal duty—first make us apprehend, then guide us to comprehend Wilhelm's world. But Goethe thinks we may need help—especially if we are young and inexperienced—disengaging ourselves from Wilhelm. Hence the coaching various members of the Tower offer him in the right way of viewing art. Jarno's advice on this subject is pertinent both for Wilhelm and for us. Wilhelm suffers from the common youthful tendency to overidentify with characters in books or on stage, most famously with Hamlet, the role his theatrical friends assign him. To see himself in Hamlet, or Hamlet in himself, is to get down on all fours with people who, in Jarno's words, bring "their conscience and their morals with them to the opera; . . . [or] bethink them of their loves and hatreds in contemplating a colonnade."⁷ Of course a dramatic character is human and a colonnade isn't, but an aesthetic understanding of a play requires some of the detachment an architectural critic maintains toward a colonnade, asking how it is made, where it stands in relation to earlier works, and, with regard to the human content, how particular characters differ from as well as resemble one's peculiar self. That is salutary counsel for any (but especially any young) reader's approach to *Wilhelm Meister* and its successors. The characters are humanly lifelike, yes, but they aren't altogether identical with ourselves or our neighbors, and, like operas and colonnades, they are in every case inventions—constructs made of words.⁸

Enough prolegomenon. What follows in this chapter is the consideration of five issues clearly radiating in Goethe's mind from the central project of self-cultivation:

- (1) the connection between the rise of the realistic novel, in Germany as in other nations, and the rise of individualism as such—the impulse toward self-determination that, encouraged by nature itself, prompts a youth at some point to resist his parents, especially his father;

- (2) the upshot of Wilhelm's particular struggle-with-father, his supposed theatrical vocation, which isn't quite as disastrous as it seems;
- (3) the several channels into which women, who in youth may also strike out against their parents, direct their energies, and what Wilhelm might learn from them;
- (4) the corresponding channels for men's energies, among which Wilhelm must look for models ("What will I be when I grow up?"); and
- (5) the philosophically complicated dialectic between (a) what Wilhelm must accept as necessary; (b) what he can freely choose to shape this way or that; and (c) the cooperation between his self-cultivating hand and the "higher hand" cultivating us all.

Realism, Individualism, and the "Natural" Struggle of Youth with Age

Goethe wrote *Wilhelm Meister* at the end of a century that had, so to speak, invented childhood. As Philippe Ariès' landmark *Centuries of Childhood* has demonstrated, the "young person" who in the Middle Ages had to be folded into the adult work force—death rates, poverty, and lack of social welfare systems required it—was in the wealthier and therefore healthier Enlightenment discovered to be something other than a miniature adult: to wit, a child. And writers from John Locke to Rousseau, William Blake to William Wordsworth, endeavored to define the child's special condition, to prescribe ways to nurture and educate it properly in order to bring it successfully through adolescence into adulthood. *Wilhelm Meister* was, in Nicholas Boyle's phrase, a "supremely uncourtly"—that is, a novelistic as against poetic or expository—contribution to this discussion.⁹ But what does "novelistic" mean in this context?

In the beginning it wasn't a German notion at all. The realistic novel arose in early eighteenth-century England rather than on the Continent because, among several other factors,¹⁰ the break with Catholicism and the commercial success of its liberated middle class had produced a society that was, in Francis Jeffrey's words (reviewing Carlyle's 1824 translation of Goethe's novel), already "free, sociable, discursive, reformed, [and] familiar" in Shakespeare's time, and by Defoe's time, when the gains of the Glorious Revolution were solidifying, was even more so. The late eighteenth-century bourgeois revolution in France brought analogous benefits to its society, such that by the 1830s Balzac in Paris could study what Dickens could in London, namely, the several classes mingled in the fascinatingly if cruelly competitive jostle of market capitalism. Germany had no such metropolitan center, and politically it was still stretching out of the feudal chrysalis, with a working class submissive and incurious, a burgher class small and self-protective, and a nobility far removed from them both. Goethe was a burgher, with little interest in the class below him, and with only a civil servant's access to the class above. (It is often essential, by the way, to insist on the term "burgher" in order to distinguish the mid-sector of German society—merchants, officers, university-educated professionals, the handful of intellectuals who wrote

books and essays, and the lower ranks of the nobility—from its counterparts in French and English society, which should respectively be called the bourgeoisie and the middle-class.) In any event, Goethe would not have found much of interest among either the workers or the nobles. They were ingrown and narrow. His precursor burgher novelists had for these reasons been able to produce only self-reflexive Shandean sports such as Georg Christoph Lichtenberg's *The Waste Books* (or *Aphorisms*, 1765–1799), or ruminative *Bildungsromane* such as Wieland's *History of Agathon* (1766–1767). Novels like Wieland's, as T. J. Reed has said, were not just creations of an age concerned with education; they were a pis aller for writers for whom the social theme was as yet impossible.¹¹ In a representative eighteenth-century English novel like *Tom Jones*, "the young man from the provinces" travels to London and achieves outward successes: wife, fortune, and public recognition. The Bunyanesque pilgrimage has been transposed to a secular plane. In a representative eighteenth-century German novel like *Agathon*, though Wieland granted his debt to Fielding, the pilgrimage is still to a large extent Bunyanesque. In other words, the health of the hero's soul is what counts, while only a slight nod is given to his material connections with other people or to the affairs of society at large.

While we would make a category mistake to praise *Wilhelm Meister* as "realistic" in the *Jane Eyre* or *Vanity Fair* mode—it is much more freighted than such Victorian novels with fairy tale motifs, forced coincidences, sudden deaths, paranormal sexuality, outbursts of poetry, seminar-style philosophical disquisitions, and self-reflexive meditations on *Hamlet* and aesthetics generally—the book does advance well beyond the *Agathon* model of exclusive inwardness. By yoking a Lutheran, at times even pietistic concern for the soul with an intelligent interest in its "material base," broadly conceived, Goethe creates a hybrid realism that Mr. Boyle suggestively compares to the "magic" variety recently offered by Umberto Eco, Gabriel García Márquez, or Günter Grass—or, to put it in eighteenth-century terms, he has blended Voltairean *conte*, Johnsonian fable, and Smollettian travelogue (Boyle, 2.424, 240). He does in any event a better job than he had in the *Theatrical Mission* of presenting the quiddities of mid-century burgherly life and, importantly, of distancing Wilhelm's post-adolescent story from his own by pushing him *beyond* the said mission. In the *Lehrjahre*, more specifically, Goethe integrates Wilhelm's life with that of his son Felix and with the activities of the Tower, and in the *Wanderjahre* (begun in 1807, published in 1821 and, much expanded, in 1829, and, largely ignored by Anglophone writers and readers, not under consideration here) he has his hero qualify as a surgeon, ready to accompany some Germans to America, where they will establish their own sort of Brook Farm.

Goethe is also shrewdly cognizant of money—the theater's struggles for gate receipts, the Tower's income-sharing corporation—which a Wieland or a Humboldt would never have stooped to mention. Goethe knew that any life, internally rich or not, depended on external resources. Characters who, like the Harper, detach themselves from the pursuit of material well-being lose touch not only with their fellows (save as beggars beseeching alms) but also, as in the Beautiful Soul's case, with their very bodies.¹² The "hollow empty Me," as the Physician calls the inner self (2.16), can and will be filled—with ideas, feelings, memories, the products of experience. Only, Goethe unpietistically maintained—and it was a conviction his Italian journey had reinforced—the products of experience ought to be those that ground the inward

in the outward: the soul (to employ the common antitheses) in the body, the self in the society, the mind's work in the hands' work, spirit in nature.

The separated theses needed to be brought closer together, as we can see by starting with "nature," which for Goethe is a very complex word, with both a material and a spiritual charge. It is the world's body—the land, sky, and waters—and the unseen providence, or "program" as we might say, within or behind that body. Providentially, Goethe is convinced, "she" will favor any person who takes up almost any job with a view not to making money or treating other people instrumentally, necessary as such means usually are toward whatever end, but to building (a process implicit in *Bildung*) his character. In other words, she encourages the progressive evolution of her creatures' adaptive powers, though not in a higgledy-piggledy way. Creative evolution—many of Goethe's researches into the common principles governing plant and animal *Bildung*, during the very months he is writing *Wilhelm Meister*, anticipate the Lamarckian riposte to Darwin that Samuel Butler and Bernard Shaw would later offer—most often occurs when an organism cunningly deviates from a pattern nature has given it, only to see how soon it will become uncomfortable enough to make a change.¹³ A person will have a particular vocation (*Bestimmung*) to which nature has called him, but not forever. (You want to be an electrical engineer? "Fine," says nature, "and what will you become after *that*?") Call it Goethe's post-feudal, Lutheran heritage or simply his psychological restlessness: for Wilhelm, as for himself, there is no standing still. Any desired object, as soon as it is obtained, turns out to be as limiting and unsatisfying as the ones he already has. Small wonder that "contentment" is low on the list of Goethean desiderata. When discomfort or crisis occurs, "becoming" trumps "being" again and again, in a Faustian movement toward greater, or at least different, (dis)satisfactions.¹⁴

Wilhelm's self-evolution depends upon his readiness to respond to whatever turns up, both nature's material offerings (the warmth of spring or the happenstantial encounter with a woman to enjoy it with) and nature's spiritual promptings (his sexual, aesthetic, or reverential impulses). Readiness to respond doesn't mean "uncritical surrender to." Goethe is no amoralist. Wilhelm is supposed to learn how to moderate and direct his impulses—this is the educative hyper-self-consciousness that Lawrence and others would object to in Goethe—recognizing and accepting what even inspired impulse *cannot* alter, be it Mariana's lack of imagination, the actors' lack of aesthetic ideals, or his own lack of Shakespearean genius, while he recognizes and goes to work on what inspired impulse *can*. Like what? To begin with, his vocation. It is to some degree in his power to fashion it as a painter fashions a picture. Certain materials are given—the number of paint tubes and brushes, possibly the size of canvases and sometimes even the subject—but the artist is free to choose his method of handling and arranging these things. So, by analogy, Wilhelm can choose to join a theatrical troupe instead of the commercial business his father has pointed to.

This act of rebellion brings on the usual paternal disapproval and the usual filial guilt. His father, kindly and fierce enough in the heavy paterfamilias way, dies when his son is yet very young, and so occasions another absence the youth has to deal with—again by seeking paternal surrogates among older men. (Wilhelm's *mother*, one might note, may as well not exist, she gets so little mention, and he therefore has to seek the requisite feminine energies, often among older women, outside his childhood home.) Such

absconded or absconding parents—Wilhelm's are more vividly present in the *Theatrical Mission*—are characteristic of many canonical *Bildungsromane*, not just because of mortality rates within older societies but because novelists have sought the broader, often richer acculturation that the world beyond the childhood home can offer. Much is obviously suffered when one loses one's parents, but with luck one can suddenly contemplate possibilities that were before unimaginable. The storyteller can do more with an orphan than with a normal child. For Wilhelm, however, the transition is hard. His father's influence has been potent enough to require that he fight him off even after he is dead, once on the opening night of *Hamlet*, when he is certain that the king's ghost is his actual father's, come to rebuke him, the trembling prince, for not doing his burgherly duty; and again in the bedroom, where the specter of "the harnessed King" is dissipated by the kisses of Philina, whom he is too drunk to push away. Intercourse with her confirms the sexual initiation he has had with Mariana. By making him feel more like a father himself, Philina helps quiet his father's perturbed spirit.

While a *Bildungsbeld*, like any son, needs to assimilate his father's positive as well as to reject his negative energies, from *Wilhelm Meister* to *Sons and Lovers* many *Bildungsromane* foreground the rejection. The sons want so desperately to be themselves that patricide (and often matricide) seem figuratively a kind of test of their manhood. As we see, Lawrence's exploration of this process, specifically in Paul Morel's passionate search for a more balanced method of assimilating as well as rejecting his parents' qualities, is much more complex and deft than what we behold in Goethe, and suggests that within this subgenre of the novel, at any rate, something like creative progress from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century was made. But to everything a season. In Goethe's epoch, it was genuinely revolutionary—it seemed quite adequately complex—to insist that a son might freely choose to do something different from what his father had done. Wilhelm's father is a merchant, so he tries to become a strolling player. The father of his boyhood friend and eventual brother-in-law Werner is a bon vivant, so the son tries to become a frugal capitalist, and succeeds with a vengeance. His "there but for the grace of God go I" function in the story is to warn Wilhelm and us against the fetishizing of money and the physical and mental stresses that go with too many years on an office stool. That is the older Werner, however. When he is younger, he argues a good case for reinvesting dividends (or in Keynesian phrase, having his cake and not eating it) and for mercantile activity in general: it not only fosters peace through trade, but generates the circulation of money and goods by which Wilhelm himself, like every German burgher, is supported (1.65). Werner's *apologia pro Fortuna*—he adores the world of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*—reaches epical heights that moved even the very *spirituelle* Schiller to praise (*Correspondence*, 1.38), and is proof, should we require it, that filial rebellion needn't always be in a Bohemian direction.

Wilhelm's Supposed Theatrical Vocation

Wilhelm understands economics well enough to follow Werner's *apologia*, but like Christian Buddenbrook in Mann's novel of multigenerational *Bildung*, he dismisses economics as trivial and shallow, and politics as venal and boring. Of science, unfortunately,

he knows nothing and has been taught less. His lively brain and sympathetic heart can be stirred only by the arts, and given his childish play with puppets, he assumes that the right art for him will be the theater. It does at first seem to be his *métier*, for if, as Aurelia says, in practical affairs he is as innocent as Adam "standing agape" on the morn of Creation, in literary affairs he is as knowing as Shakespeare himself: "one would think you had just descended from a synod of the gods, and had listened there while they were taking counsel how to form men" (1.285). In Wilhelm's case it is all right that he never learns how to *act* Shakespeare at even a journeyman level. Reading him critically is the main thing, since understanding the characters and stories of those plays is tantamount to understanding human nature itself. (Samuel Johnson had made the equivalent claim, but when Goethe and other Weimar classicists made it, English writers such as Coleridge and William Hazlitt really took notice, and the great age of "character appreciation" in Shakespearean criticism began.) So, on the strength of a lead role in a school play and a field trip to Stratford a young man wants to study theater at the university? *Let him!* Experiment with life—*placet experiri*, as Mann's Settembrini classically phrases it—and make the usual mistakes. There will be no *Bildung* without a measure of folly along the way.¹⁵

This sounds insouciant enough, but in fact Wilhelm considers his theatrical move quite deliberately. Writing to Werner, he declares himself unable to find fulfillment, as his friend can, in "boundless acquisition" and "light mirthful . . . enjoyment." Why not? It is because, among the opulent and the mirthful, he feels aspects of his sensibility are muted. No one responds to his wit, his melancholy, his subtle insights—a typical gifted youth's complaint. This late eighteenth-century gifted youth, living in a country where the ancien régime is the only régime, puts his problem in Beaumarchais-like terms, the abilities of one class versus the disabilities of another:

I know not how it is in foreign countries; but in Germany, a universal, and if I may say so, personal cultivation is beyond the reach of any one except a nobleman. A burgher may acquire merit; by excessive efforts he may even educate his mind; but his personal qualities are lost, or worse than lost, let him struggle as he will. (1.319)

"Personal cultivation" means, at base level, making himself look good—to have the qualities of voice, dress, carriage, "a polished manner" in "his figure, his person," those Chesterfieldian graces that a nobleman seems to have by birthright and that for those lacking such a birthright could most easily be acquired in the theater. Looking good—today one imagines supermodels and movie stars with some justice thinking this way—has no more to do with "capacities, talents, wealth" than the Apollo Belvedere does. All we care about, with such figures, are line, molding, texture, proportion, color, and so on.

Wilhelm rather innocently believes that his neighbors gaze at a nobleman (*Edelmann*) in a similarly aesthetic way. How democratically presumptuous, how ridiculous it would be for a burgher, regardless of his natural endowment, to pretend to *this* sort of Apollonian beauty (or social decorativeness):

The burgher may not ask himself: "What art thou?" He can only ask: "What hast thou? What discernment, knowledge, talent, wealth?" If the nobleman, merely by his personal carriage, offers all that can be asked of him, the burgher by his personal carriage offers

nothing, and can offer nothing. The former has a right to *seem*; the latter is compelled to *be*, and when he aims at seeming becomes ludicrous and tasteless. The former does and makes, the latter but effects and procures; he must cultivate some single gift in order to be useful, and it is beforehand settled, that in his manner of existence there is no harmony, and can be none, since he is bound to make himself of use in one department, and so has to relinquish all the others. (1.320)

The burgher must settle into some one mode of production, service, or entrepreneurship, and never venture beyond. The noble need produce nothing in any mode: his "doing" consists of recreation, his "making" consists (one assumes) of directing and administering the labor of other people, and between his recreational and managerial efforts he is able to achieve a "harmony" of talents and interests that is denied the narrowly grooved burgher. (Don't ask about the yet narrower groove of the proletarian, for this is a preindustrial Germany; the peasant isn't under consideration, either, but one needn't be a devotee of George Sturt's *The Wheelwright's Shop* to imagine ways in which the peasant's groove is rather wider than his burgher cousin's.) Wilhelm is—social circumstances compel him to be—Teutonically nonpolitical. He doesn't dream of a constitutional change that would make Germany more like England or America, perhaps because he has a profound intuition that Germany, like any other nation, will change organically not mechanically, and that written constitutions have but slight effects on the process. Goethe's alarm at the social engineering going on in France since 1789 was very like Edmund Burke's.

In any event, Wilhelm addresses his self-cultivation problem as—well, an individual self, intent on "consider[ing] by what means I may save myself." This salvific project sounds like the introduction of a northern burgher into the southern court Baldassare Castiglione had described in *Il cortegiano* or *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), and must indeed reflect Goethe's own transplantation into Duke Karl August's court at Weimar—a place in which to look good, as noted, but also to develop "my mental faculties and tastes, that so, in this enjoyment henceforth indispensable, I may esteem as good the good alone, as beautiful the beautiful alone." Physical and mental aptitudes, in brief, are to be cultivated in tandem, and since Wilhelm has no entrée into aristocratic court circles, he turns to the theater, after all a kind of poor man's court. For in it the poor can pretend to be rich, or indeed to be whatever sort of person the play calls for. Playacting is only pretending. It isn't the serious, Castiglione-like pursuit of many-sided development—the *uomo universale* ideal—that Goethe himself made strikingly his own: part courtier, part mineralogist, part painter, botanist, zoologist, architect, poet, playwright. Doing a little of everything well is reserved for the one-in-a-generation person who has a Goethean endowment. Wilhelm is more like some—by no means all—of us when we were very young, in that he wants to be different from his middling father. And finding himself attracted to those beautiful people, the nobles, he channels his envy, or emulation, into theater work. It seems likely merely to feed his already advanced narcissism, but at the end of the day it leads him *out* of it, which is what education—the Latin *educere*—literally means.

Even if Wilhelm had the talent for acting more than Hamletesque roles, the situation of the eighteenth-century German theater would materially frustrate the ideal "harmony" of physical and mental development he is striving for. Not only are there the fiscal problems that harass most artists, and that force Serlo to turn the company

into a light opera troupe pandering to Philistine taste (more along the lines of *The Sound of Music* and *The Fantasticks* than *King Lear* or *The Three Sisters*); but there are also the limitations of the company itself, which is scarcely more ready to perform Shakespeare than the Philistines are to watch him. During the best days of Serlo's deep thinking and vivid acting, his players are too easily given to debauchery—their joyful talk about doing high drama soon dissipating into a drunken supper that ends with glasses and punch bowl broken. Nor are their spirits aided, at other points, by the way the nobles treat them as hired servants, or by the way marauders from some beastly army set upon them in the woods. This is clearly not a country friendly to the theater, and when Philina decamps—she whose wit and quickness have amid scenes of William Hogarthian squalor held them together—the company simply dissolves.¹⁶

When, as it were, the cardboard theater and wooden puppets are put away, what can Wilhelm be said to have gained from this experiment? Contact with Bohemians, for starters. They are “bad company,” as some readers have thought, but among them sex and conversation are, with Goethe's evident approval, freer than in burgherly circles, and they enable Wilhelm, as Goethe told Eckermann, to recognize the contrastingly *better* culture in the Tower.¹⁷ In addition, he has had the opportunity to try on different roles, both on and off the stage, which will help him discover the one, or ones, he is truly good for. Acting is a kind of therapy, as the Second Stranger says: it is “the best mode of drawing men out of themselves, and leading them, by a circuitous path, back into themselves again” (1.146–47).

To act Hamlet is, for Wilhelm, a homeopathic therapy. In his interpretation, the Prince doesn't conceive and execute a “scheme of vengeance”; rather, the original murder “rolls itself along with all its consequences,” dragging the good into an abyss with the wicked—all as “Fate alone” decrees. How close this is to Shakespeare's dramatic poem isn't the question. Wilhelm sees in Hamlet what he sees in himself: indecision, intellectualism, and an interest in the theater. More importantly, he wants to believe there is a “fate” that has ordered him to become an actor, and that can therefore be held responsible for his having defied his father. His streamlining of the play—eliminating Fortinbras, the active prince who represents what Hamlet himself in happier times might have been, and the mission to England, wherein Hamlet outfoxes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—may overemphasize Hamlet's passivity, but it also serves to purge Wilhelm of his own. By overdosing on passivity he can, so to speak, spit it out and thus leave that particular adolescent phase behind him. It is like the undergraduate who drinks too much beer: his unconscious lets him do it—I am offering a benign theory—till his stomach discovers the mistake and teaches him to say no.

The Tower rather heavily declares that “we should guard against a talent which we can't hope to practice in perfection. Improve it as we may, we shall always in the end, when the merit of the master has become apparent to us, painfully lament the loss of time and strength devoted to such botching” (2.125). True enough, and everyone can think of tryouts that should never have been attempted. But Wilhelm's experience in the theater has not been merely widening or purgative. It has revealed a genuine vocational possibility. If his histrionic range is small and the epoch in general unripe for a Shakespearean renaissance, we needn't altogether endorse Mr. Boyle's judgment that the whole experiment has been an “expensive disaster” and waste of time (Boyle, 2.245, 372). We can imagine him, not too foolishly, doing good journeyman

work as a provincial theater director. He is at his best when urging the players to attend to often overlooked fundamentals such as moderating their gestures and speaking loudly enough, and to be *critics* of the pieces performed. And when he passionately demands that the ensemble *practice* till their timing and coordination are as sharp as an orchestra's, we can hear echoes of the director of the ducal theater in Weimar, who himself never rose above the level of amateur acting, but who still could believe in the possibility of intelligent performance, shrewdly prompted. In the *Wanderjahre*, Goethe may temporarily have despaired of such possibility, but neither that nor Wilhelm's sighs of regret should eclipse his small but distinct satisfactions in rehearsal and show, or the rightness of his quest for *any* avenue of freely creative self-expression. A piano player may never become a pianist, but no Goethean would call his hours at the keyboard wasted.

Feminine Modalities: Philina and the Beautiful Soul, Theresa and Natalia

The novel's gallery of women—from Mariana, the not too clean actress whom Wilhelm's imagination transmogrifies into a Rubensian goddess of art, and who he at last learns has borne him a son, Felix; to Natalia, the fair virgin of the Tower who is so consummately developed that she helps transmogrify *him* into a responsible citizen and will after their marriage become Felix's stepmother—provides some instructive models for development. And not just female development. Two complementary pairs of women—Philina and the Beautiful Soul, Theresa and Natalia—are like mirrors, well beyond what the types even in *Hamlet* suggest, in which Wilhelm can glimpse analogous male possibilities of his own. Lawrence thought the whole gallery typical of Goethe's “grand orthodox perversity”—his refusal of intimacy, his drive “to intellectualize and so utterly falsify the phallic consciousness”—Laurentian longhand for male sexual desire.¹⁸ It is true that Theresa and Natalia don't stir Wilhelm's “phallic consciousness” very profoundly, and even Mariana has only “shown him a new experience,” namely procreative intercourse. But Lawrence must have forgotten Philina.

She who can charm readers as divergently fastidious as George Henry Lewes and Henry James must possess a vitality that appeals to something deeper than sex-in-the-head prurience. One moment she is flirting and dining with some rich city merchants, only to send them packing when they impudently assume that she will take off her clothes to pay for her meal. Next moment, like Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park*, she is expressing her impatience with a sentimentalist's adoration of the landscape: “to look upon a pair of bright black eyes is the life of a pair of blue ones. But what on earth have we to do with springs, and brooks, and old rotten lindens?” (1.128). No doubt she and her companions are arrested in what Schiller would call the sensual stage of development. Happy with simple changes, “their highest wish” is merely “To eat daily in a different spot” (1.145). That is believable, but it feels like a calculated caricature, meant to affirm the physical basis for any happiness involving *all* the faculties we call human. Philina may never augment her happiness with the Beautiful Soul's kind of intellectual exploration, but then the Beautiful Soul, afflicted as she is by tuberculosis, never augments

her happiness with the other's kind of sensual exploration. Each offers only a partial happiness but, as Lawrence and Santayana would quickly have agreed, Philina's is the more fundamental. Any *healthy*, long-lived spirituality depends upon it. Not that Wilhelm can choose such sensuality; like the Shavian Life Force, it chooses him: "if I have a touch of kindness for thee," Philina tells him, "what hast thou to do with it?" (1.263). He is distressed to find her so beautiful, especially when she dozes in cat-like sleep. He thinks her tawdry next to Natalia, but it won't do to try to stay virtuously aloof from her. Her delightful song in praise of night, with its social and sexual intercourse, may offend Aurelia as too blatant an invitation to go to bed, but its energy succeeds in turning Wilhelm from what Aurelia herself has called a "sparkling bird of Paradise" that frankly never wert, into an ordinary bird of the fallen world—which, with his constitution, is what he *should* be.

Goethe was entirely in earnest in presenting Philina's opposite, the Beautiful Soul, whose "Confessions" make up Book VI. This "religious book," he told Schiller, "is based upon the noblest illusions and upon the most delicate confusion between the *objective* and the *subjective*" (*Correspondence*, 1.60–61). As noted, the model was Susanne von Klettenberg, a pious and by no means prudish woman who had attracted him to the Moravians, though finally that group's doctrine of original sin had offended his sense of man's potential goodness. The Beautiful Soul represents Lutheranism's advance on Catholicism, the latter being represented by Augustin, who superstitiously believes that divinity and salvation are objectified in rituals and relics. Any religious or moral truths, she understands, can have no such objective grounding: they are entirely a matter of emotion, passion, and feeling—in a word, subjective (which, in his counterstatement to G. W. F. Hegel, was to be Kierkegaard's central thesis). She may be "objectively" wrong to call God her "Invisible Friend"—that is, no such assertion can be verified—but she is "subjectively" right to say, with Spinoza, that God doesn't require anyone to love Him, and that He would be no less good if *He* chose not to love anyone. In other words, such an assertion jibes first with her imaginative idea of what a majestic Wholly Other would be like, and second and more importantly with her ethical comportment: when she loves someone or something, it isn't because she thinks God is watching her, but because the person or thing is lovable and she has love to give. Subjectively of a piece, she errs, from Goethe's Kantian point of view, only in fixing her subjectivity upon specifically biblical stories and doctrines. Her niece, Natalia, won't abandon the Bible but will read it along a continuum of other profound texts, thus giving her own ethico-religious subjectivity a properly rational, universalist basis.

The second sentence of the Beautiful Soul's story reads: "About the beginning of my eighth year, I was seized with a hemorrhage; and from that moment my soul became all feeling, all memory" (1.387). As Dostoevsky would see, there is a potential connection between religiosity and illness of any sort, for whoever can't find happiness in the body may seek it in the spirit. It was a common romantic myth that tuberculosis in particular lent a person a spiritual air—the wan complexion, the sunken eyes, the saintly visage, the graceful thinness—but as Mann understood, it had in the *German* romantic tradition also suggested spiritual illness, a something wrong with the "spiritus" as well as with the breath. For contrary to the Platonic idealists' belief, the spirit, when detached from the body, *is* sick—Rudolph Bell's *Holy Anorexia* contains some nasty medieval and Renaissance examples—just as one might perversely say that the vigorous body, detached

from its spirit—think of whatever cerebrally challenged athlete you will—is sick too. There seem to be advantages to such sicknesses. By dint of *its* detachment, the "sick" spirit is capable of adventures into the suprahuman—the realm of pure spirit—that the merely healthy spirit, well integrated with its body, is incapable of. By dint of *its* detachment, the "sick" body can, on the other hand, have adventures in the infrahuman realm—represented by Philina's sensuality—that the merely healthy body, well integrated with its spirit, can't have. Full health—the well-bonded body and spirit—remains desirable, but the alternatives have their allure.

The Beautiful Soul's suppression of sensual pleasure hasn't been easy. There is a wonderful moment when she has to have her clothes removed, because they are stained with the blood of Narciss, who has been wounded in a quarrel: "I must confess, while they washed the blood from me, I saw with pleasure, for the first time, in a mirror, that I might be reckoned beautiful without help of dress" (1.397). Having accepted Narciss's proposal, she studies how to become a conventionally submissive bride, but it won't work. He expects certain premarital "dainties" that she can't bring herself to grant; he is a Voltairian skeptic, she is a mystic; and in spite of his advanced opinions, he is a masculinist who wants her to keep her intellectual gifts under a bushel, while she is a protofeminist who wants to employ them openly. She loves him, but she loves and esteems herself and her "invisible Friend" more. This is to choose "the good" over "the delightful," which for her means renouncing the idea of marriage altogether, in order to follow unimpeded her spiritual interests. Going into a Moravian convent as a canoness is an independent move. She certainly won't marry someone who expects his wife to be a worldly hostess, and what she is devoting herself to is a life not of simple-minded prayer and disabling asceticism, but of aesthetic contemplation and scientific study. She has "valued God above her bridegroom," and the richly intellectual activity that follows therefrom is, Goethe might add, what it actively *means* to value God, at least for someone whose illness has made a spiritually and physically integrated *Bildung* impossible. She may have an orthodox conviction of sin, but the Christ she turns to is Arianly heterodox—a visitor from the "shining Heights" of heaven, "whither we too must rise in order to be happy" (1.421). And rise she mystically does: "I could mount aloft above what used to threaten me; as the bird can fly singing and with ease across the fiercest stream, while the little dog stands anxiously baying on the bank" (1.422). For her, the final stage of *Bildung* is the spirit's departure from earth, the "little dog" who "stands anxiously baying" being of course her own body. In the final days of her illness, she looks upon her body's sufferings and responses to medicines with scientific detachment. Her lungs and liver, hurt as they do, are just parts of "the kindred objects of creation" where God has done "his handiwork," and where decay is as natural as gestation (1.442).

Worried that such mysticism might lead his children, Natalia and Lothario, toward hyperspirituality and morbid self-denial, the Beautiful Soul's uncle has raised them along strictly secular lines. Still, as the grown-up Natalia recognizes, it is important to tolerate, even to reverence, the ideal her older cousin has stood for. Such an ideal is extreme, but that is how ideals should be: "such persons are, without us, what the ideal of perfection is within us: models not for being imitated, but for being aimed at"—not copied verbatim but borne in mind as one fashions a self of one's own (2.94–95). The Beautiful Soul's model of perfection is there, like the depiction of