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APPRENTICESHIP OF THE NOVEL: THE *BILDUNGSROMAN*  
AND THE INVENTION OF HISTORY, CA. 1770–1820

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Wilhelm in the Tower

At the end of the seventh volume of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795–96) [*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*], Wilhelm finally gains access to the inner sanctuary of the Society of the Tower, the mysterious Masonic lodge that has been clandestinely guiding his development. Inside the Tower's padded walls, he discovers a complex bureaucratic surveillance apparatus: a vast collection of scrolls recording the story of his own life as well as that of many of the other characters whom he has encountered over the course of the novel. Biographies that meet the Society's approval are matched with a second scroll containing a *Lehrbrief* [certificate of apprenticeship]. The discovery of this archival repository sheds a new light on the almost manic impulse towards *autobiographical* writing that so clearly marks Goethe's characters. The numerous letters, diary entries, confessions, and late-night conversations through which Wilhelm and his companions expose their lives to one another's scrutiny are revealed as an indirect product of the Society's disciplining influence.<sup>1</sup> In both outward appearance and in function, the Masonic Tower thus emerges as a perfect mirror of the Benthamite *Panopticon*, the structure that Michel Foucault identified as an architectural metaphor for the creation of modern subjectivity through the internalization of discursive power.<sup>2</sup>

But an important organizational difference distinguishes the Tower archive from the way in which the autobiographical reminiscences are arranged throughout the rest of Goethe's novel. The relationship between

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Wilhelm's *Bildung* and the numerous autobiographical insets that interrupt it can perhaps best be described as one of narrative hypotaxis: the insets are subordinated in both form and content to the overriding imperative of the protagonist's socialization and self-discovery. Even the "Confessions of a Beautiful Soul"—a functionally complete novella embedded within the novel—serve the ultimate purpose of advancing Wilhelm's development. The Tower archive, on the other hand, reorganizes these narratives into a paratactic system. Wilhelm discovers "mit Erstaunen" ["to his amazement"] that previously subordinate characters, such as Jarno and Lothario, are given scrolls of their own in the Society library, and that they possess *Lehrjahre* that are outwardly indistinguishable from his.<sup>3</sup> The very barrenness of the initiation chamber already indicates its multi-functionality. Other characters have previously passed through it, and yet others will follow after Wilhelm.

The Tower archive, in other words, replaces the laws of poetic necessity with the imaginative possibilities implied by mere spatiotemporal contiguity. The logic of *story*, according to which individual plots must obey gradations of significance, yields to the logic of *history*, in which every character is the protagonist of his or her own life. Wilhelm's entry into the Tower thus signals the end not only of his own apprenticeship, but also of that of the novel, a rite of passage by which it assumes the mature form that will characterize it throughout the nineteenth and for much of the twentieth century. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault draws attention to the fact that the transition from punitive to disciplinary societies will inevitably produce new literary forms: "If from the early Middle Ages to the present day the 'adventure' is an account of individuality, the passage from the epic to the novel, from the noble deed to the secret singularity, from long exiles to the internal search for childhood, from combats to phantasies, it is also inscribed in the formation of disciplinary societies" (193). The process (only hinted at in Goethe's novel) by which a character leaves behind the merely structural functions that he or she performs in one narrative and acquires an independent existence as the protagonist of another finds its fullest expression in Honoré de Balzac's *Human Comedy*—that vast repository of stories through which, as Oscar Wilde once quipped, the nineteenth century was invented.<sup>4</sup>

### Historical Philosophy and the Rise of the Novel

More than mere wordplay is at stake in this opposition between "story" and "history." In German, as in the romance languages, a single noun [*die Geschichte*]

covers both of these concepts, a fact that already points to the intimate relationship between events and the narrative categories that alone bestow meaning upon them. As Reinhart Koselleck has shown, however, the exact manner in which this relationship is articulated undergoes a crucial transformation during Goethe's lifetime. Prior to around 1770, the German language employed *die Geschichte* as a plural noun, rather than as the feminine singular that prevails from thereon after. Thus, Johann Theodor Jablonski could write in his *Allgemeines Lexikon der Künste und Wissenschaften* (1748) [General encyclopedia of the arts and sciences] that "Die geschichte sind [sic] ein spiegel der tugend und laster, darinnen man durch fremde erfahrung lernen kann, was zu tun oder zu lassen; sie sind ein denkmal der bösen sowohl als der löblichen taten." ["History are [sic] a mirror for virtues and vices in which one can learn through assumed experience what is to be done or left undone; they are a monument to evil as well as to praiseworthy deeds"].<sup>5</sup> As both the grammatical form and Jablonski's definition imply, the eighteenth century regards "history" as an additive entity: a collection of individual "deeds," and thus also of individual stories. Missing from this early modern definition is a notion of emplotment, a sense that history is itself a dynamic narrative system and thus something that changes and progresses over time.<sup>6</sup> For Jablonski, in other words, the book of history is an almanac, a collection of instructive yet ultimately unrelated tales. For the nineteenth century, and for such important figures as G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, and Benedetto Croce, it would become closer to a novel. *Wilhelm Meister* participates in this "novelization of history," and indeed provides one of its prominent symbolic forms. This momentous step in literary history is perhaps best observed by comparing *Wilhelm Meister* to the masterpieces of eighteenth-century English literary realism, since these dominated the European culture of their time and exerted an undeniable influence on the young Goethe. In English, of course, "story" and "history" are designated by separate singular nouns, although it is worth pointing out that as late as the seventeenth century, "history" could still be used as a transitive verb meaning "to narrate." This usage is documented by the following lines from Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 2*: "And therefore will he wipe his tables clean, / And keep no tell-tale to his memory / That may repeat and history his loss / To full remembrance . . ." <sup>7</sup> Given the existence of such separate (albeit etymologically related) nouns, it may come as a surprise to see that so many of the major novels produced in England during the eighteenth century bear a title or subtitle explicitly designating them as "histories." Thus, Richardson wrote *Clarissa, Or the History of a Young Lady* (1748) and *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1754), Fielding produced *The History*

of *Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1748), and Fanny Burney added her *Evelina, Or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (1778). From here, the fashion spread to other countries. Christoph Martin Wieland, for example, almost certainly had Fielding's title in mind when he composed his *Geschichte des Agathon* (1766–67) [*The History of Agathon*], a novel that in turn directly inspired Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*.<sup>8</sup>

Denis Diderot, perhaps the most insightful contemporary reviewer of these novels, provides a compelling explanation for such appellations in his *Éloge de Richardson* (1762) [*In Praise of Richardson*]. There, he proclaims that “j'oserais dire que souvent l'histoire est un mauvais roman; et que le roman comme tu l'as fait est une bonne histoire” [“I would venture to say that history often is merely a bad novel, and that a novel of the kind that you have made is good history”].<sup>9</sup> For Diderot, in other words, actual events and fictional narratives occupy equal footing as “histories.” The fact that only the former happen to be true is not only irrelevant, but may actually be seen as a hindrance. Through his characterization of novels as *bonnes histoires*, Diderot indicates his allegiance to the Aristotelian tradition, according to which poetry occupies a higher position than historical writing because it deals with the laws of the probable, rather than with the laws of the merely actual.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the conscious decision by Fielding, Richardson, and their contemporaries to designate their novels as “histories” rather than merely as “stories” implies an audacious gambit for fiction that points to the very heart of the realist revolution in literature. Realism aims for the typical and for the true, and in an age in which history is regarded as merely an accumulation of individual stories, a novel that transcends contingencies in order to present the general laws uniting everyday experiences provides a valuable skeleton key to historical meaning. Works such as *Clarissa* or *Tom Jones* act as elegant summaries of the multifarious lessons to be learned from Jablonski's historical almanac.

Over the following decades, however, this traditional nomenclature broke down. To be sure, novels continued to be designated as “histories” until well into the nineteenth century (Thackeray's *The History of Pendennis* [1848–50] being perhaps the most prominent example). But beginning with Goethe's generation such appellations appear more and more retrograde. Fanny Burney's subtitle *History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* makes perfect sense for her *Evelina*, but would seem downright ridiculous if it were affixed to Jane Austen's *Emma* (1816). And *Wilhelm Meister* pointedly lacks a designation as a “history,” even though the two novels that most overtly inspired it (Wieland's *Agathon* and Fielding's *Tom Jones*) were both marked in this manner.

More than a mere symptom of a change in literary fashion, this transformation in novelistic nomenclature instead points to an important underlying revolution in historical sentiment. A testimony for this revolution can once again be found in the words of a contemporary reviewer, in this case those of Friedrich Schlegel, who, in the “*Athäneum* Fragment 216” (1798), boldly celebrated *Wilhelm Meister*, along with the French Revolution and Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* (1794–95) [*Science of Knowledge*], as representing “die größten Tendenzen des Zeitalters” [“the greatest tendencies of the age”].<sup>11</sup> The difference between this pronouncement and that of Diderot could not possibly be greater. For Diderot, novels are “bonnes histoires” because they reveal the empirical laws governing events in a purer, truer fashion than a mere factual account ever possibly could. For Schlegel, on the other hand, history (now conceived of in a solidly singular sense) possesses a narrative dynamic of its own, an energy that a single novel can capture only imperfectly, as a “tendency.”

Between the works of Richardson and Goethe thus lies a conceptual gap that their principal interpreters, the *encyclopédiste* Diderot, born in 1713, and the Romantic Schlegel, born in 1772, bracket perfectly. For during the last three decades of the eighteenth century, at around the time that Jablonski’s plural noun *die Geschichte* fell out of favor and was replaced with a collective singular, the increasing social and political pressures of the day gave birth to the idea that “history” might itself have a “story,” and that its basic determining factors might themselves be in motion. A flurry of new academic disciplines arose in the wake of this intellectual paradigm shift.<sup>12</sup> Philology, that distant ancestor of modern literary criticism, was one of them, although it made its entrance on the academic scene belatedly, in the lectures of Friedrich August Wolf at the University of Halle in the waning years of the century. The real turning point—and the one with the most immediate impact on Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*—had occurred several decades earlier, with the advent of a systematic study of the philosophy of history. This new branch of knowledge was inaugurated by Voltaire, who published his *La philosophie de l’histoire* [*The Philosophy of History*] in 1765, under the pseudonym of Abbé Bazin. Over the course of the next five decades, treatises on the subject became a pan-European obsession; Hegel’s *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (1837) [*Lectures on the Philosophy of History*] may be read as the definitive treatment of a set of questions that had already been approached by almost every self-respecting Enlightenment intellectual.<sup>13</sup>

If Jablonski still saw the book of history as an almanac, the new historical philosophers approached it as though it were a novel with a clearly discernible plot, which they made it their duty to track down and summarize. This

is especially clear from an offhanded remark made by Immanuel Kant in his *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* (1784) [*An Idea Towards a Universal History in a Cosmopolitan Sense*], in which the philosopher from Königsberg admits that: “Es ist [...] ein befremdlicher und dem Anscheine nach ungereimter Anschlag, nach einer Idee, wie der Weltlauf gehen müsste, wenn er gewissen vernünftigen Zwecken angemessen sein sollte, eine Geschichte abfassen zu wollen; es scheint, in einer solchen Absicht könne nur ein Roman zu Stande kommen” [“It may seem, at first sight, a strange and even absurd proposal to suggest the composition of a History according to the idea of how the course of the world is to proceed, if it is to be conformable to certain rational laws. It may well appear that only a novel could be produced from such an intention”].<sup>14</sup> Kant did not hesitate to put such qualms behind him in his pursuit to put the “story” into “history,” but his remark locates a legitimate concern. For in the attempt to give a narrative shape to a formless procession of present moments, the historical philosophers mainly copied the laws of plotting that had originally been developed for narratives shaped by human intentionality. These laws were comparatively primitive in nature, having survived in unmodified form since the time of Aristotle, according to whose famous dictum all well-constructed plots must have a beginning, a middle, and an end.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the classical historical philosophies always include a moment—known under such manifold names as “cosmopolitan peace,” “the absolute manifestation of spirit,” or “the classless society”—in which the forward momentum of history is negated and the “plot” comes to an end. The notion of an anti-teleological narrative that doesn’t strive for a harmonious conclusion does originate in the eighteenth century, both in fiction—Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67)—and in historical philosophy—Giambattista Vico’s *Scienza Nuova* (1730) [*The New Science*]. But only in the nineteenth century does it spark a paradigmatic revolution of the kind that was launched by the publication of Gustave Flaubert’s *L’éducation sentimentale* (1869) [*Sentimental Education*] and by the genealogical writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, most notably *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887) [*On the Genealogy of Morals*].

*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* provides a literary response to the contemporary attempts to narrate history, and thus represents a major departure from the novels of previous eras. The English realists sought to clarify essentially timeless laws in their writings; Goethe’s new *Bildungsroman*, on the other hand, intends to relate the individual formation of its protagonist to the historical development of the era in which he moves.

The reference to the concept of *Bildung* in the new generic designation already indicates the fundamental intellectual affinity between the dual

revolutions in philosophy and in literature. For while the term *Bildung* has a long prehistory in the German language (it was used primarily in Pietist teachings, where it referred to God's active transformation of the passive Christian), it makes its real entry into the vocabulary of Weimar Classicism only in the context of one of the most important German treatises on historical emplotment. In Johann Gottfried Herder's monumental *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784–91) [*Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*], *Bildung* refers to the products not of God's handiwork, but of an impersonal genetic force that—tempered by geographical and climatic parameters that result in “national” variations—drives human beings towards ever higher cultural achievements. In this pioneering sense, then, *Bildung* refers not to the personal formation nowadays associated with the term (largely due to the legacy of the *Bildungsroman*), but to a form of historical emplotment. The idea that *Bildung* might also refer to a spiritual or aesthetic education, a form of pedagogy divorced from the realm of means and ends, derives from Wilhelm von Humboldt's *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staates zu bestimmen* (1792) [*Ideas to Determine the Limits of State Authority*], a work which was clearly influenced by Herder's contributions. From there, the term made its way into the works of Schiller and Goethe; the designation *Bildungsroman*, however, would not appear in print until 1820, after which it was quickly forgotten for almost a century. It was coined by the minor Romantic critic Karl Morgenstern; Goethe and Schiller themselves never used it in their discussions of *Wilhelm Meister*.<sup>16</sup>

The innovation of correlating individual with social history was first observed by Mikhail Bakhtin, who in his fragmentary essay on “The *Bildungsroman* and its Significance in the History of Literary Realism” defined the genre as one in which “man's individual emergence is inseparably linked to historical emergence.”<sup>17</sup> In thus connecting the emplotment of historical processes to those of an ordinary individual, however, Goethe parts ways with the historical philosophers. Philosophy imposes “story” onto “history” by grouping empirical phenomena together under abstract categories that can then be related to one another through equally abstract dynamics, such as those of entelechy or of dialectical logic. The novel, on the other hand, works with concrete examples rather than with abstractions and traces how the currents of history pulse through ordinary objects.

*Wilhelm Meister* borrows from the English novels of social realism a devotion to mimetic detail, an obsession with plausible plot and character development, and most importantly, a celebration of the ordinary and the everyday. Franco Moretti has written on what he calls the “calm passion” of Goethe's novel: the way in which it eschews the climactic and even

eschatological events that form the subject matter of epic poetry.<sup>18</sup> Karl Löwith similarly contrasts Goethe's deeply democratic fascination with the mundane underpinnings of historical life with Hegel's subservient devotion to a "world spirit on horseback."<sup>19</sup> Wars and social upheavals do exist in *Wilhelm Meister*, but they are relegated to the background of the action. In volume 4, chapter 4, for example, a marauding army is briefly mentioned, but it ultimately does not influence Wilhelm and Serlo's travel deliberations. At another point in the book (4.17), Wilhelm is offered a commission to compose a panoramic survey of the German principalities, but abandons this project as quickly as he started it. Epic representation, circumscribing the boundaries of the known world, clearly isn't for him. He excels at narrating the intimate, the personal and the transitory; precisely the kind of subject matter also found in the mid-eighteenth-century English novel.

Where Goethe's novel differs from all works that precede it, however, is in the way in which purely personal elements of its plot become saturated with collective significance. An example of this is the famous discussion of *Hamlet* that takes up most of the fifth volume of Goethe's novel. The Shakespearean tragedy, which Wilhelm directs and in which he takes on the leading part during his stay with Serlo's troupe, provides a central vehicle for the protagonist's self-development: his struggles against oedipal anxiety, indecisiveness, and an inborn tendency towards histrionic self-fashioning. But at the same time, the play also serves as a yardstick for the dawning consciousness of the German nation, for which both Goethe and Schiller hoped to serve as midwives in their role as creators of a national theater. At one point, Serlo objects to Wilhelm's staging on the grounds that "[w]enig Deutsche, und vielleicht nur wenige Menschen aller neuern Nationen, haben Gefühl für ein ästhetisches Ganze; sie loben und tadeln nur stellenweise; sie entzücken sich nur stellenweise, und für wen ist das ein größeres Glück als für den Schauspieler, da das Theater immer nur ein gestoppeltes und gestückeltes Wesen bleibt" ["few Germans and perhaps few spectators in any nation nowadays have any sense of an aesthetic whole. They only praise or blame pieces, their pleasure is piecemeal, and nobody is pleased more by this than our actors, for theater remains just a patchwork, a collection of bits and pieces"]. To this charge, Wilhelm replies: "Ist! Aber muß es denn auch so bleiben, muß denn alles bleiben, was ist?" (295) ["That's what it is! But must it always remain so, must everything that is remain as it is?" (177)].<sup>20</sup> Wilhelm's *Bildung*, his voyage towards an integrated Self, is at the same time a journey by which the German theater, and thus also the German nation, might be led from its "patchy and fragmented being" into a "feeling of aesthetic wholeness."



Wilhelm's life thus serves as a synecdoche for a collective historical experience, a fact that fundamentally alters the nature of this experience. For *a priori*, historical time can best be conceptualized as a purely mechanical progression of seconds and hours. As Henri Lefebvre explains, however, human beings experience such a progression as a *rhythmical* continuum: they instinctively search for cyclical patterns in what might otherwise be a monotonous sequence.<sup>21</sup> Each day in a human life is different from every other, of course, but it is also marked by similarities—the habitual patterns of meals, labors, sleep, and recreational activities, for example. Social relations could not exist without the predictability of such cycles, which consequently may also be identified as the backbone of the narrative realism that arose during the eighteenth century. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) presents an extreme example of this principle, since the entire plot of the novel consists of an extended description of the heroic efforts by which Crusoe manages to transform a procession of days into increasingly complex experiential cycles. The early notches in a tree are followed by more and more ambitious ventures into agriculture and animal husbandry, all of which depend for their success on meticulous attention to repetitive actions. When Crusoe finally gains a companion, he chooses to turn him from a "savage" into a human being by bestowing a name upon him that similarly emphasizes a fundamentally cyclical relationship to time. Narrative realism, in other words, presupposes a prior mediation of empty historical time into recognizable and dependable patterns, or "rhythms."

In Crusoe's world, however, these cyclical patterns remain essentially static—for 28 long years on the island basically nothing happens, and when Crusoe finally makes his way back to civilization, he discovers that his income has multiplied according to the dependable logic of annual interest disbursements. In Wilhelm Meister's world, on the other hand, a dynamic sense of history pulses through established social relations and tends to disrupt familiar patterns. Goethe's novel is set into motion by its protagonist's realization that the experiential patterns that his background makes available to him—patterns that revolve around the family business with its secure source of income and guaranteed inheritance, as well as his occasional amorous trysts with Mariane—no longer satisfy him. A force is moving within him that longs for a different expression than that which is available to him in these surroundings, and unlike Robinson Crusoe, who leaves home under similar circumstances but then ends up reproducing precisely the same social patterns of English middle-class life from which he was ostensibly trying to flee, Wilhelm actively experiments with different ways of shaping his life during his travels. Everyday experience here responds directly to diachronic transformations in historical sentiment.

Once again it was Mikhail Bakhtin who first recognized the interplay between cyclical patterns of human experience and a linear, temporal emergence that effects changes in them as a constitutive element of Goethe's art. In keeping with his axiomatic assumption that space and time in narrative should always be thought of as a compound entity (the "chronotope"), he immediately turned his attention to the question of how spatial parameters influence the delicate balance between cyclical and emergent temporalities.<sup>22</sup> "In Goethe's world," he writes in the *Bildungsroman* essay, "there are no events, plots, or temporal motifs that are not related in an essential way to the particular spatial place of their occurrence."<sup>23</sup> As an example of a passage in which Goethe explicitly theorizes this interconnectedness, Bakhtin then quotes from a chapter of the *Italian Journey* devoted to the different ways in which Germans and Italians tell time and organize their days. Germans, Goethe insists, rely on mechanical clock time to synchronize their activities; Italians, on the other hand, organize their lives according to the rhythms of the seasons, in which days have different lengths depending on the amount of time that passes between sunrise and sunset. In other words, the two cultures resolve the opposition between cyclical and "emergent" or "linear" temporalities in different ways: in the German system, the linear element predominates, while in Italian society, cyclical patterns are still given a greater weight.

Consequently, the process by which the *Bildungsroman* translates historical time into concrete and narratable "rhythms" will always contain a culturally specific component. In Bakhtin's words, the hero of the novel of development grows into "*national-historical time*": his or her experiences express a general truth about a given culture at a given moment in historical time.<sup>24</sup> Granted, in Goethe's novel itself this tendency is only modestly developed; the "national" character of the book is highlighted mainly by the fact that Mignon, whose innermost being is saturated with the essence of Italy, remains a stranger throughout and eventually withers away. No matter how sympathetic Wilhelm may be to the young girl, he ultimately cannot understand her; she remains part of a different life-world and embodies an alien relation to historical time.

### Narrative Conclusions and the Problem of Teleology

Mignon's death, tolerated if not abetted by the Tower Society, points the way to a second important manner in which history is emplotted in the classical

*Bildungsroman*. In addition to giving a rhythmic form to the present moment in which the protagonist lives, feels and operates, each novel of development also charts the emergence of its hero over a longer amount of time, and thereby attempts to subdue diachronic historical developments to the dictates of aesthetic form. But this leads once again to the paradox that the story of the hero, like any other story, must resolve all prior obstacles and come to an end if it wants to satisfy the demands of Aristotelian poetics. In a manner similar to that of historical philosophy, the classical *Bildungsroman* thus ends with its own negation, a state in which development is arrested and mundane reality suddenly yields a hidden immanent meaning. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* consequently takes a number of surprising and agonizingly conciliatory plot turns in its final few chapters. Mariane, whose supposed infidelity first drove Wilhelm out into the world, is revealed to have been faithful to her lover after all. Even more surprisingly, she gave birth to a child who turns out to be none other than Felix, the mysterious young boy for whom Wilhelm had already been caring for much of the second half of the novel. Mignon's death, finally, removes a "foreign" element not merely from the plot, but also from the chronotope of Goethe's novel. The latent struggle between irreconcilable temporal poetics, for which Mignon's song of a "Land Where Citrus Trees Bloom" serves as a symptom, is brought to an abrupt and uniform conclusion. Through this happy resolution, in which the forward momentum of history is negated, the classical *Bildungsroman* incidentally also reveals its debt and proximity to another narrative tradition, namely the long lineage of utopian tales that was inaugurated by Thomas More's eponymous philosophical dialogue of 1516. This tradition reached the novel in the early eighteenth century, and found canonical expressions in works such as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Johann Gottfried Schnabel's *Wunderliche Fata einiger Seefahrer* (1731–43) [The wondrous story of a group of mariners].<sup>25</sup> By definition, all utopian discourse is founded on what the German critic Wilhelm Vosskamp has called the "principle of the negation of social reality."<sup>26</sup> Contingency, particularity, and historical accident are sublated into harmonically structured societies; precisely those elements which characterize the new realism of Fielding and Richardson are systematically excluded. As with the realist novel, however, utopian tales undergo a profound transformation during the latter half of the eighteenth century in response to the epistemic shifts associated with the new understanding of "history as such." While previous utopias were invariably *spatial* in nature (More's Utopia, Swift's island of the Houyhnhnms, and Schnabel's Isle Felsenburg are places one can travel to), these new narratives are conceived in *temporal* terms and the ideal societies are displaced into the future, rather

than into a foreign land. Louis-Sebastien Mercier's *L'an 2440* (1770) [*The Year 2440*], is one prominent and widely disseminated example of such a "new" utopian narrative.

Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* clearly owes a lot to these newly temporalized utopian narratives. The Society of the Tower—and even more so the Pedagogical Province of the *Wanderjahre* (1821) [*Wilhelm Meister's Wanderling Years*—offers Wilhelm a refuge from the turmoil of everyday life, a refuge that becomes accessible only after "seine Bildung auf einem gewissen Grade steht" (493) ["his development has reached a certain stage" (301)], as Jarno puts it immediately before opening the Tower door to Wilhelm. But whereas the older utopian tales placed their ideal societies in *opposition* to everyday reality (Houyhnhnms versus Yahoos, for example), *Wilhelm Meister* devotes its narrative attention to the *transition* from historical to utopian reality. The eighth book of the *Lehrjahre*, set in the Tower, is almost ancillary to the larger development of the novel, and the *Wanderjahre* commence only after Wilhelm has left the Pedagogical Province and returned to the ordinary world. In Mercier's *L'an 2440*, the protagonist simply falls asleep and dreams himself 700 years into the future. *Wilhelm Meister*, on the other hand, dramatizes precisely this *mise en abîme*, humanizing vast historical transitions by reducing them to the scope of an individual life.

At the end of his development, when he enters into the Society tower, Wilhelm is initially overwhelmed with a disquieting spectacle of historical multiplicity and contingency in the form of the numerous biographies that line the walls of the initiation chamber. But this innuendo of experiential chaos is immediately neutralized with the demonstrations of narrative power by which the Society seeks to bedazzle its newest disciple. Before they present him with his certificate of apprenticeship, for example, the Masons put on a theatrical variety show that recapitulates successive scenes of Wilhelm's life and reveals the extent of their social control amidst an abundance of cheap stage magic. History is thus at once reenacted and demystified. And young Wilhelm clearly learns his lesson. While watching with wide-eyed amazement, he exclaims: "Sonderbar! [. . . S]ollten zufällige Ereignisse einen Zusammenhang haben? Und das, was wir Schicksal nennen, sollte es bloß Zufall sein?" (494) ["How strange! Can there be some pattern in chance events? And is what we call fate, really only chance?" (302)] The contradictory nature of these two propositions speaks to Goethe's own ambivalent position; he cannot altogether commit himself to the world without poetic necessity that his novel already depicts.

But perhaps the oddest moment in this scene occurs after the Society ends its charade and Wilhelm is allowed to take a closer look at the

biographical account of his apprentice years. Glancing at the title, he reads the words “*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*”! In a weirdly auto-referential moment, Goethe thus suggests that the very book which his readers are now holding in their hands, a book over which the voice of an omniscient narrator appears to preside, might in reality be nothing else than a transcript of the Society biography. In his analysis of this passage, Friedrich Kittler concludes that the Tower biography elevates the Masonic Lodge “into the agency responsible for the rise of the *Bildungsroman*.”<sup>27</sup> But an inverse interpretation is also possible: the biography *domesticates* the new literary genre by tying it back to older narrative conventions.

*Wilhelm Meister*, it is important to remember, was published during a time of radical formal innovation and transition for the novel. As Ian Watt has shown, the rise of the eighteenth-century novel was closely tied to its imitation first of Cartesian method, and then of Locke’s empirical skepticism.<sup>28</sup> “Truth,” in the empiricist tradition, is circumscribed by the limitations of individual observers, and the eighteenth-century novel hastened to do justice to this axiom by constantly acknowledging its own boundaries. Most European novels written before roughly 1780 were epistolary, confessional, or otherwise claimed to reprint “factual” documents. What these forms have in common is a built-in fail-safe meant to protect against incredulity on the part of their readers. The narrator purports to pass along a statement of facts that is faithful either to lived experience or to recovered documentary evidence. *Tristram Shandy* presents a devastating parody of this tendency towards pious self-limitation.

The empiricist school of novel writing is confronted with an obvious problem when it attempts to react to the rapidly changing conceptual understanding of history in the late eighteenth century. For how could any individual narrator occupy the necessarily transcendental position from which the impersonal forces of an emplotted history might be surveyed and managed? Consequently, the last three decades of the century see a shift away from epistolary and confessional narration, and towards the conceit of the “omniscient narrator,” pioneered by Henry Fielding in the 1740s.<sup>29</sup> Endowed with seemingly unlimited authority, and speaking from everywhere and nowhere all at once, the omniscient narrator alone seems capable of depicting a world in motion, in which a plurality of characters and events clamor for the reader’s attention. By the early nineteenth century, the older epistolary novel seems positively old-fashioned; a modern historical sentiment demands modern formal expressions.

*Wilhelm Meister* can once again be situated on the threshold of this narrative revolution. Goethe’s novel features an omniscient narrator; this

is yet another important fashion in which it differs from its supposed precursor, Wieland's *History of Agathon*. But Goethe embraces this formal innovation only hesitantly, and through the belated introduction of the Society of the Tower suggests that "history" is something that can be controlled and represented by concrete individuals after all—even if in Goethe's case these individuals are hyper-erudite noblemen endowed with seemingly unlimited patience and financial means, apparently capable of cloning themselves to appear in multiple locations at once. Traces of the same mildly paranoid fantasy of historical mastery still haunt Balzac, in whose work they appear in the guise of the master criminal Vautrin, alias Jacques Collin, alias Carlos Herrera, who seems to have a hand in every story of the *Human Comedy*.<sup>30</sup>

For the most part, however, the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* reconciled itself to the notion of an omniscient narrator and had no problem entrusting such an ill-defined entity with the ultimate authority to control and emplot historical development. Of course, the omniscient narrator wasn't the only strategy available for this purpose. Novels as diverse as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1848), Adalbert Stifter's *Der Nachsommer* (1857) [*Indian Summer*], or Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860–61) place this power instead into the hands of an older and wiser version of the protagonist. But this move only emphasizes the central point: the protagonist, at the endpoint of his or her development, eventually crosses an ontological barrier where historical contingency yields to something altogether different and the narrated subject makes way for a narrating subject. The hero of the classical *Bildungsroman* enacts historical progress; the narrator, who always gets the final word in the nineteenth-century texts, provides a sense of closure and a logical endpoint to this forward motion.

In 1821, Wilhelm von Humboldt published an important essay on the role of the narrator in historical writing. Entitled "Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers" (literally "On the Task of the Writer of History," but more conventionally translated as "On the Task of the Historian"), this small work never references literature in particular, but may very well provide a more illuminating insight into the novel of development than Karl Morgenstern's almost concurrent essay "Über das Wesen des Bildungsromans" (1820) ["On the Nature of the *Bildungsroman*"]. Humboldt begins his essay with the audacious thesis that the work of the artist can provide methodological inspiration to the historian:

Die historische Darstellung ist, wie die künstlerische, Nachahmung der Natur. Die Grundlage von beiden ist das Erkennen der wahren

Gestalt, das Herausfinden des Notwendigen, die Absonderung des Zufälligen. Es darf uns daher nicht gereuen, das leichter erkennbare Verfahren des Künstlers auf das mehr Zweifeln unterworfenen des Geschichtsschreibers anzuwenden.

[Historical presentation, like artistic presentation, is an imitation of nature. The basis of both is the recognition of the true form, the discovery of the necessary, the exclusion of the accidental. We must therefore have no regrets in applying the more readily recognizable method of the artist to an understanding of the more dubious method employed by the historiographer].<sup>31</sup>

Unlike his eighteenth-century predecessors, Humboldt, influenced by idealist aesthetics, regards the principle task of both artist and historian not as the reproduction of probable likenesses (*bonnes histoires*, in Diderot's phrase), but in the formal elucidation of an underlying truth, to which he gives the name *Geschichte überhaupt* ["history as such"]: "Diese innere Wirkung muss die Geschichte immer hervorbringen, was auch ihr Gegenstand sein möge [. . .]. Der Geschichtsschreiber, der dieses Namens würdig ist, muss jede Begebenheit als Theil eines Ganzen, oder, was dasselbe ist, an jeder die Form der Geschichte überhaupt darstellen" (8) [History must always produce this inner effect, irrespective of its subject matter. . . . The historian worthy of his title must show every event as part of a whole, or, what amounts to the same thing, must show the form of history as such in every event described]. In much the same way in which Schlegel identifies certain texts as indicative of *tendencies* of their age, Humboldt thus exhorts the historian to render "history as such" accessible to human understanding by tracing its formal laws through individual events.

In his attempts to link the impersonal to the personal, "history as such" to concrete lived experience, Humboldt evokes a favorite *topos* of Romantic philology, the hermeneutic circle:

Jedes Begreifen einer Sache setzt, als Bedingung seiner Möglichkeit, in dem Begreifenden schon ein Analogon des nachher wirklich Begreifenen voraus, eine vorhergängige, ursprüngliche Uebereinstimmung zwischen dem Subjekt und Objekt. [. . .] Bei der Geschichte ist diese vorgängige Grundlage des Begreifens sehr klar, da Alles, was in der Weltgeschichte wirksam ist, sich auch in dem innern des Menschen bewegt. Je tiefer daher das Gemüth einer Nation alles Menschliche empfindet, je zarter, vielseitiger und reiner sie dadurch

ergriffen wird, desto mehr hat sie Anlage, Geschichtsschreiber im wahren Sinne des Wortes zu besitzen. (14–15)

[All understanding presupposes in the person who understands, as a condition of its possibility, an analogue of that which will actually be understood later; an antecedent and original correspondence between subject and object. . . . In the case of history this antecedent of understanding is quite obvious, since everything that is active in world history also moves within man. The more deeply, therefore, the soul of a nation feels everything human, and the more tenderly, purely and diversely it is moved by this, the greater will be its chance to produce historiographers in the true sense of the word].

Humboldt's conclusion that the impersonal forces of history can be understood through the echoes they elicit in the lives of individual men is precisely also the central contention of the *Bildungsroman* tradition. But Humboldt, separated from *Wilhelm Meister* by 25 years that saw the rise and fall of Napoleon Bonaparte, the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire, and the birth of a modern European political order at the Congress of Vienna, no longer entrusts a clandestine society of enlightened noblemen with the authority to control and represent history. Instead, he locates this power in the "soul of a nation" that "feels everything human." Inadvertently, Humboldt thus provides an answer to the qualms that Goethe still felt about entrusting ultimate narrative authority in his novel to a disembodied voice without mimetic referent. The nation, just like the omniscient narrator, by definition claims a phantasmal continuity that transcends individual perspectives.

For the second time, then, the time-space of the modern nation emerges as the larger conceptual identity under which the emergence of the *Bildungsheld* must be subsumed. Not only is the historical backdrop of the classical novel of development saturated with local customs that integrate the present moment into a larger and nationally specific rhythm, but the genre also strives to find absolution from the narrative demands of modernity in the timeless absolute of the national community. Perennially unsettled and unsettling, the hero of the *Bildungsroman* moves and acts within the context of a nation as it actually exists within historical time. But the simultaneous presence of a narrating subject that speaks from an omniscient perspective and often reveals itself to be an older and wiser version of the protagonist itself indicates that historical time in the novel is eventually negated: brought



to an end by the competing demands of narrative closure.<sup>32</sup> These are the dual parameters that condition the complex nature of the “national time” of which Bakhtin speaks in the *Bildungsroman* essay.

### Historical Emplotment in the Age of Realism

Nineteenth-century Europe witnessed the apex both of historicism and of nationalism, and it should thus come as no surprise that the *Bildungsroman* quickly established itself as its dominant literary form. In *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, the link between individual and collective emergence was still disguised as an aesthetic project, and the negation of this emergence through the device of a utopian fantasy took the anachronistic form of an initiation into the aristocratic Tower Society. The nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*, by contrast, had no qualms about emphasizing both the historical and the national import of its developmental fictions. Stendhal, for example, through whom Goethe’s narrative revolution gained entry into French literature, subtitled his *Le rouge et le noir* (1830) [*The Red and the Black*] as a “Chronique de 1830,” thereby stressing the intimate link between the demise of his hero and that of the Bourbon monarchy.<sup>33</sup> The great French *Bildungsromane* that followed *Le rouge et le noir* similarly strove to chronicle the “tendencies” of a given period in the tumultuous French history. Thus, Balzac’s *Le père Goriot* (1834–35) [*Old Goriot*] treats the July Monarchy, Flaubert’s *L’éducation sentimentale* the 1848 revolution and the Second Empire, while Zola’s *Nana* (1879–80) provides a scathing portrait of the Third Republic.

In England, where the long reign of Queen Victoria ensured a stable framework for the codification of both historical and national experiences, the link between individual and collective emergence impressed itself less strongly upon the *Bildungsroman* tradition than it did in France. Nevertheless, recent scholarship has come to recognize dramatic struggles with modernity and the temporal changes it occasions in novels by such as authors as Charles Dickens and George Eliot.<sup>34</sup> In Germany, the transformation of the *Bildungsroman* from an ostensibly aesthetic into an overtly historical genre took place during the *Biedermeier*, most dramatically in the work of the young Karl Leberecht Immermann, whose *Die Epigonen* (1836) [*The Epigones*] attempts to capture a sense of generational belatedness felt by those born too late to have experienced firsthand the glories of Weimar

Classicism. But national sentiment and historical utopianism find perhaps their most powerful expression in the closing paragraphs of Wilhelm Raabe's 1863 novel *Der Hungerpastor* [The minister of hunger]:

Ein Geschlecht der Menschen vergeht nach dem andern, ein Geschlecht gibt die Waffen des Lebens weiter an das andere; erst wenn der Ruf: "Kommet wieder, Menschenkinder!" zum letztenmal erklingen ist, wird mit ihm zum letztenmal der Hunger geboren werden, welcher die beiden Knaben aus der Knöppelstraße durch die Welt führt. Gib deine Waffen weiter, Hans Unwirrsch!

[Each generation of men passes away after the other; each generation hands on the weapons of life to another. Only when the call: "Return again, you human children!" has been sounded for the last time will the hunger which led the two boys from the Kröppelstrasse through the world also be born again for the final time. Pass on your weapons, Hans Unwirrsch!]<sup>35</sup>

With their strange mixture of messianic fervor and world-weary pessimism, these lines in which individual fate blends into that of successive generations could perhaps have been written only within living memory of the failed 1848 revolution. But the rhetoric which they invoke can be traced back much further, all the way into the waning years of the previous century, which saw the end of the apprenticeship of the novel and the invention of "history" in the modern sense of the word.

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### Notes

1. On this subject, see especially Friedrich A. Kittler "Über die Sozialisation Wilhelm Meisters," in *Dichtung als Sozialisationsspiel*, ed. Gerhard Kaiser and Friedrich A. Kittler (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1978), 107–08; but also Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996), 84–85.

2. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 195–230. Further citations in text.

3. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, in *Werke: Hamburger Ausgabe*, ed. Erich Trunz (Hamburg: Christian Wegner Verlag, 1981), 7:497. English translation adapted from *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, in *Collected Works*, trans. Eric A. Blackall (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), 9:304. Further citations from these two editions will refer to volumes 7 and 9 and will appear parenthetically in the text. Translations have sometimes been silently emended.

4. Oscar Wilde, *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1969), 309.
5. Quoted in Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia UP, 2004), 33.
6. On emplotment in historical writing, see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1973).
7. William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part 2*, 4.1, lns. 199–202, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 951.
8. On Fielding's influence on Wieland, see Guy Stern, *Fielding, Wieland, Goethe and the Rise of the Novel* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003).
9. Denis Diderot, "Éloge de Richardson," in *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. J. Varloot (Paris: Hermann, 1980), 13:202. English translation adapted from "In Praise of Richardson," in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. Geoffrey Bremner (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), 90.
10. See Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 51b and 59a.
11. Friedrich Schlegel, "Athenäum Fragment 216," in *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler, Jean-Jacques Anstett, and Hans Eichner (Munich: F. Schöningh, 1958), 2:198. English translation adapted from *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991), 46. In the same context, Schlegel also attacks traditional historiography by characterizing "our shabby histories of civilization" as compendia "which usually resemble a collection of variants accompanied by a running commentary for which the original text has been lost."
12. For a description of this process, see Theodore Ziolkowski, *Clio the Romantic Muse: Historicizing the Faculties in Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004).
13. On this large body of works, compare Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 34–36, and especially his more comprehensive treatment in the entry on "Geschichte" in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart: E. Clett, 1972–92), 5:658–78.
14. Immanuel Kant, "Idee zu einer Allgemeinen Geschichte in Weltbürgerlicher Absicht," in *Gesammelte Schriften, herausgegeben von der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1902), 8:29. Translation adapted from "An Idea Towards a Universal History in a Cosmopolitan Sense," in *Theories of History*, ed. Patrick Gardiner (New York: The Free Press, 1959), 32.
15. Aristotle, *Poetics I*, trans. Richard Jenko (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 10–11.
16. On the discourse of *Bildung* in German culture, see W. H. Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation: 'Bildung' from Humboldt to Thomas Mann* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1975), 1–112; and Walter Müller-Seidel, *Die Geschichtlichkeit der deutschen Klassik: Literatur und Denkformen um 1800* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1983), 105–18. The development of *Bildungsroman* scholarship is discussed in exhaustive detail in Todd Kontje, *The German Bildungsroman: History of a National Genre* (Columbia, SC: Camden, 1993).
17. Mikhail Bakhtin, "The *Bildungsroman* and its Significance in the History of Realism," in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: U of Texas P, 1986), 23.
18. See Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, trans. Albert Sbragia (London: Verso, 2000), v and *passim*.
19. See Karl Löwith, "Hegels Philosophie der Geschichte und Goethes Anschauung des Geschehens der Welt," in *Sämtliche Schriften* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Buchhandlung, 1988), 4:269–298.
20. Compare Schiller's admonition that: "Auch bey uns ist das Bild der Gattung in den Individuen vergrößert auseinander geworfen—aber in Bruchstücken, nicht in veränderten Mischungen, daß man von Individuum zu Individuum herumfragen muß, um die Totalität der Gattung zusammen zu lesen." ["With us, the image of the species has been enlarged and dispersed amongst individuals—but in fragments, not in varied mixtures, so that one has to go from individual to individual in order to find the totality of the species."] "Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen," in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Wolfgang Riedel (Munich: Deutscher

Taschenbuch Verlag, 2004), 5:582. English translation in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, trans. R. Snell (New Haven: Yale UP, 1954), 32–33.

21. See Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, trans. Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore (London: Continuum, 2004). This book collects essays originally published in French in 1985, 1986, and 1992.

22. Bakhtin's famous definition of the chronotope as the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" can be found in his essay on "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981), 84.

23. Bakhtin, *Bildungsroman*, 42.

24. Bakhtin, *Bildungsroman*, 31. Bakhtin's reading of this passage is itself the object of an influential exegesis by Homi Bhabha. See his "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 199–244.

25. In 1828, this novel was republished by Ludwig Tieck as *Die Insel Felsenburg* [Isle Felsenburg], the title by which it is now more commonly known.

26. Wilhelm Vosskamp, "Utopie als Antwort auf Geschichte. Zur Typologie literarischer Utopien in der Neuzeit," in *Geschichte als Literatur: Formen und Grenzen der Repräsentation von Vergangenheit*, ed. Hartmut Eggert, Ulrich Profitlich, and Klaus R. Scherpe (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1990), 274. My translation.

27. Kittler, "Über die Sozialisation," 107.

28. See Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1957), 9–34.

29. See *Ibid.*, 260–89.

30. For more on the character of Vautrin, see most recently Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2005), 36–38.

31. Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers," in *Gesammelte Werke* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), 1:8. My translation. Further citations in text will refer to this edition and volume.

32. In "Dissemination," Homi Bhabha uses the adjectives "performative" and "pedagogical" to differentiate between these two forms of shaping history. See *The Location of Culture*, 202ff.

33. On Stendhal and Goethe, see Manfred Naumann, *Stendhals Deutschland: Impressionen über Land und Leute* (Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 2001).

34. See in this context Edward Said's reading of *Great Expectations*, in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993); and especially Jed Esty's perceptive analysis of *The Mill on the Floss*, in "Nationhood, Adulthood, and the Ruptures of *Bildung*: Arresting Development in *The Mill on the Floss*," *Narrative* 4:2 (1996): 144–59.

35. Wilhelm Raabe, *Der Hungerpastor* (Stuttgart: Edition Anker, 2002), 479. My translation.