

## On the Nature of the *Bildungsroman*

### Introduction

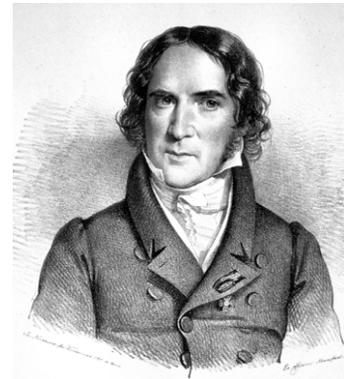
THE TERM *BILDUNGSROMAN* HAS LONG BEEN ONE OF THE MOST PROBLEMATIC ENTRIES IN THE LEXICON OF LITERARY STUDIES. ALTHOUGH IT is often used innocuously, to refer to almost any novel that focuses on the development of a young protagonist, matters look rather different in the more secluded world of academic German departments. Here, the *Bildungsroman* is the object of fierce debates that illustrate how even such arcane fields as classificatory genre studies tenuously float on ideological undercurrents.

The word was introduced to popular usage by Wilhelm Dilthey in *Poetry and Experience* (1906), though he had already used the term in the earlier *Life of Schleiermacher* (1870), a book that fittingly appeared on the eve of German unification under Bismarck. In *Poetry and Experience*, Dilthey argued that the *Bildungsroman* was a distinctively German achievement, a product of unique political circumstances and an antithesis of the French and English novels of social realism. This claim was repeated with increasing nationalistic fervor by Thomas Mann and others during the time of the First World War and became, in due course, an ideological commonplace of the Third Reich. After 1945, a younger generation of scholars eager to break with the sins of the past drew conclusions that were the inverse of Dilthey's but retained his basic premise: suddenly, the *Bildungsroman* was regarded as a literary symptom of the German *Sonderweg*, the separate path into modernity that had paved the way for fascism.<sup>1</sup>

This is the background that one needs to keep in mind if one wishes to understand the importance of Fritz Martini's 1961 discovery that Dilthey, though he popularized the term, by no means invented it. This honor belongs, rather, to Karl Morgenstern (1770–1852), a professor of aesthetics at the University of Dorpat (now Tartu in Estonia), who first used the new name in public in 1819, in a lecture called "On the Nature of the *Bildungsroman*" ("Über das Wesen des Bildungsromans").<sup>2</sup> This lecture, delivered at a provincial university and then published in an equally provincial journal a year later, had little immediate impact, and, while Martini argues that Goethe

*Above: Lithograph of Karl Morgenstern by Josef Kriehuber (1828).*

### KARL MORGENSTERN



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may have known of Morgenstern's coinage (242), the term all but fell out of use from 1820 to 1870.<sup>3</sup> But Morgenstern's investigation into the nature of the developmental novel nevertheless remains significant because both its premises and its conclusions directly contradict Dilthey's. Any modern study of the genre that hopes to extricate itself from entrenched ideological debates would therefore do well to reevaluate Morgenstern's place in the genealogy of *Bildungsroman* criticism.

What surprises most about Morgenstern's lecture is its sweeping scope and almost utopian enthusiasm. Dilthey sees the developmental novel as historically and nationally delineated: a literary expression of the "individualism of a culture whose sphere of interest was limited to private life" because "governmental authority . . . in the small and middle-sized German states confronted the young generation of writers as alien" (335). Morgenstern, by contrast, regards the *Bildungsroman* as a universal subcategory of the modern novel and supports his definition with references to an astounding variety of novels from a number of national traditions. And while Dilthey's approach spawned a long tradition emphasizing the genre's concern with "inwardness" and "personality" at the expense of social concerns and interpersonal relations, Morgenstern insists, in the most famous lines in the lecture, that "this depiction promotes the development of the reader to a greater extent than any other kind of novel." For him, in other words, the *Bildungsroman* gazes not inward, at the development of its fictional protagonist, but outward, into the real world and toward the development of its audience.<sup>4</sup>

Morgenstern's insistence on the pedagogical values of the developmental novel and his trust in the ability of literary works to shape and cultivate the *whole* individual are frequently interpreted as relics of an eighteenth-century mind-set.<sup>5</sup> And indeed, parts of his lecture, especially the section in which Morgenstern tries to differentiate the novel from the epic, bear a distinct resemblance to Friedrich von Blanckenburg's *Essay on the Novel* (1774), a foundational text of narrative theory in German. Morgenstern's choice of literary examples also reveals a conservative mind-set: while the

bulk of his lecture is devoted, unsurprisingly, to an analysis of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, he on several occasions includes encomiums on the already shopworn novels of his friend and colleague Friedrich Maximilian Klinger.

If Morgenstern in some respects appears to be behind the times, this can surely be explained by the vicissitudes of his biography.<sup>6</sup> Born in Magdeburg in 1770, Karl Morgenstern early on distinguished himself academically and eventually became a pupil of the philologist Friedrich August Wolf at Halle. He thus participated in the birth of the modern specialized university, yet he rejected academic specialization after merely four years of service at the University of Danzig, from 1798 to 1802. Morgenstern instead accepted a call to the newly founded University of Dorpat, which Tsar Alexander I was aggressively staffing with Western academics. With him traveled Klinger, who would eventually become the university's founding curator. Dorpat at the time must have seemed like the end of the world, but Morgenstern delighted in the opportunity to teach in a generalist curriculum, becoming university librarian, curator, and even botanist in the process. In this outpost at the fringes of modernity, Morgenstern could thus practice a holistic approach to pedagogy, of which his lecture on the *Bildungsroman* is a logical offshoot.

In other and more important regards, however, Morgenstern shows himself to be a child of his times. The conclusion of his lecture especially is full of the optimism that flourished in Germany during the years after the fall of Napoleon. In distinct contrast with many other writers on the *Bildungsroman*, Morgenstern does not content himself with adulation of Goethe's model but instead demands new forms of the novel that might do justice to these changed and promising times. For him, in other words, the developmental novel does not represent a turn away from the public sphere but rather captures, as he puts it earlier in the lecture, "the most beautiful aspects of modern European man's development and of the age that [is] coming to be." More than a hundred years after Morgenstern, and in complete innocence of his work, Mikhail Bakhtin defined the *Bildungsroman* as a kind of novel in

which “man’s individual emergence is inseparably linked to historical emergence” (23). The same viewpoint can already be found in this lecture.

A related characteristic of Morgenstern’s investigation is his unabashed argument for the *Bildungsroman* as a tool of realist mimesis. He thus proclaims that *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* “presents to us German life, German thought, and the morals of our time through its hero, its scenery and environment” and thereby shows that Thomas Mann, after the First World War had cooled his nationalist fervor, was far from the first person to postulate a link between the *Bildungsroman* and the *Zeitroman*, between the narrative of individual development and the socially panoramic novel.

To the contemporary critic, Morgenstern’s essay, despite all its archaisms, thus offers an approach that would connect the classical *Bildungsroman* to many of the broader intellectual currents of its time: the move toward social realism in literature and the arts, the yearning for the shared experiences of a national community, and not least the search for an adequate way to represent the dynamic forces of history. Far from isolating the *Bildungsroman* as the symptom of a German *Sonderweg*, Morgenstern’s work eloquently affirms it as a central category of modern literature.

## NOTES

1. For an overview of the changing vicissitudes of *Bildungsroman* criticism, see Kontje, *German Bildungsroman*, as well as Sammons.

2. Technically, Morgenstern had first used the term a decade earlier, in a lecture entitled “On the Spirit and Cohesion of a Number of Philosophical Novels” (“Über den Geist und Zusammenhang einer Reihe philosophischer Romane”) that he delivered in 1809 and self-published in 1817. But it was only in the 1819 lecture that he set out to offer a coherent definition of what he now clearly regarded as a new genre; indeed, the opening paragraph of the later lecture makes clear that he did not expect his audience to have any knowledge of his earlier usage.

3. The text of Morgenstern’s lecture was later reprinted in an important volume edited by Rolf Selbmann, which also contains the article in which Fritz Martini outlines his

discovery of the previously forgotten critic. More recently, digital facsimiles of most of Morgenstern’s published texts (but not of this lecture) have been made available to a scholarly public worldwide at *EEVA: Digital Repository for Older Estonian Literature* ([www.utlib.ee/ekollekt/eeva/](http://www.utlib.ee/ekollekt/eeva/)).

4. Kontje has made this claim the basis of his *Private Lives in the Public Sphere*, an innovative investigation of the role that the German *Bildungsroman* played in the formation of cultural communities from 1770 to 1820.

5. Martini and Selbmann take this view—Martini in the original article outlining his rediscovery of Morgenstern and Rolf Selbmann in the editorial remarks that accompany the volume in which Martini’s article was later reprinted.

6. Wilhelm Süss’s long essay in cultural history is by far the most comprehensive biographical resource on Morgenstern, full of insightful primary documents.

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## On the Nature of the *Bildungsroman*

OFTENTIMES, HONORABLE LISTENERS, WHEN stepping before you at this time and place I have not found it altogether easy to choose a theme that without leading too deeply into science and literature would nevertheless move beyond the outer chambers of knowledge and that might furthermore attract a mixed audience without merely touching on commonplaces. Today, before we proceed to the joyous principal occasion for our festive gathering, I wish to speak about the most exquisite of all the many types of novel; you will permit me to call it by a name that has to my knowledge never been used before—namely, the *Bildungsroman*.<sup>a</sup> Some of you have so far been content to refer to it as the *family novel* [*Familienroman*]<sup>a</sup>—a name that in no way touches on the essence of the question at hand.

To begin with, it will not be superfluous to speak of the genre of the *novel* in a general sense, especially since not every one of you will be completely clear how to place it amid the various kinds of fiction and of literary works in general. Theorists of poetry customarily rank the novel, although it is composed in prose, immediately after the heroic epic. This is done not without a certain justification, for it belongs amid the epic literatures—that is, among those that tell a story—and is like them a work of fiction that pretends to be true. For many other kinds of fiction we have detailed treatises that elucidate their theory as it can be derived from existing examples. No such volume as yet exists for the novel. Blanckenburg's *Essay on the Novel*, which was published forty-five years ago, would no longer be sufficient even if its theory were more exhaustive than it is. Literature needs a new work, written in a philosophical spirit and with critical erudition. A satisfactory theory of the novel would demand first of all a more specific articulation of the way it differs from *drama* on the one

hand and from the *heroic epic* on the other. It will be my privilege here to present and explain at least the major differences between the novel and these two genres.

First we will look at the way it differs from drama. Here we shall start with an episode from the fifth book of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. One evening, the acting company that Wilhelm is temporarily a part of disputes whether novel or drama might deserve preference. Serlo, the director of the company, remarks that both can be excellent in their own right, only they have to remain within the confines of their proper genre. "I am not sure I understand this," replies Wilhelm. "And who does?" replies Serlo, "and yet it would be worth the effort to further clarify the matter." They converse together for a long time, and the following finally is the approximate result of their discussion:

In the novel as in drama we can see human nature and action. The difference between the two kinds of fiction does not lie merely in their external form: that is, not in the fact that the persons in the one speak, whereas in the other their history usually is narrated, and so on. In the novel, it is primarily *dispositions* and *events* that are presented; in the drama, *characters* and *deeds*. The novel must move forward slowly, and the attitudes of the hero must, by some way or another, restrain the progression of the whole toward its full development and conclusion. Drama must hasten, and the main character must press forward to the end only to be restrained. The hero of the novel must be suffering, or at least not be highly active; in the dramatic hero, on the other hand, we look for activity and deeds. Grandison, Clarissa, Pamela, the Vicar of Wakefield, Tom Jones himself are, if not suffering, then at least retarding, characters, and all events are faithfully modeled according to their dispositions. In the drama, the hero models nothing according to himself; all things resist him, and

he clears and casts away the obstacles or else is overwhelmed by them.<sup>b</sup>

This passage without any doubt contains a remark that penetrates deep into the nature of the novel and of drama. Goethe admits that human actions are common to the novel and to drama, but he wishes the former to present primarily *dispositions* and *events*, the latter primarily *characters* and *deeds*. He demands this because the novel needs to progress slowly, drama, by contrast, in a hurry. On closer investigation, of course, no sharp distinction between the two genres can be discerned in the way they treat dispositions and characters. For dispositions are the foundation of character, which develops primarily from them, and the novel as well as drama depends on the presentation of character. The decisive truth, however, lies in the distinction that the novel has more time and space to develop and present its dispositions than the drama and, furthermore, that the characters stand fully formed in the latter, whereas in the novel they are supposed to develop before our eyes. Regarding the injunction that the novelistic hero must be suffering or at least not be highly active, whereas one demands activity and deeds from the dramatic hero, we would be well within our rights to demand further explication from Goethe. For it is impossible to see how Grandison, for example, is not just as much active as he is suffering or how, inversely, Shakespeare's Hamlet and King Lear, or even Sophocles's Oedipus, aren't at least as much suffering as they are active. Furthermore, I can derive no decisive reason from the general conception of the novel that might explain why men such as Klinger's Faust, Rafael de Aquillas, and Giafar the Barmecide,<sup>c</sup> to whom nobody would deny activity and deeds, should not be just as capable heroes of the novels that are named after them as Goethe's Werther, Wilhelm Meister, and Eduard, who, for all their richness of sentiment, nevertheless incomparably lag behind them in strength

of character. Heroes of this kind, of course, need to be painted in colors entirely different from those that were chosen in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* and in *Elective Affinities*—novels in which reflections of an entirely different sort are tied to the emotions, dispositions, and actions of the characters, especially as regards their striving toward a higher morality. Nevertheless, I believe that while it may be possible to declare that the colors chosen by Klinger are inadequate to the nature of the novel and that the philosophical doubts, views, and encouragements that he ties to his characters run contrary to the true bearing of the novel, it is impossible to prove it. For if the novel may be called the widest vessel among all the poetic forms, in which any flower of the soul has room and air to bud, sprout, and bloom, to branch out and spread in all the abundance granted to it by nature, and if the novel, as we will show by comparison with the epic of the ancient Greeks, is suited more than any other genre to show the inner aspect of the human soul and to reveal its intimations, endeavors, battles, defeats, and victories, then there is in fact no reason why the forceful, or even the grand and the sublime, should not with equal right occupy its place as do the tender, agreeable, and beautiful, why that which commands respect or is deep, somber, and stupendous should not hold its own against the lovable, the dear, the cheerful, or the harmonic. A theory that measures according to individual circumstance (even if that circumstance were the most enviable of all as regards personal happiness) and excludes that which in another noble and vigorous nature transcends it would be limited and one-sided. I would like to see such old friends as Klinger and Goethe discuss this matter in writing or, even better, in oral conversation. I am sure the former would be quick to reply to all charges by the latter, and I even suspect that Goethe would, without hesitation and with his usual charity toward the excellence of others, widen the distinctions between novel and drama

that he himself has drawn with an all too easy hand. It is true, of course, that in the novel of his life, which is rich not only in fiction but also in truth, Goethe says in a passage about English poetry that

[t]rue poetry reveals itself by its capacity to free us, in the manner of a secular gospel, by its inner cheerfulness and its outer comforts from the burdens of the world that press us down. Like a balloon it lifts us, together with the weights that cling to us, into higher regions and spreads out before us the convoluted errors of the earth in a bird's-eye perspective. The most cheerful and the most serious works share as their purpose to lessen our passion and pain through their fortunate ingenious representation.<sup>1</sup>

But is this really the only way by which poetry reveals itself? Everywhere, even in the masterpieces of Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Schiller, Milton, Klopstock—in short, of those poets who, fully conscious of the transcendental nature of human beings, strove to explore the limits of humanity in their idealistic aspiration? Are they for this reason lesser poets? Or is the distinguishing feature of the poet not his ability to pull down Platonic ideas—the ideas of the good and holy as much as those of the true and beautiful—into the realm of poetic representation and demonstration according to the best capabilities of genius and artifice? Could it not be that the only true notion of the ideality of the poet is the one that Schiller and Klinger formed in their most mature years? According to this notion, the poet has to have cultivated not only imagination and sense of beauty and reason in the richest measure but also moral power and, in short, the highest concept of the human, which is always revealed in morality; he furthermore needs to have cultivated it not only reflectively but also practically in order to be able to mirror it in his works. If this were the case, every poetic representation of *morally* firm and profound human beings would rest on equally

unshakable true and ideal foundations of human nature as the representation, no matter how beautiful, of *aesthetically* cultivated and accomplished human beings—even if the majority of the finer reading public would find representations of the latter kind much closer to its own image and thus also more pleasing.

But let us return from this digression to the other half of the present observations: to the differences between the novel and *epic poetry*. It seems to me that these can be reduced—leaving aside that the latter necessarily has to be carried out in meter—to three main points.

First: in accordance with the spirit of the age in which epic poetry was born, the *marvelous is absolutely essential in it*. In the novel *this is not the case*, although it is possible that the marvelous may nevertheless occur in certain cases where reality is connected to the realm of ghosts. This happens, for example, in Klinger's *Faust the Occidental*, in which the author deemed it necessary to introduce his spirit of the cold isles in order to pursue his poetic plan. The Homeric epics contain great deeds connected to marvelous occurrences that are produced by what is called the *deus ex machina*. Such actions, brought about through the direct intervention of superhuman beings, are merely the product of childish beliefs and of the overactive imaginations of a poorly educated people. Miracles, the belief in miracles, and sensuous depictions of miraculous opulence all belong together. We find them only in the heroic prehistory of a nation: in the age of the Trojan War, which Homer sang about, and later in the age of Charlemagne and of the Crusades, which Ariosto and Tasso depicted. By contrast, the tranquil, clear language of history and the ripe fruit of reason generally prevail in the novel of the moderns. Its subject is drawn from the spheres of human activity—preferably, though not exclusively, from domestic life. Its emotions, dispositions, and actions are those of the real world as they are found in educated [*gebildeten*] society:

they have merely been cleansed and purified of all dross by the mind of the shaping [*bildenden*] novelist. For this reason, the *heroic novel*, which seeks to depict events from the heroic age of antiquity in prose, and which fortunately is rare, is a hybrid genre that has won little acclaim and deserves even less of it. The same goes for the *prose romance* [*Ritterroman*]. The romance, which emerged in the Middle Ages and was written in the Romanic language (i.e., in the language of the Franks rather than in Latin), and which thereby gave its name to the prose novel [*prosaischer Roman*], which at that time was slowly detaching itself both from epic poetry and from historical writing—the romance needed to be written in meter to be truly effective, as we can see in the works of Ariosto, Tasso, and their successors in Italian and other tongues. For this reason, epic poetry enters on grounds that are entirely foreign to it when it chooses modern subjects instead of reaching back to a distant past; the elevation of the imagination to the marvelous is possible only in the dusk of such a past, not in the broad daylight of modern times. Therefore, Lucan was as ill-advised in the choice of subject matter for his *Pharsalia* as Voltaire was for his *Henriad* or Jenisch for his *Borussias*; anyone who tried to compose a *Rossiade* about the marvels of the present time would fare no better.<sup>d</sup> Experience has confirmed that the allegorical beings that so-called historical poets like to strew among their works are nothing but an inadequate surrogate. The heroic age, which, as we have seen, is the only advantageous one for epic poetry, supplies sensuous grandeur of action in greater measure than it does examples of subtle character formation. When men cannot accomplish something, the gods help them: if the former need to be goaded on or deterred, the latter descend from Mount Olympus, and everywhere the marvelous and the superhuman are tangled up with the natural and the human. The ancient poets gave us vivid characters, but psychological

development was not one of their strengths, nor is it a strong point of their age: these poets depict characters directly through their deeds rather than through idle ruminations about them. Their heroic epics depict their nation in the virile period of its youth, while it is struggling for the great and the magnificent, and they do so in a language of elation that is only amplified by an audience—not a readership—that listens even to the most marvelous things with a childlike sense of rapture. Poverty in cultural concepts coupled with a wealth of natural images, a practically rather than theoretically trained intellect, a moral sense that has not yet been rendered unnecessarily subtle by the multiplication of social circumstance, together with unrefined customs, moderate needs, and contentment in local pleasures all combine to produce these sensuously rich depictions. But the struggles of such an age pass. The nation reaches a state of greater external peace, property is secured, the professions and occupations of men become more differentiated and more interdependent at the same time, and reason gradually asserts its rights over what had previously been the domain of imagination. Miracles vanish, oracles fall silent, the gods retreat to Mount Olympus; reality reigns, and the law of objective reason loudly declares its unlimited claims. But even now the imagination does not relinquish that which has nourished and formed it. Together with the products of its fancy it flees into a new domain that has room for intricately entangled chains of events and for the emotions, images, thoughts, and reflections that are attached to them. This domain borders on the one side on history, on the other on poetry, and as a result the light of the former and the rosy clouds of the latter cover its skies in curious mixtures and refractions, while men wander across its beautiful meadows. The name of this domain is the *novel*. Here the narrator, who dresses everything (or almost everything) in the garb of prose, speaks with the voice of history and employs its seal to

legitimate his deceptive purposes; he uses the prosaic disposition in which men ordinarily find themselves to outwit them with an entertaining piece of fiction designed to make them feel at home, while at the same time introducing them to far-off lands in a most pleasant manner.

A second principal difference between epic and novel lies in the fact that the primary plot of the *former* can extend, through the hero, to the fate of one or more nations, and even to that of all mankind, while the primary plot of the *latter*, in the cases where it even exists, extends only to the fate of a single individual, or to the individuals who are placed in interaction with him. I say: in the cases where the novel contains a primary plot. For this isn't true with all good novels, but only with those that *herein* are closely related to both epic and drama: *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, for example, begins with the hero's love for Harriet Byron and ends with their marriage, so that in this case the plot is as unified as the story in the *Odyssey* of the hero's eventual return to the home he has longed for throughout so many adventures. That the principal plot of the epic can extend through the hero to the fate of one or more nations, and even to that of mankind entire, is demonstrated in the first instance by the *Iliad* and by Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*, in the second by Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Klopstock's *Messiah*. The nature of the genuine novel, however, does not allow for something comparable, or else the form would come to resemble a part of true general history. And this would result in an evident internal contradiction, since it is commonly recognized that fiction belongs to the innermost nature of the novel—a circumstance that also casts into disrepute the so-called *historical novels*, in which historical and unhistorical subjects can never form a harmonious totality, even if books such as Meissner's *Alcibiades*, Lafontaine's *Aristomenes and Gorgus*, and Fessler's *Marcus Aurelius* display desirable traits in their characterization.<sup>6</sup> For all this,

the differences between epic and novel that I have just enumerated should not be taken as strict boundaries in regards to their extensive subject matter. We might imagine, for example, novels that portray the history of a fictional nation, especially for moral-political and for satirical purposes. Among these we might count political novels, such as the *Utopia* of Sir Thomas More, *The History of the Sevarites*, and many others, and satirical ones, such as Swift's *Tale of the Tub* or Klinger's *Travels before the Flood*.<sup>7</sup>

But no matter how far-reaching or narrowly circumscribed the sphere of influence of the hero's actions in a novel might be, and no matter to what extent it might approach or stay behind that of the epic hero (since this is not something that can be precisely measured), the third and most important difference will always lie in the fact that the epic—in accordance with the historical age in which it originated and which we described above—portrays the hero as acting on the external world and as bringing about important changes in it. The novel, by contrast, depicts the influence that men and environments exert on the hero and explains to us the gradual formation of his inner being. For this reason, the epic will concentrate on the actions of the hero and their external impact on other men, while the novel focuses on the internal effects that events and circumstances have on a hero whom we are supposed to see both as what he is and as what he isn't. In this way, our general inquiry into the boundaries between epic and novel has led us all by itself to the definition of the *Bildungsroman* as the most noble category of the novel, which best expresses the nature of the genre and the way it differs from the epic.

We may call a novel a *Bildungsroman* first and foremost on account of its content, because it represents the development of the hero in its beginning and progress to a certain stage of completion, but also, second, because this depiction promotes the development of the reader to a greater extent than any

other kind of novel. The objective and work-encompassing goal of any poet who produces such a novel will be the pleasurable, beautiful, and entertaining depiction of the formative history of a protagonist who is especially suited to such a development; this goal will be original and, as with every truly beautiful artwork, free of any didacticism. But the poet is at the same time a human being who (just as he strives in his capacity as poet and artist to follow the foundational law of aesthetics and to produce the beautiful) strives in his capacity as a human being to follow the foundational law of morals and to aim for the good in himself and in others. For this reason, the novelist will wisely aim to unite the purpose of art, which is to please and to entertain by means of the beautiful, with the strictly human purpose to serve, to instruct, and to better—in a word, to *form* [*bilden*]. This fulfills the ancient Horatian principle that “Omne tulit punctum, qui miscuit utile dulci.” ‘He has carried every point who has mingled the useful with the agreeable.’<sup>g</sup>

The kind of formation [*Bildung*] that the novel, as we saw, is supposed to both depict and confer will either occupy itself with one of the many aspects of man—his intellectual, moral, or aesthetic sides, each conceived either as general or in regard to particular purposes—or call on the community of human powers and seek to harmonically stimulate and form them. Thus are produced *philosophical* and *art novels*, as well as some that aim for a general and purely human course of instruction. We can therefore find *philosophical* novels that have both theoretical and practical purposes, such as those of the honorable men Jacobi and Klinger, and also *art novels* in which the aesthetic purpose to offer instruction in the fine arts predominates, such as Heinse’s *Ardinghello*, Tieck’s *Franz Sternbald’s Wanderings*, and Novalis’s *Henry of Ofterdingen*.<sup>h</sup> Still, it should be said that all these works more or less examine the human being as a whole and consider also his social

relations, especially as regards the deepest need that the hearts of educated men in modern times can feel: *love* in its higher sense. We can also find the more general *Bildungsromane* of the unforgettable Wieland, foremost among them his *Agathon*, which in my opinion is still one of the most exquisite of all works in this genre and all the more happily approaches the beautiful ideal of Greek *kalokagathia* because its poet, who himself possessed much of a beautiful Athenian soul, deposited within it the treasure of his own development toward wisdom, derived from a long and happy life as a poet in the public esteem.<sup>i</sup> But the work that appears to us in gentle radiance as the most general and comprehensive tendency of human *Bildung* is Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, which doubly appeals to us Germans because its poet, just as he did in the much earlier *Sorrows of Werther*, presents to us German life, German thought, and the morals of our time through its hero, its scenery and environment. Wieland, of course, who lived in an earlier period in which German *Bildung* could not yet hold its own against meddlesome foreign influences, especially those from France, spurned such elements, but Klinger already gave a dignified example in his *History of a German*.<sup>j</sup> Without getting lost in exaggerations of the kind that the ingenious Friedrich Schlegel put forth in his *Athenaeum*, when he declared that the French Revolution, Fichte’s *Science of Knowledge*, and *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* represented the highest tendencies of the century, we may nevertheless say with sober and full conviction that no previous novel—not only of the German people—so successfully and to such a high degree and expansiveness attempted to represent and promote the harmonious formation of the purely human. In this, it captured the most beautiful aspects of modern European man’s development and of the age that was coming to be at the time that the book was published in Germany. I would love to dwell on a more specific outline of this

marvelous work, to name for you the various characters presented therein, to discuss the richness of its remarks and pronouncements on life, art, and science, and to develop the beauties of its classical language, which permeates it in its moral purity. But since others have already preceded me in this, I can only recall to your mind the most salient points.<sup>2</sup>

The task of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* appears to be nothing else than to depict a human being who develops toward his true nature by means of a collaboration of his inner dispositions with outer circumstances. The goal of this development is a perfect equilibrium, combining harmony with freedom. The nourishment that our minds derive from this presentation varies in proportion to the inner disposition toward development of the person depicted and to the formative power in the world that surrounds him. In order to accommodate the kind of being given to Wilhelm Meister by the grace of nature, the poet had to find a world from which one could expect the formation not of an artist, a statesman, or a scholar but of a *human being*. A modern setting necessarily made the presentation of this world more lively than an antique one, of the kind that Wieland preferred for his novels, could have made it, and a German environment rendered it the liveliest of all, as well as most suitable for the purpose of representing a general formation. Wilhelm Meister possesses a highly receptive imagination that had to be employed and developed in manifold ways. This demands freedom from the oppression of external needs, but in combination with a position in the real world that isn't too comfortable, so that he might strive to advance himself using his own powers. *Mariane*, a young girl who loves him amid circumstances that aren't entirely pure, is his first sweetheart: she amounts to too little to become his wife, too much to be left behind without regrets. This necessitates her death, in which she appears in a brighter light than she ever did in life. The theater, as a bridge from reality into

a world of imagination, presents irresistible charms to a young man like Wilhelm. In time, however, he discovers that he possesses no calling to be an actor, even if the theater has awakened many of his nobler sentiments. The unsatisfactory outside circumstances of a life as an actor move him out of his idealistic world and closer to the actual one. A number of characters full of healthy life, some of them merely charming, some of them truly beautiful, introduce him to the resplendent side of this world. Opposed to these are two sickly creatures, both from the southern realm of Italy: *Mignon* and *the Harper*, both of them full of a southern fire and depth that give new energy to Meister whenever outside circumstances wear him down. *The countess*, endowed with a soft heart and the frailty of a woman, is nevertheless not without grace and thus a suitable tool to awaken in Meister the desire to please. *Aurelie* gives a warning example of the destruction that passion and imagination can cause even in a noble person if the inner forces of the soul are not in balance. *Natalie's aunt*, on the other hand, whose *Confessions of a Beautiful Soul* we get to read, is filled with a peace brought about by the renunciation of the sensual world. Many blossoms had to fall in order to ripen the fruit of her contemplative piety. A different kind of inner peace, this one combined with incessant action on the outside, is demonstrated by *Theresa*. Here there are no quarrels and nervous tensions, but neither can we find any ardency or imagination. Nevertheless, she possesses clarity and perfection—without enthusiasm, it is true, and always in full conscience, but nevertheless mixed with receptiveness for true nobility. *Natalie* possesses the same inner peace, clarity, and activity, but here everything is animated by love. This love ardently spreads throughout all that she does and reveals in her the sanctity of a higher nature devoid of any oppression, comforting and silently pleasing. And yet although there are all these lovely characters, it would be impossible

to find a single fundamentally evil creature in the entire book. Even *Barbara* isn't malicious, but merely a base woman who seeks out her own advantage and nevertheless possesses a certain devotion to Mariane and Felix. But it is similarly impossible to find a transcendental ideal; instead, we see everywhere traces of the constraints and the frailty of human nature. The protagonists instead derive their interest from *striving* toward the infinite. The diversity of the characters stems from the various directions that this striving takes, while one-sidedness, together with a misapprehension of forces in some characters, results in the shadows of the portrait and in the dissonances that mar the harmony. Thus, *Jarno* combines a clarity and resolution of judgment with the coldness and hardness of a man of the world while *Philine* suffers from an excess of a careless, although attractive, fine sensibility that is not reigned in by any moral cultivation. The *great-uncle of Natalie*, the *Abbé*, and *Lothario* appear to us as higher and more potent beings of a special kind; all three are more fixed in their character than William Meister, who will only later become like them and is presented to us in this becoming. But we learn comparatively little (too little to satisfy our wishes) about them and their prehistory, and, as a result, the principal figure, *Meister*, is never overshadowed by them. One of the best judges of our novel has rightly found a notable artifice in the way characters and fates are intertwined in it. "Both," he says,

affect the other reciprocally. Neither is character merely the result of a string of circumstances, nor fate merely the result of a given character. Personality develops from an independent and inexplicable seed, and this development is merely abetted by external circumstances. This is the effect that the puppet theater has on Meister, and the chest infection on the canoness.<sup>k</sup>

Thus, Meister's stay at the count's palace, the robber's ambush, and the visit to Lothario

all are connected with free choices sprung from individual dispositions. In this way, the whole approaches real life, in which man is never merely governed by the external world but also cannot derive everything from his own inner being. Two characters foremost show the power of destiny—*Mignon* and *the Harper*, both of whom possess tender natures that have to submit to the tremendous pressure of circumstances. The rest of the novel profits from this admixture of the tragic by an increase of wealth and dignity. Besides the aforementioned characters there are also special circumstances that act on *Meister*. Among these we may count, together with his life as an actor and his stay at the count's palace, the secret society, which exerts a hidden influence on the formation and direction of men—fortunately in a benevolent way. A child, finally, helps complete Meister's formation, for, as Goethe said so wisely, when we pay attention to them, children cultivate that in us which even women have left undeveloped.<sup>3</sup>

It is true that the rapid acceleration of entwined events toward the end of the novel is often surprising, but it is never unnatural. It derives from preceding events, from characteristic tendencies that have previously been hinted at as if by accident, or from the natural course of the human heart and spirit. The painful impression left by *Mignon's* death is balanced by the funeral service: the holy solemnity that it inspires lifts the soul into the realm of the eternal. When the whole artistic edifice stood before the imagination of the poet and was perhaps already partially put to paper, it was nevertheless still capable of improvement by diverse ornaments, such as the interlaced poems or the discussions about Hamlet and other aspects of poetic art; the letter of apprenticeship; and many other exquisite remarks about art, education, and worldly wisdom—all of which were woven into the whole not as random decorations but as a necessary part. Up to a certain point, it is possible to trace the formative influence of the

artist through the novel, and several excellent critics have done so, usually immediately after the first publication of the outstanding work. Beyond this point, however, the genius of the work announces itself only through the impact it leaves. A reader with an inclination toward the arts can be all the more grateful, therefore, for a renewed opportunity to read Goethe's *Truth and Poetry* and learn from the great author of *Wilhelm Meister* himself which threads of his rich life he wove into the marvelously intricate tapestry. For regardless of all talk about poetic gift, and regardless of the heights to which creative imagination is elevated in our perception, the most lifelike, powerful, and instructive elements of the novel, and indeed of poetry in general, remain those that the poet has himself lived and experienced, no matter to what constructs of fancy they may otherwise be tied. Without such experiences, which are now familiar to us through Goethe's own presentation of his life (not to mention those other significant ones, which the poet, still richer than his work, understandably had to conceal from his readers), we would have neither *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, nor *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, nor even, as a continuation of the life story would presumably show, Goethe's third and final novel, *Elective Affinities*. And we already know from his book how other characters that appear in his works, such as Gretchen and even Mephistopheles in *Faust*, relate to the poet's lived experiences. We may take from them an example of how a high poetic power recasts the true, idealizes it, and then presents it to posterity. For this reason I have to declare that I find Friedrich Schlegel's recent loud lament to the effect that Goethe wastes (as he would put it) so much artifice on entirely modern subjects one-sided, even though Schlegel otherwise is one of Goethe's warmest and most insightful admirers. Of course, this has to do with Schlegel's theory of poetry, in which he declares the *indirect* representation of reality and the present age

(speaking, perhaps, in too general a sense here) to be the appropriate subject of poetry.<sup>4</sup>

The example of *Wilhelm Meister* has, I believe, served as an ample illustration of what is meant by a *Bildungsroman* and was intentionally chosen as the best of its kind, from our time and for our time.

Many other related questions still remain, such as: Is every good novel a *Bildungsroman*? Can and should every good novel be a *Bildungsroman*? Did the ancients know this genre, and if not, why not? What are other important modern examples of this type, drawn not only from German but also from Italian, Spanish, French, and British literature? Such questions and others like them I will perhaps answer at another time, assuming that you, my esteemed listeners, will find them agreeable. For now I have only one further remark. I just now called *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* a model of its kind, from our time and for our time. But Chronos marches quickly, leaving ruins behind him and gazing toward ever-new edifices that rise up before him. How much has changed in Germany and in the rest of Europe during the twenty-five years that have passed since the publication of the *Apprenticeship*; how much has already changed its shape and how much strives toward new forms that in some cases have been foreseen but in others come completely unexpected! We have seen the rejuvenation of spirits that has accompanied the rise of the German nation against the scandalous oppression of the former occupiers, the French, together with their creatures and machines and that has resulted in a lawful and just constitution under the governance of ancestral rulers and elected representatives of duly acquired rights; we have seen the revival of memories of Hermann, the *Song of the Nibelungs*, of Luther, of old German might, faith, and truthfulness just as much as old German architecture, painting, and poetry; we have witnessed the universally felt need for a deeper and unfeigned religiosity and

for a truly humanistic philosophy that approaches Platonic Socratism, a chaste poetry that dedicates itself to higher beauties of every kind, an art that unites the national with the classical; we have seen, finally, the universal need for a more thorough scientific method in all subjects of knowledge, a finer sociability that is devoid of empty formalities and wiser and more fortunate than all previously practiced life; considering all these things we may expect many happy developments from the current and from the future generations. For the same reason, many other marvelous trees with beautiful flowers and ripe fruits shall flourish in the infinitely large garden of novel writing. Why should “that noble inciter, Comforter Hope,” turn away from the lamp of life?! Joyfully let us turn, instead, from the golden harvests of bygone years to the invigorating green of the growing crop!

## NOTES

1. *Truth and Poetry: From My Own Life*, pt. 3, vol. 14.

2. See the contributions of Körner (the father of Theodor K.), Fr. Schlegel, Jenisch, Schubarth, and several others to various literary journals. I have principally drawn on the first of these (often retaining his own words) whenever my feelings after several readings of a work corresponded with his analysis. We are often in agreement, but not always—not, for example when he counts Wilhelm Meister among those human beings who are called to rule in the world, nor when he attributes to Natalie a slowly growing passion for Meister, since her soul may be capable of deep and ardent empathy, but surely not of passion. My earliest opinions on *Wilhelm Meister*, written immediately after the publication of the first two volumes of the book and thus only partially correct, can be found in a letter dated 28 August 1795 that has been printed in the *Neue Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und freien Künste*, vol. 51, pp. 59–70.

3. *Wilhelm Meister*, vol. 7, ch. 7.

4. See Fr. Schlegel’s *History of Ancient and Modern Literature* [*Geschichte der alten und neuen Litteratur* (1812)], pt. 2.

## TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

The original text, a transcript of an 1819 lecture, appeared in 1820 in *Inländisches Museum*, a short-lived periodical published by Carl Eduard Raupach in Dorpat (now Tartu, Estonia) from 1820 to 1821. Further information is available at *EEVA: Digital Repository for Older Estonian Literature* ([www.utlib.ee/ekollekt/eeva/](http://www.utlib.ee/ekollekt/eeva/)).

a. Morgenstern delivered his lecture on 12 December 1819 (24 December according to the Julian calendar), on the seventeenth anniversary of the founding of the University of Dorpat. The birthday of Tsar Alexander I, the patron of the university, also happened to be 12 December.

b. This quotation is drawn from bk. 5, ch. 7, of *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*.

c. The heroes, respectively, of *Faust der Morgenländer* (1797), *Giagar der Barmecide* (1792–94), and *Geschichte des Raphael de Aquillas* (1793), three novels by Friedrich Maximilian von Klinger (1752–1831), whose play *Sturm und Drang* (1777) gave a name to the “storm and stress” movement in German letters. Klinger was then serving as curator of the University of Dorpat and was a friend of Morgenstern’s.

d. *Pharsalia* (ca. 61–65 CE), by Lucan; *La Henriade* (1723), by Voltaire; *Borussias* (1794) by Daniel Jenisch; *Rossiyada* (1771–94), by Mikhail Kheraskov.

e. *Alcibiades* (1781–88), by August Gottlieb Meissner; *Aristomenes und Gorgus* (1796), by August Lafontaine; *Marc Aurel* (1791–92), by Ignaz Aurel Fessler.

f. *Histoire des Sevarambes* (1675), by Denis Vairassel; *Reisen vor der Sündfluth* (1795), by Klinger.

g. Horace, *Ars Poetica* (line 343).

h. *Ardinghello* (1787), by Wilhelm Heinse; *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen* (1798), by Ludwig Tieck; *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802), by Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis).

i. *Die Geschichte des Agathon* (1766–67), by Christoph Martin Wieland. *Kalokagathia* refers to the Hellenic ideal (espoused, for example, in Plato’s *Republic*) of a harmonious development toward physical, moral, and spiritual perfection.

j. *Geschichte eines Deutschen* (1798), by Klinger.

k. This quotation is taken from a review of *Wilhelm Meister* that Christian Gottfried Körner published in Schiller’s literary journal *Die Horen* in 1796 (vol. 12).

l. From the concluding couplet of Goethe’s poem “Meine Göttin” (“My Goddess,” 1789).