

Abstract in English:

HELLMUT AMMERLAHN

**Imagination and Truth. Goethe's Bildungsroman of the Artist, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*: Structures, Symbolism, Poetology.**

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The monograph presents a multi-faceted, cohesive, and comprehensive interpretation of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* in the context of Goethe's works. The author's nuanced concept of wholeness, as expressed in his aesthetic, epistemological and scientific writings, must be recognized as forming the basis of this, his classical masterpiece of fiction. All individual elements of the novel, including enigmatic characters such as Mignon and Harpist and their extraordinary Italian prehistory, reveal themselves as fully integrated into the thematic context and the structure of the whole. By employing hermeneutic principles of Gadamer and Heidegger to methodologically justify this approach to the novel, and by focusing on its interrelated symbolic networks, the monograph provides answers to questions that have hitherto been unresolved, such as:

- Why does the elite, aristocratic Tower Society select as its protégé Wilhelm Meister, the seemingly passive son of a bourgeois merchant, and ultimately initiate him as a vital and essential member into their secret organization?
- Why do Mignon and the Harpist, the lyrical voices in Wilhelm's life, find their ultimate transformation or demise in the realms of Natalie's castle and the Tower?
- Why does Goethe integrate an entirely new motif sequence pertaining to the fine arts, such as the art collection of Wilhelm's grandfather and the picture of the Sick Prince, into the final form of the novel? Why are these essential elements missing from his *Theatrical Mission*, the first version of Wilhelm's endeavors, in the view of traditional scholarship the author's "only artist novel"? Does this not indicate that Goethe's *Bildungsroman*, which has been classified inconclusively for over 200 years, is concerned with much more than the vague notion of a general education?

**Hellmut Ammerlahn, Research Results (Selection):**

- ◆ According to Goethe's epistemology, the meandering indecisiveness of the talented hero is the sign of a vacillating and not yet regulated but nevertheless creative and productive imagination. This becomes evident through his tragic doppelgangers, Mignon and the Harpist. Wilhelm creates them out of painful memories from his past, the initial childhood loss of his beloved marionettes, and the abandonment of his love Mariane as a young man, coupled with his experiences in the present.
- ◆ Mignon exhibits the external form of a marionette until Wilhelm transforms her into a child of his heart. Like the itinerant Harpist, this "little Mary" figure comes

from Italy, for Goethe the land and culmination of the arts. Analogous or inversely proportional to Wilhelm's own development, the two figures display more erratic than organic metamorphoses. They embody the hero's emotions of longing and guilt, but also express the inner relief music and poetry can bring to a tortured heart. Through a detailed structural and thematic analysis of Mignon's and the Harpist's songs, it becomes clear that these songs originate from Wilhelm himself. His lively imagination is able to transform the traumatic experiences of his past, his hopes and fears, into the images of these singers. In the novel itself, Goethe as authorial narrator repeatedly and directly points to the fact that Wilhelm writes poems and plays, and he states that "an entire novel [developed] in his soul." Wilhelm's songs are also sung in the later sequel, his *Journeyman Years*.

- ◆ Thus, emerging from the diminishing masks behind which the author with empathy and irony hides his hero, Wilhelm Meister increasingly reveals his true nature as that of a creative poet. In respect to Goethe's life-long quest to master his own imagination, the story of Wilhelm's emotional and cognitive journey is positioned chronologically between the author's two artist dramas, *Torquato Tasso* and *Faust II* (Acts I-III). These three works thus share a common denominator in addition to a multitude of analogous situations. Frequent references to the two artist dramas help to elucidate the function of Wilhelm's symbolic relationships to all the figures within the novel that either impact or express the stages of his development.

- ◆ At the plot level, the formerly secret Tower Society reveals itself as enlightened nobility promoting education and social reform. According to Goethe's epistemology, Jarno, the Abbé, and Lothario constitute a true aristocracy of thoughtful insight and activity representing the developed human faculties of analytical logic, higher reasoning and far-reaching engagement respectively. The hero requires their assistance just as much as they depend on the animating power of Wilhelm's creative imagination. For Goethe, the human faculties of perception, thinking and judgment need the power of imagination so that they "do not descend into empty incompetence" (cf. Goethe "critique" of Kant in his letter to Maria Paulowna dated January 2, 1817). This explains psychologically the Tower's interest in Wilhelm's development and his integration into their society.

- ◆ With the help of the leaders from the Tower Society, who accompany him continually in the novel's final books rather than appearing sporadically as enigmatic emissaries, Wilhelm has reached the human and artistic maturity to transform Mignon, the "genius child" of his past suffering and longing, into a work of art. It takes place in the castle's "Hall of the Past." Mignon's lifelike embalmed body, a parallel in Goethe's novel *The Elective Affinities* confirms the symbolism, represents life experiences transformed into the permanence of art. Having previously been forgiven by Mariane for his distrust in her loyalty, Wilhelm comes to terms with his past on a personal level and as a creative artist.

- ◆ Step by step, Wilhelm sheds his tragic perspective on life, as embodied in the self-created and in the literary doppelganger, the Harpist and Hamlet respectively. By interpreting and adapting the text of Shakespeare's drama and

by playing the title role, Wilhelm distances himself from his earlier identification with the sick prince, Hamlet. He now realizes that they don't share the same fate. Likewise, through his uncompromising intervention on behalf of his natural son Felix (the "bringer of luck"), Wilhelm withdraws the foundation he had laid for the Harpist's existence. The tragic bard un sentimentally and permanently exits Wilhelm's life before the novel's happy ending.

- ◆ Goethe's insights, derived from his studies of morphology and the life sciences, culminate in the visualized idea of the "archetypal form." It is personified in the figure of perfection, Natalie, who by her law-giving guidance and her healing power fulfills nature's tendencies to balance inequities and disparities. Parallel to Faust's Helena, Natalie is accorded the characterization "form of all forms," representing for Goethe supreme beauty and the epitome of natural and moral harmony. Through his initiation into the Tower Society and his subsequent recognition and appropriation of Natalie as a figure of light who no longer blinds him, Wilhelm has made great strides forward in his pursuit of wholeness. Decreasingly he finds himself the passive subject of fancy and delusion, of fear and hope; increasingly the search for the "truth of what is real" (Goethe) prevails in inspiring Wilhelm's poetic imagination.

- ◆ The content of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, down to the smallest detail, manifests itself conceptually and artistically in the novel's form, and is focused around one primary and one secondary core. In Chapter 6 of Book 4; i.e., precisely halfway through the novel, Natalie appears as the yet unknown Amazon. This occurs in the 49<sup>th</sup> of 98 total chapters. The primary core as expressed in the configuration of 7x7 plus 7x7 chapters thus constitutes a balanced symmetry. Natalie initiates Wilhelm's healing process and, at the end of the novel, joins with him in a bond for life. Wilhelm's interpretation of Hamlet whom he sees as tragically overwhelmed by fate marks the secondary core. It takes place seven chapters later, representing structurally an asymmetrical relationship of 8x7 plus 6x7 chapters for seven of the novel's eight books which are divided into chapters. (Book Six containing the "Confessions of a Beautiful Soul" as well as an exploration of the Uncle's exemplary castle and his (Goethean) world view, is not divided into chapters. However, its insertion after Wilhelm's departure from the theater marks a major jump forward and upward in the hero's development). Goethe calls the principle of composition found in these relationships, a "concealed symmetry." He had discovered its model in Raphael's paintings during his Italian study trip. As a master craftsman Goethe uses "concealed symmetry" to the fullest in creating his own form-perfect masterpiece.

- ◆ *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, published in 1796, has become a prototypical paradigm for numerous authors writing educational and artist novels. Far surpassing the aesthetic aims of the *Theatrical Mission*, Goethe's serene but humorous treatment of Wilhelm Meister's errors and detours makes it easy to overlook the sophisticated developmental processes which are depicted in the novel's final version. Metacritically, this "Bildungsroman of the Artist" contains Goethe's poetology. Symbolically, it both hides and reveals the ironically distanced, "secretly-obvious" inner autobiography of his own maturation towards

becoming a thinking and well-rounded poet. It was completed during a most productive period and under the “rejuvenating” influence of Schiller’s friendship.

◆ In a letter dating from 1782, Goethe identifies the novel’s hero as his likeness, his double. He purposely assigns him the name Wilhelm. This is, in German, the first name of the author’s as well as his hero’s poetic role model, William Shakespeare. The 22-year-old Goethe, precisely the same age as Wilhelm at the beginning of the novel, in 1771 calls Shakespeare, like Wilhelm does, his “friend.” An essay written in 1813 celebrates Shakespeare as a “master,” and in his autobiography *Poetry and Truth* Shakespeare appears as “our father.” Considering Goethe’s real-life artistic “son-father” relationship to Shakespeare and in view of the “kingdom” Wilhelm inherits through Natalie, the novel ends with an astounding hidden confession by the author. It is perhaps the most intriguing of this inner autobiography’s many surprises. In the text of the present monograph, particularly in the “Conclusion” and in the footnotes, additional correlations are established. Relevant references to Goethe’s letters and conversations, and numerous parallels to his other poetic, scientific and autobiographical works support the arguments presented here for the understanding of the novel.