

GOETHE: WILHELM MEISTERS

LEHRJAHRE (1795-6)

In a famous 'Fragment' published in 1798 in the periodical of the early German Romantics, the *Athenäum*, Friedrich Schlegel described the French Revolution, Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* (1794) and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* as the three greatest 'tendencies' of the age, and from his following remarks it is clear that he was challenging normal opinion by putting the appearance of a philosophical and a literary work on the same level of cultural importance as a political event already generally regarded as a turning point in history. This assessment and his long review of the *Lehrjahre*, the series of letters written by Schiller between 1794 and 1796, as Goethe sent him successive books of it before publication, and admiring comments by innumerable German writers and critics down to Hofmannsthal, Hermann Hesse and Thomas Mann, above all perhaps the fact that the novel has been imitated in a whole series of 'Bildungsromane' and made this *the* German species of the novel, all this indicates that it is felt to be peculiarly German and representative. The rather lukewarm appreciation of the work by English critics apart from Carlyle tends to reinforce this view. When T. S. Eliot wrote in 1929 that Goethe, unlike Dante, 'always rouses a strong sentiment of disbelief in what he says', he was not going any further than D. G. Rossetti and several others down to D. H. Lawrence. They find Goethe thought-provoking but difficult, and if their ignorance of German cuts them off from his poetry, they have not the patience to explore what is so obviously an alien tradition. Though the early books of the *Lehrjahre* are a good story by any standards, the novel as a whole is evidently, like so many German novels, intended to interest the reader at least as much by its ideas as by its presentations of character and events. Our purpose is to study it primarily as an interpretation of life, an expression of Goethe's mature thought but also, through him, of his age and its inherited traditions.

In a typical 'Bildungsroman' we are shown the development of

an intelligent and open-minded young man in a complex, modern society without generally accepted values; he gradually comes to decide, through the influence of friends, teachers and chance acquaintances as well as the ripening of his own intellectual and perhaps artistic capacities and interests as his experience in these fields grows, what is best in life for him and how he intends to pursue it. We see him learning to deal with the common problems of personal and social relationships, acquiring a point of view in practical matters and above all a 'Weltanschauung', a lay religion or general philosophy of life, or perhaps one after another. Adventurous episodes may be introduced by the author to maintain interest, but in general there is enough variety if the hero meets well contrasted friends in different social milieux, and of course falls in love with more than one kind of girl, some appealing to his senses and some to his mind. The novel usually ends when he has attained to some degree of maturity, and what he does with his life later is not revealed to us. There is often a large autobiographical element in such novels, so the favourite hero is a writer or artist, not a man of action. There had been 'artist-novels' in Germany from Wieland's time, and there was a fresh outcrop with the Romantics, but in these the hero is more fully conscious of his own unique personality and more eager to take the lead than Wilhelm Meister and the normal dreamy 'Bildungsroman' hero.

It is true that in the first version of *Wilhelm Meister*, not published by Goethe but known from a manuscript copy made by a friend in Zürich, only discovered in 1910, the centre of interest is Wilhelm's own career as a dramatist, actor and theatre-manager in the making, who lives for the ambitious dream of reforming the German theatre and making it into a means of educating the public through art, exactly the kind of dream which inspired Schiller's address about the possible effects of a good standing theatre to the 'German Society' at Mannheim in June, 1784, while he was engaged as theatre poet by the Mannheim National Theatre. When Goethe sent him, ten years later, the proofs of the first book of *Wilhelm Meister*, Schiller wrote back that he could remember only too well his own experience of life and love in a theatrical troupe such as Goethe had so well described. In his lecture, partly to please his bourgeois audience, he had adopted the tone of the Enlightenment and said things like this:

The stage is the channel, open to all, into which the light of wisdom pours down from the superior, thinking part of the people, to spread from there in milder beams through the whole state. More correct ideas, sounder principles, purer feelings flow from here through all the veins of the people. The mists of barbarism, of dark superstition vanish, night gives way to victorious light.

The thinking is as mixed up as the metaphors, but many shared these opinions. Iffland had been sent to the theatre by his father at the age of eight to see Lessing's *Miss Sara Sampson* because it 'taught a good lesson' and decided on the stage, instead of the church, as a career, thinking of it as he did as 'a school of wisdom, of beautiful feelings', and from the same Hanover school K. P. Moritz had run away with similar intentions but eventually taken to writing and become the author of *Anton Reiser*, an autobiographical novel of which one is often reminded in reading *Wilhelm Meisters Theatralische Sendung*. When Goethe wrote his novel of the theatre, between 1777 and 1785, he was busy, amongst many other things, with the amateur theatre at the court of Weimar, doubling the role of *maitre des plaisirs* of the Duke with that of minister and member of the small governing council of state. Like Wilhelm, he traced his interest in the theatre back to his grandmother's gift of a puppet-theatre when he was a small boy, and he had been writing plays and reading and seeing French classical drama since boyhood. Herder had made him an enthusiastic admirer of Shakespeare at twenty-one, and Goethe's 'Shakespearean' historical play, *Götz von Berlichingen*, had made a name for him in Germany a year or more before his European success with the novel *Werther*. The atmosphere of the time and his own close acquaintance with the German theatre as dramatist and writer of operettas performed in many places, and further as a leading spirit in the amateur theatre in Weimar for several years, made it quite natural that he should conceive the idea of a theatre novel reflecting the striking developments which had taken place in Germany in forty or fifty years round the middle of the eighteenth century, and especially the establishment of National Theatres and the gradual transformation of the repertoire by the inclusion of Shakespeare and plays in the English tradition. It is interesting to note that there was nothing national in the normal sense of the word about the National Theatres, except that they presented their plays in German, unlike

the French players and Italian opera troupes hitherto occasionally invited to entertain German courts. They put on original German plays by preference, but there were not nearly enough to go round, and much use had to be made of translations, at the first National Theatre in Hamburg, 1767-9, where Lessing was engaged as 'Dramaturg', and at all its successors in Vienna, Gotha, Mannheim, Berlin, Weimar etc. They were essentially subsidized repertory theatres, mostly, unlike the first one, in one of the capitals of Germany's many small states and so often described also as court theatres. They tried to raise the status of actors by taking them off the road and paying them better, but their economic situation was usually precarious, even in Vienna and Berlin. There were far too many of them for a poor country to support, but this was of course the beginning, fostered by inter-state rivalry, of the later German system of state and municipal theatres, through which a good theatre, for drama and opera, has come to be considered just as essential to the cultural life of any centre of population as libraries and art galleries.¹

When Goethe resumed work on the novel in 1794, after a break of eight or nine years, he found it necessary to revise drastically what he had written to bring it into line with his new conception of the central theme. In spite of these changes the point of transition from the old material to the new, at the end of what is now the fifth book, was unmistakable even before the discovery of the Zürich manuscript. Up to this point the style is realistic. Except for two obviously poetic or symbolic figures, Mignon and the Harpist, the characters and action produce the illusion of being described from life in all its complexity and unexpectedness, not constructed and arranged following a plan. This freshness is more marked in the *Theatralische Sendung* itself. Goethe's skilful use of Susanne von Klettenberg's papers in the sixth book of the *Lehrjahre* gives it too something of the same depth and unpredictability, but the last three books lack this irrational charm, being too obviously didactic and utopian. They were written much more quickly than the earlier books, and in writing them Goethe has evidently always followed closely a systematic plan like the one he drew up for *Faust* when he tried to complete in the 1790s a drama of which the beginnings had grown in his imagination unsought in vivid fragments. The new centre of interest in the novel was to be not the hero's character or adventures or accomplishments in themselves, but

the visible link between his successive experiences and awareness of worthy models and his gradual achievement of a fully rounded personality and well tested philosophy of life. The theatre novel was to become a 'Bildungsroman'.

It was entirely natural that after seventeen years the idea of educating and improving society through the theatre should have lost its former appeal for Goethe. About the theatre and its influence Goethe had now few illusions, especially since he had unwillingly taken over in 1791 the general supervision for the Duke of the newly established Weimar Court Theatre. In time, with the inspiring cooperation of Schiller, and direct acquaintance with the work of a really great actor, Iffland, he was to acquire a new interest and take a full share in raising the art of the theatre in Germany to a new peak, but while writing the *Lehrjahre* he could only treat Wilhelm's idealistic efforts for the theatre with irony, as an episode in his education by personal experience. When Jarno, the *raisonneur* of the later books, asks Wilhelm: 'How are you getting on with your fanciful plans of doing something for art and morality in the company of gypsies?' Wilhelm recites a litany of disappointments with the personal deficiencies of his actor friends, only to be laughed at by Jarno for expecting them to be any better than men in general. He had been describing not the theatre but the world (VII, 3). What he had learnt specifically from the actors, together with their aristocratic patrons, was to become more fully conscious than he had been instinctively since early manhood of the human limitations of the section of society to which he belonged by birth, the commercial middle class.

The point at which the revised version, the *Lehrjahre*, first explicitly reveals itself as a 'Bildungsroman' is in the third chapter of Book Five, where Wilhelm firmly rejects the proposals sent to him by his business associate, Werner, for the re-organization of their firm after the recent death of Wilhelm's father. This is just before the middle of the completed novel, when Goethe has made use of about four fifths of the contents of his first version. Looking back and comparing, one finds that he has re-written the *Sendung*, changing it in many ways to suit his new conception. The result is that the theatre no longer seems to be for Wilhelm the one thing of interest in life, which he meets with in many different forms on his business

journeys, and soon sets out to reform with all the self-confidence of a young genius. It is one experience among many, though still predominant, and Wilhelm learns from it, in his engaging, open-minded way, as he learns from everyone and everything, often noting down his observations for our benefit. His love of art and literature is no longer a sign of creative talent, expressing itself in revolt against a philistine and divided home, but an expression of the natural tastes of a young man from a well-to-do family, whose grandfather had been a discriminating collector of pictures and whose parents, though they sell the paintings to pay for a fine house, splendidly furnished, evidently take an aesthetic pleasure in it, for they hardly entertain at all, whereas their friends and later partners, the Werners, have their dark old house always full of guests. It is only young Werner who is a thorough-going capitalist, though still of an early type. He believes, like the merchants praised in the *Spectator*, that he is contributing to universal happiness by pursuing his own interest, and prudently observing the old-fashioned virtues, order, economy, perseverance, self-control. He lives, as he boasts, by other men's follies, and usefulness to him is his criterion for everyone and everything. His ruling idea is that his capital must be productive, not of human satisfaction but of more depersonalized wealth. So he proposes in his long letter to Wilhelm (v, 2) to marry Wilhelm's sister, as had long been planned, and to take her and her mother into his already over-crowded house, for what does a little inconvenience matter compared with the prospect of adding greatly to their capital by selling the Meisters' fine big house, always a useless luxury like the picture collection before it? He hopes that Wilhelm has not inherited the silly notions that had run in his family so far! He congratulates him on having made so many interesting and useful observations on his journey - Wilhelm, not daring to tell his father how he had really spent his time, had pretended to have been keeping a diary, as his father had recommended, and made up with the help of a friend pages full of statistics and technical descriptions to send home. Werner's letter convinces Wilhelm finally that the life of a prosperous merchant has no appeal for him now, and 'that it is only in the theatre that he can complete the "Bildung" which he desires for himself'.

In the following chapter we have Wilhelm's reply to Werner,

explaining, in conciliatory terms, how differently from Werner he now sees the world, and why only work in the theatre will satisfy him. It is tempting to take this letter as expressing the author's own views and to make it the key to the novel, but it is important to remember that it is Wilhelm who is speaking, long before his 'Bildung' is complete, and speaking in such a way as to make his adoption of values very unlike those of the normal merchant as palatable as possible to his future brother-in-law. He seems to make both the lessons he has learnt so far and the kind of satisfaction he hopes for in an acting career surprisingly external, but the changes that have already taken place in him go far beyond the improvement which he mentions in his physique, in his manner and bearing in society, and in his voice and speech. He has come to realize his limitations as a 'Bürger', the carefully brought up son of a good middle-class family, first of all through sharing the bohemian life of a group of actors. The contrast is complete. Instead of the 'sacred economy' of money and time, the love of order and a rationalized way of life excluding surprise and adventure, Wilhelm encounters what may sometimes seem to him idleness, waste and fecklessness, but is more often admired as the naive insouciance of genius, generosity, courage. He never quite loses his bourgeois prejudices, but he soon realizes that this almost totally opposite point of view can have its attractions for a free spirit. Though the actors are the paid servants of art, it is their naturalness that attracts him to them as individuals. At their best they have the charm of the spontaneous, at their worst they are merely human. Unlike the worthy Werner they can live in the moment, indulge their senses without shame and appreciate physical grace and dexterity. They teach Wilhelm to fence, to dance and to take people of all sorts for what they are, whether socially approved or not. They are spontaneous above all in their affections. Mariane, Mme Melina, Philine follow the heart and not the middle-class code. Listening to Mme Melina's open confession before the village judge of her relations before marriage with the man she already looked upon as her husband, Wilhelm 'formed a high opinion of the girl's character; while the officials wrote her down as a shameless hussy and the townspeople present thanked God that cases of this kind had either never happened in their families, or never been found out'. Wilhelm of course, like Werther envying the peasant boy his naive expression

of passion, is of the age of Rousseau, and in his early manhood it is the winged god he worships, but already at the end of the *Lehrjahre* love has become the goddess of family life, the bond of a social institution. The love of order is too deeply engrained in Wilhelm to be completely dispelled at any time by the passing appeal of spontaneity in others. If Wilhelm is ever to become an artist, he, like Gustav Aschenbach (*Der Tod in Venedig*), or Goethe himself, will carry over into his new profession at least the love of orderly habits and the full use of time. But just as his infatuation with the theatre and with Mariane makes him blind to the tawdriness of the scenery and properties as he waits for his mistress in the wings, so the sight of her untidy bedroom, littered with scraps of finery, ribbons, hairpins, toilet articles bearing the signs of use, clothes and possessions of all kinds in dusty heaps, gives him a delightful feeling of intimacy, though his own room at home is a model of elegance and artistic taste. Similarly the gay friendliness of Philine, her careless generosity, her outspokenness and intolerance of humbug, her bright ideas for amusingly passing the time – these and similar traits in Laertes, Friedrich and the rest make him happy to forget, at least for a time, the claims of caution and restraint. Although Goethe does not conceal the danger of giving impulse and instinct free play, and sets off the generosity and grace of some with the avarice and stupidity of others, the immediate effect on Wilhelm of living with the actors is a kind of re-assessment of all values which confirms him in his unworldliness. In these chapters Friedrich Schlegel was given many a hint for his apology for idleness (in *Lucinde*), Brentano for his baiting of the philistine and the whole romantic myth of the artist's inherent superiority to the normal citizen was given a powerful impetus.

When he replies to Werner, Wilhelm has already had some experience of another way of living and thinking besides the theatre which is new and attractive to him as a 'Bürger'. The theatre itself provides an introduction for Wilhelm to aristocratic society, just as Goethe's literary distinction had given him the *entrée* to the court of Weimar. There is a certain logic in this transition, because if the nobleman was free through his inherited wealth and privileges, the actor became something of a free artist in Germany earlier, for instance, than the writer. So in the 1770s and 1780s, roughly the period of the *Lehrjahre*, the stage attracted middle-class boys with

some education and artistic leanings, like Iffland and K. P. Moritz, as we have seen, and Wilhelm can plausibly put forward the idea that as an actor he will enjoy what matters to him of the freedom for which all envy the nobleman, the freedom to be himself, with the expectation of being appreciated for his personal qualities.

Having undeceived Werner about the misleading diary and told him that a life of money-making and mindless relaxation is not at all his own ideal, Wilhelm writes:

At the back of my mind, it has been my wish and intention since my youth to develop to the full my own self, the powers that are in me. My ideas have not changed, but I see rather more clearly now by what means I can realize them[...] If I were a nobleman, we should soon agree, but as I am only of the middle class, I must adopt a course of my own, and I want you to understand me. I don't know how it is in other countries, but in Germany it is only for a nobleman that a certain general development of his personality is possible. A 'Bürger' can earn his reward and at a pinch perhaps train his mind, but whatever he may do, his personality does not count.²

A gentleman, on the other hand, Wilhelm believes, values his individual personality in itself and expects others to do so, as his dignified bearing shows. Serlo, the accomplished actor, explains to him in detail later how difficult it is to imitate the manners of a gentleman, because they are mainly negative, and the result of long practice. He must never hurry, or betray his feelings, but maintain the same unruffled calm with everyone and in any situation. Goethe clearly has in view what Lord Chesterfield in his famous *Letters to his son* had called 'the lesser talents' – 'an engaging manner, an easy good breeding, a genteel behaviour and address'. We can only understand the emphasis he makes Wilhelm lay on these externals and Wilhelm's extraordinary expectation that as an actor he will, though a mere 'Bürger', find in displaying himself on the stage a similar satisfaction in his own all-round development as he attributes to the born aristocrat, if we take Goethe's attitude towards his hero as ironical, here as in so many other places. The reality behind the aristocratic mask has been clearly displayed in Book Three, and Wilhelm has himself been made to agree with the actors in the belief that only a comparatively poor man can appreciate the happiness of inwardness, and be capable of true friendship and fidelity (iv, 2). The troupe, accompanied by Wilhelm, had been invited by a count to his

mansion, to help to entertain a general of princely rank and his staff, and Wilhelm had gone gladly, full of the highest expectations and 'praising his genius' for leading him up to 'the higher regions' where dwelt the thrice blest favourites of fortune, who would surely, in their privileged position, have learnt discrimination, and directed their minds to the necessary, the useful, the true sooner than most – irony again of course on Goethe's part at Wilhelm's naiveté (III, 2). Seen at close quarters, the aristocracy are found to be just as full of illusions about themselves as ordinary mortals and everything about them is façade, like the beautiful but chimneyless fireplace in the unfurnished building where the troupe has to spend its first night. The actors find that their patrons, from the Count downwards, know little about art though surrounded by beautiful things. Literature and the drama are two forms of distraction among the many in their lives. All praise the Baron as poet and connoisseur, but he is quite evidently a vain poetaster. When an anonymous poem about him causes malicious glee among the actors, Wilhelm reproaches them for falling into the usual German blunder of running down the achievements of men of rank in the arts, but this is perhaps a cover for Goethe's expression in these verses of a feeling to which he himself, as a bourgeois poet at the court, was not a stranger:

Ich armer Teufel, Herr Baron,
 Beneide Sie um Ihren Stand,
 Um Ihren Platz so nah am Thron,
 Und um manch schön Stück Ackerland,
 Um Ihres Vaters festes Schloß,
 Um seine Wildbahn und Geschoß.

Mich armen Teufel, Herr Baron,
 Beneiden Sie, so wie es scheint,
 Weil die Natur von Knaben schon
 Mit mir es mütterlich gemeint.
 Ich ward mit leichtem Mut und Kopf
 Zwar arm, doch nicht ein armer Tropf.

Nun dächt' ich, lieber Herr Baron,
 Wir ließen's beide, wie wir sind:
 Sie blieben des Herrn Vaters Sohn,
 Und ich blieb' meiner Mutter Kind.
 Wir leben ohne Neid und Haß,

Begehren nicht des andern Titel,
 Sie keinen Platz auf dem Parnaß,
 Und keinen ich in dem Kapitel.*³

In the Utopian world of the later chapters, differences of rank are, as Schiller put it, treated as completely negligible when humane issues are at stake, though he wondered how the ordinary reader would accept a novel ending with three marriages which are all misalliances. In the third book however the social gulf is very real, even between two people as attractive in each other's eyes as Wilhelm and the Countess. They are described as exchanging meaningful glances across this gulf much as two outposts of opposing armies, separated by a river, fraternize with each other without thinking of the war in which they are fighting. There are hints of many fleeting love affairs at the castle which break down all barriers, but they are typical of the morals of the rococo age, painted here in all its heartlessness and charming elegance. There is a memorable description of the Countess dressed for a banquet. All about her is artifice, yet this supreme art has the effect of the natural. 'If Minerva leapt completely armed from the head of Jupiter, this goddess seems to have stepped out from some flower light-footedly in full array.' The picture of the Countess's *lever*, at which Wilhelm's reading of scenes from his play is interrupted by a succession of momentous trifles, has only one rival in German literature, the first act of Hofmannsthal's *Rosenkavalier*.

All this is of course to be regarded as a part of Wilhelm's aesthetic education, which is continued when the troupe leaves the Count's mansion, with Wilhelm now as its elected head. It is no longer the actor's life in itself which serves Wilhelm's further development, so much as his delighted exploration of the work of Shakespeare, first brought to his notice, as a dramatist really worthy of his study, by Jarno at the mansion. Wilhelm revels to begin with in the richness and variety of Shakespeare and lives himself into his characters, seeing

* I, poor devil, dear Baron, envy you your rank, your place so close to the throne, and many a fine piece of arable, your father's castle too, his shooting preserve and rents.

Me, poor devil, dear Baron, you envy, as it seems, because nature was a kindly mother to me even as a boy. I grew up with a cheerful temper, poor indeed, but not a poor dolt.

Now it seems to me, dear Baron, we'd better leave things as they are, that you should remain your father's son, and I my mother's child. Let's live without envy or hate, and neither seek the other's title, you claiming no seat on Parnassus, and I none in cathedral chapters. (Only the very blue-blooded were elected to these perquisites.)

himself as a kind of Prince Hal who finds pleasure for a time in the company of low companions. He even adopts a fanciful form of dress, wearing a bright silk scarf round his waist and a kind of ruff, made of strips of muslin sewn to his shirt. Goethe shows us how he gradually discovers more and more in Shakespeare, first in *Hamlet*, the play which made the deepest impression in the *Sturm und Drang* period, when Shakespeare was introduced by degrees into the repertoire of the German theatre, above all by F. L. Schröder in Hamburg, from 1776, after he had prepared the ground by producing a series of post-Shakespearian English comedy and tragedy. The domestic dramas of Lessing and his imitators and the strong stuff of *Sturm und Drang* had also helped to wean the public from French classicism and 'comédie larmoyante'. Erich Trunz has well brought out the novelty of the chapters about Wilhelm's enthusiastic reading and production, the interesting feature of which is not so much the particular interpretation of *Hamlet* which is offered, clearly in part a characterization of the hero himself, as the quasi-religious attitude of Wilhelm to the art of Shakespeare.

It is a way of experiencing art which was only fully developed in the age of Goethe. Art means something like this for Wackenroder's Klosterbruder too [in the *Herzensergießungen*] and for Hoffmann's Kapellmeister Kreisler (in *Kater Murr*). This way of seeing art only became possible in a world for which the Church had ceased to answer all men's questions, but where man stands before the Sphinx of life and the best interpretation that he finds is expressed as art. It has become a feature of modern education ('Bildung') that there is a way of experiencing art which reveals the world, but this recognition dates from the *Lehrjahre*. Theorists like Herder had spoken about it earlier, but here a poet creates for us someone going through the experience.⁴

It must be admitted that Wilhelm is not seen in the novel to derive any very clear revelations from Shakespeare about life and the world, but the plays and his own experience begin to throw light on each other. It is immediately after his realization of his own conceit and rashness in leading the actors by a dangerous route, where they were attacked and plundered by robbers, that he interprets 'The time is out of joint; O cursed spite, That ever I was born to set it right!' as an indication that Shakespeare wanted to show us 'a great deed laid upon a soul that is not capable of it', like an oak-tree planted in a

flower-vase (IV, 13). Similarly we are reminded of his tendency to ascribe misfortunes passively to 'fate' which could well have been prevented, the bad habit of which three mysterious strangers on separate occasions try to cure him, when he says that it is left to fate to accomplish the revenge of which neither Hamlet nor the subterranean powers had been capable (IV, 15).

It is still from people, from personal relations, that Wilhelm learns most in the fourth book, which is about the motley company's fate after leaving the temporary security of the Count's mansion. Eventually all make their way to a large town where Serlo, a famous actor-manager already known to Wilhelm, runs his own standing theatre. Serlo is in all essentials modelled on F. L. Schröder, the German Garrick, in Hamburg. Wilhelm has long discussions about Shakespeare with Serlo and his sister Aurelie, whose talent is as outstanding as her brother's, though it is in emotional scenes that she excels, while he is a comic and character actor. Compared with Serlo, who has theatre blood in his veins and has learnt his art in an acting career of the utmost variety which began in his earliest years, Wilhelm will always be an amateur, but his idealism and poetic sensibility impress the hardened professional so much that, having trouble with his present troupe, he offers to take on all Wilhelm's friends if he himself will join them as *jeune premier*. Wilhelm does not immediately accept the invitation. For one thing, he has regained a certain interest in commerce through seeing new aspects of it in the big town and hesitates to give up all that it might provide him with. But his deepest desire, he admits, anticipating the fuller statement he is to make in the letter to Werner already mentioned, is 'to unfold and develop the capacities which may lie in him, whether in body or mind, for the good and the beautiful'. He is grateful and amazed that 'fate' seems to be giving him a second chance of realizing what he had dreamt of before Mariane's unfaithfulness, a great and beneficent career in the theatre. Perhaps the love of art had always been his strongest motive, and not merely the attractions of an un-philistine life?

Wilhelm's reference to Mariane suggests a closer look at the role played by women in Wilhelm's 'Bildung'. Is it true, as D. H. Lawrence once wrote to Aldous Huxley (27 March 1928), that '*Wilhelm Meister*' is amazing as a book of peculiar immorality, the

perversity of intellectualized sex, and the utter incapacity for any development of contact with any other human being, which is peculiarly bourgeois and Goethean'? The sentences which follow show that Lawrence was completely equating Wilhelm with Goethe himself, which is surely unjustified, a misuse of fiction. 'Goethe began millions of intimacies', it goes on, 'but never got beyond the how-do-you-do stage, then fell off into his own boundless ego. He perverted himself into perfection and God-likeness.' A very similar impression of Goethe himself had been conveyed by Max Beerbohm in the essay *Quia Imperfectum* of 1919: 'Of Goethe we are shy for such reasons as that he was never injudicious, never lazy, always in his best form – and always in love with some lady or another just so much as was good for the development of his soul and his art, and never more than that by a tittle.' This note is struck as early as 1850 by Walter Bagehot in his Shakespeare essay, where he says of Goethe: 'He moved hither and thither through life, but he was always a man apart ... In every scene he was there, and he made it clear that he was there, with a reserve, and as a stranger. He went there to *experience* ... No scene and no subject were to him what Scotland and Scotch nature were to Sir Walter Scott.' George Eliot, though she greatly admired Goethe, approved of this criticism, and similar remarks are to be found about that time in R. H. Hutton's review of Lewes's *Life of Goethe*, in Sarah Austin and in D. G. Rossetti.⁵ This is an impression of Goethe which is understandable in Victorian English readers of Goethe's autobiographical writings, *Poetry and Truth*, where he is consciously reviewing the experiences which have made him what he is, and the *Italian Journey*, where his self-confessed seriousness, his determination to *study* art and life, as the very German Winckelmann had done before him, seems all wrong to readers who associate the thought of Italy mainly with holidays. One is reminded of Henry Sidgwick's alleged reply to a German visitor who said that there was no word in English quite corresponding to 'Gelehrte': 'Oh yes there is. We call it "prig".' This sums up the instinctive reaction of many of us to the whole notion of 'Bildung', of conscious self-development. But an attentive reading of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* does not seem to me to justify Lawrence's criticism.

The affair with Mariane is such an old, old story that Goethe chose in the revised version to combine it with Wilhelm's interminable

recollections about his first puppet-play and precocious interest in the theatre. Looking back in Book IV, as we have just seen, Wilhelm is not sure whether it was his wish to continue indefinitely the novel irregular life, into which a chance passion for an actress had plunged him, which had made him think of the stage as a career, or whether it was the pure love of art which had made him fall in love with an actress. In Book I (chapter 8) he had however told Mariane that his love of the theatre had indeed begun with the puppet-plays, and that in his teens, before his education by private tutors was over, it had been decided to put him into Herr Werner's counting-house to be trained for commerce, and then: 'My mind turned only the more decisively away from everything that I considered an unworthy occupation. I wanted to devote every effort to the stage and to find there my fortune and happiness.' It was then that he wrote the poem about a youth at the cross-roads which is mentioned several times, in which the muse of tragedy and a figure representing commerce had contended with each other for him. The collapse of his romance drives him into the arms of trade, but his deeper feelings are unaltered and assert themselves when, on his business journey, any form of acting comes his way. The official moral of the Mariane episode is put into the mouth of the stranger, really the first emissary of 'The Tower', we learn later, who talks to Wilhelm in the street just before his disillusionment with Mariane. The stranger urges him not to excuse his habit of following his inclinations by invoking 'fate', the will of higher beings,

giving chance a kind of rationality, to follow which is even a sort of religion[...] I have no joy in a man, unless he knows what is good for himself and others, and keeps his arbitrary impulses under control. Everyone has his own fortune under his hands as the artist has the raw material which he wants to form into a figure. But it is the same with this art as with all others. Only the capacity for it is innate, and it must be learnt and carefully practised.

For three or four years Wilhelm applies himself more seriously than ever to commerce, renouncing his old ambitions in poetry and the theatre and nursing his grief at his loss, 'convinced that it was the first and the last that he would suffer in his life and rejecting any comfort which suggested to him that these sufferings would ever end'. But then, on a business journey on horseback, he finds himself enjoying the fresh air and the fine hilly country, and soon he makes interesting

contacts with people. In a small town he comes across Philine and Mignon almost simultaneously, the first members of the other sex to play any part in his life after Mariane. Philine, the actress, is as her name implies a sort of man's dream, detested by women. She is golden-haired, cheerful, sprightly and above all uninhibited, but she is a highly individual creation, not just a sex doll. Her levity is incurable, but she is recklessly generous, good-hearted and open, though well able to take care of herself in a crisis, for she has come through many. A born anarchist, who sees the state as a silly old man in a wig, she incorporates more than anyone else the attractions of bohemian freedom for the serious Wilhelm. She represents a constant temptation to let everything slide, and that is her function in the *Bildungsroman*. Almost at the end of the novel (VIII, 7) Wilhelm says: 'I loved Philine, but could not help despising her.' In Book v, 10, after Philine's characteristic song about the joys of night, Wilhelm tells the indignant Aurelie that he could account for every moment when Philine and he have been together, but the comedy with Philine's slippers that night shows that he is far from insensible, and in the wild night following his triumph as Hamlet, his mysterious nocturnal visitor turns out eventually to have been Philine, though next day she runs off with the equally irresponsible Friedrich, and marries him later.

Mignon, the mysterious girl in boy's clothes, who looks about twelve but is more childish than her age, shy and unapproachable, barely articulate in German and given to strange salaams and capers, arouses Wilhelm's compassion. He rescues her from the swarthy Italian acrobat's ill-treatment and treats her like a daughter, but in her devotion she soon seems attached to him in more than a childlike way, though the longing for a far-off home in her incomparable songs, which seem to express her nature as the Harpist's do his, never leaves her. She seems the very spirit of Romantic poetry and of Goethe's feeling for Italy, but in notes for the continuation of the novel he applies to her the phrase: 'madness through discordant relationships'. Her story, when at last we hear it, seems like part of a Gothic novel of horror.

Book III brings for Wilhelm the frequent sight of the Countess, a paragon of rococo charm married to an old eccentric. She has every attraction, rank, youth, beauty, elegance and a certain shyness.

She is not insensitive to a handsome, gifted young man, and they look at each other with interest across the yawning gulf of rank. The mischievous plot of the gay Baroness and Philine for bringing the pair together alone is foiled by the Count's unexpected return, to see himself, as he thinks, sitting in his dressing-gown, reading, a terrifying omen which makes him turn to Pietism. Wilhelm had been a very unwilling party to this intrigue, being 'by nature far removed from any empty gallantry', but when he was finally taking leave of the Countess, she rashly showed signs of her growing liking and he, emboldened, took her into his arms. Goethe contrives a sharp awakening to their moral lapse and an effective close to Book III by making the Countess, who had returned Wilhelm's kisses, suddenly tear herself away with a cry, put her hand to her heart and beg him, if he loves her, not to see her again. The author answers later his own question as to what strange warning of chance or fate tore them asunder. The diamond-studded portrait-medallion of her husband which she wore had been pressed painfully against her breast. Before long, in spite of her doctor's reassurance, she was convinced she had cancer, and like her husband took refuge in religion.

In Book IV, after the attack by armed bandits on the troupe as it makes its way to the big town, the wounded Wilhelm, left behind while the rest seek help in a village, is discovered near nightfall lying with his head in Philine's lap by a young lady, one of a party on horseback, followed later by several coaches. The Amazon, as she is always called later, makes the deepest possible impression on Wilhelm. 'He had fixed his eyes on the gentle, dignified, quiet, sympathetic features of the lady approaching. He thought he had never seen anything more noble and lovable.' In comparison with her Philine looked an impudent vagabond. Wilhelm's wound is dressed by a surgeon brought from one of the coaches, but soon the party is hurried on its way by the lady's uncle, eager to see his family in safer country. As he faints away again, Wilhelm has a vision as of a saint. The manservant left behind to look after him eventually finds quarters for the couple with a clergyman, but when Wilhelm recovers, he cannot find the Amazon's family from the information left by her man. In his memory she and the Countess are as alike as twins.

It is only in the last book that this thread is taken up again, and the Amazon is found to be indeed the Countess's sister Natalie, about

whose virtues we have heard in Book VI, the 'Confessions of a "schöne Seele"', her aunt. But first there is one more possible partner for Wilhelm to be considered, Serlo's sister Aurelie, to whom Serlo tries to marry him to secure his services for his troupe. Aurelie is described in Goethe's formula as a case of 'stubborn self-torturing attachment'. Wilhelm, a good listener, hears from her the long story of her stage career and of her impressions of the stream of men who have made love to her, an indictment of the crude approaches of every possible social type. She could only keep sane by coolly observing their antics as caricatures of humanity, without surprise, because having lost her mother early, she had been brought up by a nymphomaniac aunt, and known her loathsome miscellaneous visitors. She is moved to tell Wilhelm of her experiences because she finds him so ignorant of human nature in the real world, though so perceptive a critic of dramatic poetry. 'Nothing gets in to you from outside. I have seldom seen anyone who knows so little about the people he lives with, so completely misunderstands them.'

All this time Aurelie had been entirely devoted to her art but, lacking encouragement from an intelligent audience, she had let her brother marry her to a dull but efficient young man whom he wanted as business manager, and she had fallen in with their wish to give their audiences what they wanted. At last, just before her husband's early death, she had met a man she could wholly admire, who understood her art and gave her a new motive for her work, a cultivated landowner who had served as an officer with Lafayette in the American war. It is the Baron Lothario who plays a leading part in the later books of the *Lehrjahre* and in the *Wanderjahre*, a man with many interests and many claims on his affections. Distracted with her hopeless love for him, overworked and filled with a sense of failure she vents her frustration one day on the hapless Wilhelm. Staring into his eyes she asks him whether he can say that *he* has never tried to win a woman's favours by deceptive arts and assurances. He can, he says, because his life has been simple and temptations few, and to show how he shares her feelings, he is ready to vow that no woman shall ever hear a declaration of love from his lips to whom he cannot devote his whole life. That he may never forget, she scores with her dagger the palm of his outstretched hand.

The first five books show us an eminently teachable young man in

a natural sequence of situations into which he was led, in adult life, mainly by his passion for the theatre, in a world which is recognizably that inhabited by Goethe himself before the French Revolution. If we picture to ourselves the middle class, the actors and the nobility of the time with the help of the novel, we shall know them very much as they were, even though the facets of their life which are illuminated here are carefully selected to suit the author's purpose. This selection has to be much more rigorous in the later books, as Emil Staiger has pointed out:

The nearer Wilhelm Meister comes to his real goal, the more the range of his existence is contracted. No place in public affairs, no mark of distinction, no important office fall to his lot. The army, the government, the church, all general institutions lie outside the area over which the classical laws of culture hold sway. It is only in the circle of the family, with a few friends grouped around it, that the individual still appears as a human being with clear contours. But it must be a moderately well-to-do family. Its strength must not be used up in the fight for existence. Culture of the highest grade, moreover, presupposes a tradition that is not of yesterday. The group chosen must therefore inevitably be an aristocratic one. Within the nobility again certain types must be carefully avoided. The patriotic traditions, for instance, that were lively after the Seven Years War, have no place here. There are neither Prussians nor Saxons, only Germans, in fact not even Germans, but only men, citizens of the world, compelled indeed to live in space and time, but not bounded by space and time.⁶

The gradually increasing abstraction so well described by Staiger is principally, no doubt, a consequence of the shift in the central theme from a life in the theatre to the formation of a personality. Consciously or not, and it seems quite consciously, the revised version conveys a message, the particular conception of the good life we call Weimar humanism, the content of which is to be found also in many other works of Herder, Goethe and Schiller chiefly between 1785 and 1805. H. A. Korff has analysed the intellectual content of these works very clearly in his *Geist der Goethezeit*. The kind of ethical view he finds in Herder, for instance, he expresses at one point as follows: 'The ultimate meaning of our humanity is that we develop that higher human being within ourselves, which emerges if we continually strengthen our truly human powers, and subjugate the inhumane.'⁷ This may strike us now as disappointingly vague and question-begging.

Herder's ethical views bear the imprint of his own experience and habit of life in an unpolitical age and country. In his maturity, at least, it is quiet family life that is the norm for his view of the good, as it was for Goethe's and Schiller's. The values of inwardness are to the fore in it, but political action, adventure and heroism are praised as virtues only for earlier ages.⁸

In the same spirit of goodness and kindness, undogmatic but still unconsciously Christian, Goethe brings before us an Iphigenie overcoming the curse of inhumanity, that had hitherto dogged her family, by her inner vision of a new ideal, one which, as Korff puts it, 'convinces us not by its utility but by its beauty'. The touch of the author of *Iphigenie* is clearly visible in the 'schöne Seele' and Natalie. In the life story of the schöne Seele, which is given by her doctor to Wilhelm to comfort Aurelie in her self-inflicted illness and constitutes Book VI of the novel, we have the reflexions on the growth of her own personality of one of the group of people most given to such introspection at that time, the unorthodox Christians who came to be called 'Pietists'. It forms an apt transition from the revised theatre novel to the openly didactic final section of the new 'Bildungsroman', for in her dissatisfaction with the life of her class, her quietism, the concentration of all her energies on the salvation of her own soul, the schöne Seele forms a kind of feminine counterpart to Wilhelm. Her inner life, like his, soon outruns the means of expression available. She will not marry, any more than he will take up a normal occupation, at the cost of sacrificing her impulse to be fully herself. She is intelligent, sensitive and naturally religious but, as the daughter of a court official, she is for long surrounded by people 'without the least culture' who reject with contempt not merely blue-stockings, but any girl of good family who has intelligent interests, 'probably because it was thought to be bad manners to put so many ignorant men to shame'. Her old French tutor warns her not only against these cavaliers' subtle seductiveness, but also against the danger of infection from their touch. We witness a scene of amazing brutality in which she becomes involved at a private party in 'good' society. There is no idealization of the aristocracy here, any more than in the preceding books, but what surprised contemporary readers was Goethe's insight into the mind and heart of a deeply religious woman steeped in the quite special traditions of German Pietism. Goethe could not have written this section, as he wrote to Schiller (18 March

1795), if he had not earlier 'made studies from nature for it', a reference, as became clear later from his *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (II, 8) to his friendship in Frankfurt days with his mother's cousin Susanne von Klettenberg (1723-74). The extent of his own involvement in Pietism for a short time only became known through the publication (1922) of his letters to his Leipzig friend E. Th. Langer, and his 'Protean' ability to enter into the way of thinking of Catholic contemplatives too had been proved, not long before the composition of the *Lehrjahre*, by his friendship with Fürstin Gallitzin,⁹ though there was really nothing surprising for sensitive readers of *Iphigenie*, as we have said, or of *Tasso*, with its portrait of the Princess.

The schöne Seele leads in her maturity a life of good works, prayer and contemplation like that of a sister of certain Catholic orders, and she is in fact a Protestant 'Stiftsdame'. Her rich uncle had secured her admission to a 'Stift' when it was clear that she would not marry, and it was this that enabled her to lead what she called the life of 'a Herrnhut sister on her own account', that is, without having to reside in a 'Schwesterheim'. Only blue blood, a specified number of 'descents', together with the ability to contribute a considerable sum to the funds of the community, qualified a lady for membership of a 'Stift'. After taking vows of chastity and obedience to the Superiors she was assured of a fixed income, a kind of annuity, for the rest of her life, if she chose to live outside the 'Stift'. But more remarkable than her obviously privileged position is her natural goodness and serenity, as one of those 'Glad hearts, without reproach or blot/Who do God's work and know it not', or what Schiller (in *Über Anmut und Würde*, 1793) had defined as one 'who may confidently leave his will to be conducted by feeling'. Goethe's schöne Seele sees no merit of her own in her uninterrupted moral progress, in the fact, as she says, that 'my actions continually draw nearer to the idea that I have conceived of perfection, and that I find it easier every day to do what I consider right, in spite of the weakness of my body...It is an impulse that guides me and always guides me aright; I follow my convictions and know as little of restraint as of remorse. Thanks be to God that I recognize to whom I owe this good fortune and that I can only think of these qualities with humility.'

Goethe wrote to Schiller while engaged on this book that 'the whole

rests on the noblest illusions and the subtlest confusion of the subjective with the objective' and following a hint from Schiller makes Lothario, her nephew, say that the true *schöne Seele* is his sister Natalie. The implied criticism is that the aunt is over-concerned with herself, with her own salvation, that she has not the self-forgetfulness of the genuine saint, no adequate sense of the suffering in the world. This is one of the dangers of inwardness that we shall find also affecting some of our later subjects in their humanistic 'Bildung'. If the *schöne Seele* represents the Pietistic strain in eighteenth-century German culture, her uncle, described in her 'Confessions', stands for the complementary rationalistic movement. His character is summed up in his maxim: 'A man's greatest merit is to control the circumstances of his life as fully as possible, and to reduce their influence on him to a minimum.' Life itself is an art for him, and the highest of all. His house and estate are the perfection of order and good taste, the expression of his energy and practical ability. In his life there is no room for longing or for brooding over the power of destiny. Longing, according to one mouth-piece of the author, is to be converted into calm contemplation. Fate, as three different strangers have all told Wilhelm in successive books of the novel – he meets them all again at the end of Book VII, when he learns about the secret society, The Tower, which they serve, and which has been exercising a benevolent supervision over him – fate is a useless concept, an imaginary excuse for lack of self-control. A man's fortune is in his own hands, to be shaped by him as raw material is shaped by the artist. These thoughts are symbolized in various ways in the Uncle's house, described in Book VII, above all in the Hall of the Past, where Mignon, in one important aspect the personification of longing, dies and is laid to rest. 'Children, go back into life!' the funeral choir sings, 'Flee from night! Day and joy and duration are the lot of the living.'

The last two books are full of directly didactic passages like this, and the characters seem to be there mainly in order to speak them. These figures have nearly all been gradually brought before us first in the preceding books, and four of them turn out to be brothers and sisters, the four nephews and nieces of the *schöne Seele*, who have lost their parents early and been brought up in the house of the Uncle by a French Abbé. Natalie is the 'Amazone' of Book IV, Lothario is

Aurelie's lost lover in the same book, the Countess of Book III is a younger sister and Philine's boy-follower in Book II, strange to relate, is their irresponsible young brother. Eventually we learn that the Harpist and Mignon are the brother and niece of the Uncle's old friend, the Marchese, who also appears, and Wilhelm is finally taken into the family as Natalie's husband. The four brothers and sisters have been educated by their rationalistic great-uncle and their tutor the Abbé, whose origins are mysterious and who has certainly lost his faith, without religious instruction and on Rousseauistic principles. The first step in education, says the Abbé, is to discover a child's wishes and inclinations and enable him to satisfy them as soon as possible, 'so that the pupil, if he has been mistaken, may discover his error soon enough, and when he has found what suits him, may hold fast to it and develop in that direction with all the greater determination'. The children have been kept out of the way of their introspective aunt and she complains, not without reason, that the Uncle is more tolerant in principle than in practice. The results of this trial and error method of education have been good with two of the children, Lothario and Natalie, and not so good with the rather empty-headed Countess and the cheerful impulsive idiot Friedrich. Natalie, discussing her education with Wilhelm (VIII, 3), says that as far back as she remembers her chief interest has been in people and their difficulties, not in nature or art, and her unreflecting impulse has always been to help them, and not with money, but with the things they needed. But though the Abbé's method had suited her, she does not use it herself, and lets the many girls and young women she has around her find out everything by experience.

Anyone who does not help at the moment seems to me never to help, and anyone who does not give advice at the moment, never to advise. In the same way it seems to me necessary to formulate and make the children learn certain laws, which give a certain support in life. In fact I would almost go so far as to say that it is better to go wrong by following rules than by being driven this way and that by the caprices of our nature.

Lothario rather reminds us of Goethe's admiring description to Eckermann (12 March 1828) of the young Englishmen in Weimar, who are no cleverer and no better than other people, he admits, but unlike so many young Germans, 'they have the courage to be what nature made them. Nothing in them is misshapen and twisted,

nothing half-hearted and perverse. No matter what kind of people they are, they are always complete human beings.' He puts it down to their tradition of personal freedom, national pride and above all a freer education and early development than most Germans enjoy. Byron of course fascinated him as the picture of untrammelled English genius. It is typical that in the last chapter of the novel, the old Count, whose memories are confused, greets Wilhelm as an English lord. Lothario is not a poet, but he combines the highest cultivation with the love of adventure in the cause of freedom – 'If an action was not surrounded by a thousand dangers, it did not seem worthy of notice.' His distinguished service as a volunteer with the French contingent in the American War of Independence has already been mentioned. It had cost him a great part of his fortune, and when Wilhelm first meets him he is busily improving his estate, convinced now that 'here or nowhere is America', i.e. an opportunity for useful activity. His utilitarian tendency is reflected in the unlovely additions he has made to his old mansion and in his impatience with medieval survivals such as the exclusive right of the nobility to own land and their exemption from land tax – the kind of thing that Freiherr vom Stein was soon to do away with. He also contemplates the freeing of his peasantry, but not over-hastily, and not to his own detriment. The death of the Uncle has brought him so much new land that he sells some to Werner and Wilhelm, and Wilhelm is to manage it as an investment – so in this region 'noble' estates can evidently be sold already to 'Bürger'. Lothario is also, we hear, keenly interested in public affairs and is in touch with leading figures. He is himself a born leader, who inspires and invigorates those around him. We hear that the Tower is to turn into a sort of international consortium for the protection of land-owners against the risks of revolution, clearly a veiled reference to the plight of aristocratic refugees from the French Revolution, which is otherwise never mentioned. In the last chapter of the *Lehrjahre* Lothario puts forward the idea of a new 'Bund', an association of the old 'Tower' members and Wilhelm for the furtherance of 'worthy' activity for the public good. This is one of the bodies behind the emigration project in the *Wanderjahre*.

'A man is never happy until his unlimited strivings find their own limits' is a maxim of Jarno's (VIII, 5), and Lothario finds it true not only in his public activities, but also in love. To Aurelie, on his return

from America, he seemed to be used to success with women. We hear of a farmer's daughter before her, and after her Therese and her supposed mother, living abroad, then Lydie and a discarded lady who persuaded her divorced husband to fight a duel with him. After all this varied experience, the type of woman he wants as a wife, a type personified in Therese, is a good housekeeper. There are several parallels in Goethe to the passage describing his ideal, in the *Zweite Epistel*, for instance, or in *Hermann und Dorothea*, and it seems to have been Goethe's own. Therese is in fact not only an excellent housekeeper but an expert in estate management, a woman with a career of her own. She has little imagination, but clear ideas and strong common sense. It is from her that we have perhaps the most illuminating comment on the character of Wilhelm (VIII, 4). She finds him very like Natalie, with the same eagerness for something better, 'by which we ourselves bring into being the good that we think we are finding'. Wilhelm's life, she says, has been one of endless seeking and not finding. But it is not a futile seeking, but a wonderfully good-hearted seeking which makes him think people can give him what can only come from himself.

Lothario, Natalie and their friends are clearly meant to be taken as models of 'Humanität', as men and women who are 'noble' in the sense of Goethe's poem *Das Göttliche*:

Der edle Mensch
Sei hilfreich und gut.
Unermüdlich schaff' er
Das Nützliche, Rechte.*

The intellectual and moral foundation beneath these books is the ethical idealism of Goethe and Schiller at the height of their powers, the lasting importance of which for the best minds in Germany in later generations will be the main topic of all our later chapters. The thoughts and aspirations of Lothario and Natalie have a wider scope than those of their great-uncle. The Uncle walls off his estate, like a monastery of reason and art, from the chaotic world outside, but they have the cosmopolitan spirit of the younger generation. The idea of the Tower, so fantastic for a modern reader, does not seem quite so unconvincing a piece of literary apparatus, contrived for the sole

* The noble man should be helpful and kind, should tirelessly strive for what is useful and right.

purpose of imposing a kind of unity on the revised novel, if one looks into the history of secret societies in Goethe's day. High hopes were entertained for a time by people as cool-headed as Lessing from Freemasonry, it had a certain vogue for short periods in Weimar, and the Illuminati, the Rosicrucians and other secret societies had evidently a considerable following. Goethe's poem *Die Geheimnisse*, of which an impressive fragment was written in 1784, was inspired by similar hopes of a humanistic substitute for a vanishing religion. Pierre Byezukhov in *War and Peace*, reflecting a Russian continuation of the tradition, is still looking in the same direction for a key to the meaning of life. What was common to all these movements was the attempt to harmonize the conflicts due to religious, national and social differences.

Aesthetically the revised version of the novel, the *Lehrjahre*, is marred by the introduction of several other features, as well as the improbable secret society, which were well-tried attractions of the popular German novel of that time, an attack by robbers, a fire, motifs like abduction and incest, the linking-up of most of the characters as members of a single family and other incredible coincidences. As Max Wundt long since pointed out, Goethe's essential subject in the later books is the presentation of an ideal way of life and the hero's connection with it becomes more and more external.

It seems as if the author had not had the patience to show the ideals he has in mind emerging and ripening in Wilhelm himself, by making him discover them in active life and make them his own. At any rate he chooses the short cut of parading this ideal before him in living examples[...] The question is hardly raised as to how far he is capable of realizing these ideals in his own life.¹⁰

There is naturally a love interest. Several of the characters fall in and out of love with each other in quick succession and the loose ends are tied up in no less than four marriages, three of them of an aristocrat with a plebeian. Here one might perhaps speak of 'intellectualized sex'. These later books

do not strike home to our imagination. Natalie, for instance, is a completely ideal character, who educates and loses Mignon, who hears of Wilhelm's adventure with Philine, furthers his match with Therese, and ultimately marries him herself, with unaltered serene equanimity. Wilhelm's early life is full of the substantiality of experience; his later education is theoretical.

Hence we cannot help feeling that in his adventures with the troupe he was a real person among real persons, while in the later part, and in the *Wanderjahre*, he is an unreal ghost walking among other ghosts.¹¹

However imperfect the form of the later books of the *Lehrjahre* may be, the view of life conveyed in them to the patient Wilhelm is, as we have said, the very essence of Weimar humanism, profoundly interesting as such even for a Marxist critic like Georg Lukács, who sees it all as part of 'the heroic struggle of great bourgeois artists against the hostility to their art of capitalist society', and the expression of the hopes for the renewal of human society aroused in Goethe's best contemporaries by the French Revolution. It is a picture of a Utopia, he says, but of one truly founded on elements from existing reality. It is like one of those rare communities spoken of by Schiller in the last of the *Letters on aesthetic education*, where 'conduct is not governed by the unthinking imitation of others' behaviour, but by the fineness of a man's own nature', his nature corrected by wise education, and by the self-corrective processes of experience of life. The leading idea of the theorists of the Tower is the inability of the individual to live happily for himself alone. For one thing he, like everyone else, will be gifted in some directions but not in others, so that in any civilized society there must be scope for all kinds of complementary activities. The division of labour on which middle-class society is founded is therefore reaffirmed, but the ideal of harmony is not forgotten, the harmony of mind and body in the individual (this more particularly in the *Wanderjahre* with its insistence on crafts) and the harmony of the diversified activities of a society. It is mankind that is infinite in faculty, not the individual, and a man's first aim should be to discover his true vocation. The Tower has allowed its protégé Wilhelm to do this freely, following the Abbé's principle, by experiment, a painful, fumbling process for those in whom there is most to develop, but the only way in which we get to know ourselves, namely by action. The Abbé's Rousseauistic ideas are not fully accepted by Jarno and Natalie, as we have seen, which means that Goethe presents his Utopia, Lukács says, with a certain irony. No one disputes however that the beginning of wisdom for Wilhelm is the discovery of Felix, the realization that he is a father, responsible for another now and in the future, necessarily one-sided himself, but a member of an enduring society which aspires to

harmony. This is a new form of 'Bürgerlichkeit' distinguished from the old, as Korff says, by a higher spiritual awareness, a fuller consciousness of their citizenship, which gives their life a meaning unrealized by those who nurse their emotions, like Werther, or without talent, like the young Wilhelm, live for art. They find their satisfaction in real life, unlike those against whom the hard saying in Wilhelm's 'letter of apprenticeship' (VII, 9) is directed: 'A man who works only with signs is a pedant, a hypocrite or a botcher.'

Does that not really mean that this so-called 'Bildungsroman' is not quite what such a novel is generally supposed to be? The question was raised in an illuminating article by Kurt May in 1957, which brought out in a detailed analysis the full meaning of Max Wundt's much earlier criticism, already quoted. Wundt had said that Goethe, in the last books of the novel, only brings various complementary ideals before Wilhelm's eyes without asking how far Wilhelm is capable of realising them in his own life. May goes further and says that Goethe did not mean his hero to become finally a man of harmonious all-round culture such as Humboldt had envisaged in his famous youthful essay (see pp. 15-18), although this has always been assumed by critics in general, knowing Goethe's own reputation as 'uomo universale' in the Renaissance tradition. Goethe did indeed at various times show himself in his writings to be attracted by the harmonious personality ideal, for instance in the Winckelmann essay of 1801, but he says there that to realise such an ideal had been reserved for the Ancients alone. Schiller on the other hand had advanced the 'wholeness' ideal in the sixth letter on Aesthetic Education in 1795 with a passion similar to that of Hölderlin a little later in his *Hyperion*, but 'the Goethean "Bildungsroman", on the contrary, ends with the recognition that a man of his day could not develop the full harmony of his nature and would do better to aim at being, and to have himself educated as, a fragment, a single part'.¹² This does not mean that Goethe had failed in what he was attempting, but that he had never been aiming at what his critics have supposed:

It is only these numerous interpreters of Goethe's book who, in good faith, have seen a harmonious education as realized at the end of the *Lehrjahre*, not the author himself. It has been widely assumed that in this 'classical' novel the classical personality ideal must have been realized, that in an idealistic work

of art the idea of man must surely be made to triumph. Goethe however, on the contrary, has shown Wilhelm as cultivating himself only in the measure permitted by his limited capacities and potentialities. The idea of man as such cannot be perfectly attained in a single individual[...]and Goethe has, in the *Lehrjahre*, written a novel round the belief that the modern humanistic ideal of harmonious 'Bildung' has to be abandoned.¹³

The realist Goethe recognized then that we must content ourselves in education with something less than 'restoring the totality of our nature', as Schiller had demanded. He left Wilhelm, at the end of the *Lehrjahre*, not already at the desired goal, but with the prospect of proving himself, in the company of his son Felix, his wife Natalie and her friends and through the acceptance of a limited task in civil society, a reasonably cultivated person, some time in the future. This made a continuation, such as Goethe eventually wrote in the *Wanderjahre*, an artistic necessity.