This essay proposes to discuss the social factors contributing to the rise of the Bildungsroman or "novel of education" at the end of the eighteenth century. How and why does it appear? In what respect can we say it constitutes a distinct development in the history of the novel? What does its rapid expansion, to the point of its saturating European fiction, as a better part of the nineteenth, be the symptom of a structural crisis at the genesis of modernity. The crisis appears, undoubtedly, as a familiar one: its locus is in the "youth", who have become a problem, the problem of modern society as it lurched in to being born. "Virtually without notice, in the dreams and nightmares of the so-called double revolution, Europe plunges into Modernity, but without possessing a culture of modernity", and so saunters onto the scene the youth, fresh-faced and beardless, to fill the vacuum as a new signifier. Moretti poses a simple question: why does the definitive narrative form of modernity, the novel, choose as its subject the youth? What conditions allow for the youth to become the archetypal subject of the modern novel? What features do these Bildungsroman share in common with one another? Their protagonists, invariably, are presented as manifesting two characteristics: "mobility" and "interiority". Moretti's argument, briefly, is that the youth, insofar as he is destined to enter into an economy premised on exchange, on the permanent upheaval and circulation of objects and states, must realign himself both as "mobile" and as "interior"; that is, that he must have an essence separate from the social sphere and that he must at some time be able to navigate, with all due plasticity and spontaneity, the social sphere itself. This opens a dialectical tension of sorts. Taken in itself, the notion of "interiority" suggests the self-sufficiency of the subject, who would, it follows, lead a for-itself existence severed from any economic relations qua relations with the other, while "mobility", alternatively, suggests that the locus of the subject is radically unstable and exists only as a shifting signifier, the site of an infinite chain of substitutions, the site of an infinite chain of substitutions, its rapid expansion, to the point of its saturating European fiction, as a better part of the nineteenth, be the symptom of a structural crisis at the genesis of modernity.
in this mobility without himself being caught up in its current.

Let us be specific: youth has always existed both as a biological category and a concept. We may recall how in the Alcibiades, among other Platonic dialogues, Socrates is concerned with that time, important by any standards, when the youth has finished his education and is preparing to enter into the world. Is he ready? Has he sufficiently prepared himself for the exigencies of political life? Has he realized his potential or will he go out into the world as he came into, crying for his mother, for his life? Alcibiades, however, is entering into politics. An aristocrat of an ancient lineage, he will fulfill a structure as old as Athens itself. His problem is one of many along the stations of life’s way, and is not constituted as the problem, the antagonism which in its resistance to any incorporation receives its own entelechy. The youth of the nineteenth century, conversely, is defined by this antagonism: in the bustling city whose perimeters are his own any simple, unqualified incorporation into tradition is no longer productive. Insofar as the ‘modern’ is that which resists—in the most accepted, banal of senses—tradition, youth emerges as its signifier.

Yet the pedagogical figures brought forth in the novel, precisely in their being hidden, in their being incorporated as a kind of super-ego both inside and outside, seem to provide a very promising point of departure for such an attempt. Indeed, if one must become at once “normal” and “other” than the father, there must be a shift away from a mere repetition of the father’s existence. This is a necessary expression of an exchange economy— if it does not occur, the youth cannot become the permanently dynamic subject of modernity he needs to become, whether as artist or businessman. For the expansion of capital to go unimpeded there must be an exploitative and entrepreneurial drive within the subject. Wilhelm Meister, as a product of the Enlightenment, the subject must be mobile in his recognition of a “permanent revolution”, and individual in his refusal to give up his own self to this upheaval. There must be, therefore, a contradiction between self and society, but this contradiction must be the structural condition of society itself, as the persistence of this contradiction is precisely what generates the new. In what Moretti calls the ‘interiorization of contradiction’, the youth learns to live with the structural imbalance at the heart of modern experience; he normalizes it, compromising his self-sufficiency while never submitting entirely to mere fixity, becoming the dynamic—but nevertheless legitimated and legal—subject of modernity. Moretti, however, questions the possibility of a psychoanalytic reading of the form of the novel embodied by Wilhelm Meister. If the Bildungsroman is the building of the ego, the sedimentation of experience into a single entity, then psychoanalysis always looks beyond towards some ‘other’ figure not present within the text. Moretti poses the question:

How is it that we have Freudian interpretations of tragedy and myth, of fairy tale and comedy—yet nothing comparable for the novel? For the same reason, I believe, that we have no solid Freudian analysis of youth: because the raison d’être of psychoanalysis lies in breaking up the psyche into opposing “forces”—whereas the novel and the novel have opposite task of fusing, or at least bringing together, the conflicting features of individual personality. Because, in other words, psychoanalysis always looks beyond the Ego—whereas the Bildungsroman attempts to build the Ego, and makes it the indisputable center of its own structure.

Yet the pedagogical figures brought forth in the novel, precisely in their being hidden, in their being incorporated as a kind of super-ego both inside and outside, seem to provide a very promising point of departure for such an attempt. Indeed, if one must become at once “normal” and “other” than the father, there must be a shift away from a mere repetition of the father’s existence. This is a necessary expression of an exchange economy— if it does not occur, the youth cannot become the permanently dynamic subject of modernity he needs to become, whether as artist or businessman. For the expansion of capital to go unimpeded there must be an exploitative and entrepreneurial drive within the subject. Wilhelm Meister, as a product of the Enlightenment, the subject must be mobile in his recognition of a “permanent revolution”, and individual in his refusal to give up his own self to this upheaval. There must be, therefore, a contradiction between self and society, but this contradiction must be the structural condition of society itself, as the persistence of this contradiction is precisely what generates the new. In what Moretti calls the ‘interiorization of contradiction’, the youth learns to live with the structural imbalance at the heart of modern experience; he normalizes it, compromising his self-sufficiency while never submitting entirely to mere fixity, becoming the dynamic—but nevertheless legitimated and legal—subject of modernity.

Yet the pedagogical figures brought forth in the novel, precisely in their being hidden, in their being incorporated as a kind of super-ego both inside and outside, seem to provide a very promising point of departure for such an attempt. Indeed, if one must become at once “normal” and “other” than the father, there must be, therefore, a contradiction between self and society, but this contradiction must be the structural condition of society itself, as the persistence of this contradiction is precisely what generates the new. In what Moretti calls the ‘interiorization of contradiction’, the youth learns to live with the
err, to enjoy life, in order that he may be convinced that his education, his entrance into “normal” society, is in fact self-realization. That Wilhelm’s life is a pedagogical experiment which incorporates a few “chance” meetings into a super-ego that leads Wilhelm down that right path—towards a “normal” yet “fulfilling” life of family that serves as a compromise between work and pleasure, conformity and individuality—is both a confirmation of Old Meister’s wishes for him to work hard like him while offering him the fantasy that he is doing the opposite. As the abbe, one of the pedagogues of whose experiments Wilhelm’s life is in large part the product of, reminds him: “It is the very best way to take people out of themselves and, by way of a detour, return them to themselves.” Such is the structure of Wilhelm’s education, and the “detour” is the narrative itself. To become a “normal” member of society, Wilhelm must be led out of himself, must believe he is operating against the grain of his father’s wishes when, indeed, he ends up appeasing him completely. This requires locked doors, forbidden towers, the magical space of the theater, a journey away from the father so that at the decisive moment a repetition occurs and he is reintegrated into society, is “returned to himself.” Thus, like Hamlet, Wilhelm must fulfill his father’s injunctions or be haunted by guilt, by the specter of radical lack in the face of the real, and the hauntedontological presence of the father that permeates the entire novel, abating only after his emergence from behind a curtain at the point of Wilhelm’s apprenticeship into the Freemasonry, can only be satisfied and returned to the grave when all hopes of the poetic existence are dispelled and Wilhelm faces responsibility and becomes, in other words, a father.

“Children in well-established and well-organized homes feel rather like rats and mice: They seek out cracks and crannies to find their way to forbidden dainties. The furtive and intense fear with which they are filled is one of the joys of childhood.” In these words Goethe has given us a formulation of what, at the base, structures the entire novel: Wilhelm’s attempt to carve out a hidden, poetic reality, a for-itself existence that operates in the dusty, obscure corners of the rationally ordered framework provided by Old Meister. Anything either forbidden by Old Meister, or simply unobserved, becomes a repository of erotic energy: it is what cannot be surveyed by him, and gains its seductive power precisely by being “other” than him. The irony of the matter is that this is precisely what the father wishes of his son—for him to experiment, to err, to explore, as though in secret, so that the threat of punishment looms—like a church steeple above a village—without ever needing to be актуated. In an effort to restrict pleasure, to submit it to the demands of a rational calculus, Wilhelm needs to experience for himself the extraordinary pains that results from a libidinal economy over-invested in its object. One should never place all one’s capital in a single venture, but in order to learn such things one needs to undergo them: an active pedagogue is simply insufficient, liable to force immobile, un-individualized subjects without any dynamism to speak of. This is precisely what occurs with the puppet-theatre in Wilhelm’s youth, and the notion that Old Meister disapproves of such a useless activity is viable only inasmuch as he needs to appeal to disapprov of it. Not only does Old Meister express satisfaction in his son for seeming to have such a ready memory—indeed, he arranges for the lieutenant to initiate his son into the mysteries of the theatre while pretending he knows nothing of the whole affair. Old Meister, in other words, wants his son to be independent, to explore his talents, but wants to appear to disapprove of such an enterprise, which is precisely what he needs to do after his emergence from behind a curtain at the point of Wilhelm’s apprenticeship into the Freemasonry, can only be satisfied and returned to the grave when all hopes of the poetic existence are dispelled and Wilhelm faces responsibility and becomes, in other words, a father.

“Children in well-established and well-organized homes feel rather like rats and mice: They seek out cracks and crannies to find their way to forbidden dainties. The furtive and intense fear with which they are filled is one of the joys of childhood.” In these words Goethe has given us a formulation of what, at the base, structures the entire novel: Wilhelm’s attempt to carve out a hidden, poetic reality, a for-itself existence that operates in the dusty, obscure corners of the rationally ordered framework provided by Old Meister. Anything either forbidden by Old Meister, or simply unobserved, becomes a repository of erotic energy: it is what cannot be surveyed by him, and gains its seductive power precisely by being “other” than him. The irony of the matter is that this is precisely what the father wishes of his son—for him to experiment, to err, to explore, as though in secret, so that the threat of punishment looms—like a church steeple above a village—without ever needing to be актуated. In an effort to restrict pleasure, to submit it to the demands of a rational calculus, Wilhelm needs to experience for himself the extraordinary pains that results from a libidinal economy over-invested in its object. One should never place all one’s capital in a single venture, but in order to learn such things one needs to undergo them: an active pedagogue is simply insufficient, liable to force immobile, un-individualized subjects without any dynamism to speak of. This is precisely what occurs with the puppet-theatre in Wilhelm’s youth, and the notion that Old Meister disapproves of such a useless activity is viable only inasmuch as he needs to appeal to disapprov of it. Not only does Old Meister express satisfaction in his son for seeming to have such a ready memory—indeed, he arranges for the lieutenant to initiate his son into the mysteries of the theatre while pretending he knows nothing of the whole affair. Old Meister, in other words, wants his son to be independent, to explore his talents, but wants to appear to disapprove of such an enterprise, which is precisely what he needs to do after his emergence from behind a curtain at the point of Wilhelm’s apprenticeship into the Freemasonry, can only be satisfied and returned to the grave when all hopes of the poetic existence are dispelled and Wilhelm faces responsibility and becomes, in other words, a father.

err, to enjoy life, in order that he may be convinced that his education, his entrance into “normal” society, is in fact self-realization. That Wilhelm’s life is a pedagogical experiment which incorporates a few “chance” meetings into a super-ego that leads Wilhelm down that right path—towards a “normal” yet “fulfilling” life of family that serves as a compromise between work and pleasure, conformity and individuality—is both a confirmation of Old Meister’s wishes for him to work hard like him while offering him the fantasy that he is doing the opposite. As the abbe, one of the pedagogues of whose experiments Wilhelm’s life is in large part the product of, reminds him: “It is the very best way to take people out of themselves and, by way of a detour, return them to themselves.” Such is the structure of Wilhelm’s education, and the “detour” is the narrative itself. To become a “normal” member of society, Wilhelm must be led out of himself, must believe he is operating against the grain of his father’s wishes when, indeed, he ends up appeasing him completely. This requires locked doors, forbidden towers, the magical space of the theater, a journey away from the father so that at the decisive moment a repetition occurs and he is reintegrated into society, is “returned to himself.” Thus, like Hamlet, Wilhelm must fulfill his father’s injunctions or be haunted by guilt, by the specter of radical lack in the face of the real, and the hauntedontological presence of the father that permeates the entire novel, abating only after his emergence from behind a curtain at the point of Wilhelm’s apprenticeship into the Freemasonry, can only be satisfied and returned to the grave when all hopes of the poetic existence are dispelled and Wilhelm faces responsibility and becomes, in other words, a father.
then, is the illusion of choice, which is always positioned in relation to the forbidden. Thus Wilhelm, whose “normal” life is that of a petty bourgeois in a gaudy household with a meticulously ordered room—teleological books arranged uncut by his bedside—chooses the locked door behind which lies the dainty foods and the boxes of puppets, and in so doing fulfills not only the promise of the door but those two modern demands of “mobility” and “individuation”.

Goethe, to complicate things further, prevents the reader from discovering whether the initiatory gift of the theater was actually planned by the Freemasonry, the pedagogic guild responsible for Wilhelm’s heuristic education, as a direct remedy, a new object of desire, in response to the traumatic loss of his grandfather’s art collection. Is Wilhelm’s entire past, his interests, the locked doors left briefly opened, merely a series of carefully orchestrated events designed to teach him how to live as a subject of this new, “modern” order? The figure of the lieutenant who designed and controlled the puppets, and who—although one can stake this claim only tentatively—seems to resurface throughout the novel as one of the stranger’s pedagogic prostheses, is both the giver of the theater, the initiator of Wilhelm into psychic life (Goethe, characteristically, was a great proponent of Rousseau), of a “return to the self” that lies the dainty foods and the boxes of puppets, and in so doing fulfills not only the promise of the door but the authority of the father—that the subject enjoys this play, which of course is essential to his education; and so if it is to be directed at all it must be directed by a phantom, by a thing that gains its power precisely in its being absent from view.

So what then are the structural conditions of Wilhelm’s education? The conspiring forces that shape Wilhelm’s existence—the abbé, Jarno, the officer—all serve negative pedagogical functions, acting in a sense as Rousseauian instigators of a true nature (Goethe, characteristically, was a great proponent of Rousseau), of a “return to the self” that uses pedagogy precisely in order to create a natural self, except that under this new order Nature requires and not constituted in relation to the authority of the father—that the subject enjoys this play, which of course is essential to his education; and so if it is to be directed at all it must be directed by a phantom, by a thing that gains its power precisely in its being absent from view.

So what then are the structural conditions of Wilhelm’s education? The conspiring forces that shape Wilhelm’s existence—the abbé, Jarno, the officer—serve negative pedagogical functions, acting in a sense as Rousseauian instigators of a true nature (Goethe, characteristically, was a great proponent of Rousseau), of a “return to the self” that uses pedagogy precisely in order to create a natural self, except that under this new order Nature requires and not constituted in relation to the authority of the father—that the subject enjoys this play, which of course is essential to his education; and so if it is to be directed at all it must be directed by a phantom, by a thing that gains its power precisely in its being absent from view.

So what then are the structural conditions of Wilhelm’s education? The conspiring forces that shape Wilhelm’s existence—the abbé, Jarno, the officer—all serve negative pedagogical functions, acting in a sense as Rousseauian instigators of a true nature (Goethe, characteristically, was a great proponent of Rousseau), of a “return to the self” that uses pedagogy precisely in order to create a natural self, except that under this new order Nature requires and not constituted in relation to the authority of the father—that the subject enjoys this play, which of course is essential to his education; and so if it is to be directed at all it must be directed by a phantom, by a thing that gains its power precisely in its being absent from view.

So what then are the structural conditions of Wilhelm’s education? The conspiring forces that shape Wilhelm’s existence—the abbé, Jarno, the officer—all serve negative pedagogical functions, acting in a sense as Rousseauian instigators of a true nature (Goethe, characteristically, was a great proponent of Rousseau), of a “return to the self” that uses pedagogy precisely in order to create a natural self, except that under this new order Nature requires and not constituted in relation to the authority of the father—that the subject enjoys this play, which of course is essential to his education; and so if it is to be directed at all it must be directed by a phantom, by a thing that gains its power precisely in its being absent from view.
then how is one to return to nature? Wilhelm’s strongest obsessions with Teutonic knights and his grandfather’s house are therefore symptoms of an extreme unease at subject/object relations under capitalist modes of production. If, coming out of Rousseau, culture is contrary to the good, an accretion of bad habits and affectations that bars the subject from full self-presence, then how is one to return to nature if nature itself is technologically transformed into a permanent circulation of things which bear value only in relation to an abstract system of codification?

The subject of Capital, of the Aufklärung, must be able to bear the traumatic circulation of objects, or otherwise develop a spiritual attachment to that very circulation. Thus Werner, who thinks “of his trade and business activities in terms of spiritual elevation”5, offers one response to the radical loss of meaning that occurs when Nature becomes subject both to a capitalist mode of production and to a body of knowledge that seeks to organize it in relation to a rational calculus of ends. Nature ceases to be nature when it is known, when it is submitted to a technical apparatus. The problem of a pedagogy in which the object of education is a “return to nature” is thus the problem of an organization that resists all direct mirroring of the narrative process, the subject must believe only in necessity but must somehow insert a reason, a logic, so that the finished product—necessity that is—remains itself and the subject itself is like the puppeteer, and Wilhelm like the puppet being directed by a necessity that he only believes he can influence. The only freedom he has is the freedom to do exactly what was planned for him, and yet he is still free to do it, since there is no one explicitly directing his movements other than shadowy figures who perennially emerge from street corners and from behind curtains to surreptitiously offer their suggestions.

Thus, at a certain point, the distinction between pedagogue and pupil is supposed to dissolve, or rather the former is supposed to be incorporated into the latter as a super-ego. Overshadowing everything else, it is the hauntological presence of the father that emerges as a response to the trauma of castration: the loss of the plenary space provided by Wilhelm’s grandfather’s art collection, which loss Wilhelm recalls as “the first sad days” of his life, where “one thing after the other to a capitalist mode of production and to a body of knowledge that seeks to organize it in relation to a rational calculus of ends. Nature ceases to be nature when it is known, when it is submitted to a technical apparatus. The problem of a pedagogy in which the object of education is a “return to nature” is thus the problem of an organization that resists all direct mirroring of the narrative process, the subject must believe only in necessity but must somehow insert a reason, a logic, so that the finished product—necessity that is—remains itself and the subject itself is like the puppeteer, and Wilhelm like the puppet being directed by a necessity that he only believes he can influence. The only freedom he has is the freedom to do exactly what was planned for him, and yet he is still free to do it, since there is no one explicitly directing his movements other than shadowy figures who perennially emerge from street corners and from behind curtains to surreptitiously offer their suggestions.

Thus, at a certain point, the distinction between pedagogue and pupil is supposed to dissolve, or rather the former is supposed to be incorporated into the latter as a super-ego. Overshadowing everything else, it is the hauntological presence of the father that emerges as a response to the trauma of castration: the loss of the plenary space provided by Wilhelm’s grandfather’s art collection, which loss Wilhelm recalls as “the first sad days” of his life, where “one thing after the other to a capitalist mode of production and to a body of knowledge that seeks to organize it in relation to a rational calculus of ends. Nature ceases to be nature when it is known, when it is submitted to a technical apparatus. The problem of a pedagogy in which the object of education is a “return to nature” is thus the problem of an organization that resists all direct mirroring of the narrative process, the subject must believe only in necessity but must somehow insert a reason, a logic, so that the finished product—necessity that is—remains itself and the subject itself is like the puppeteer, and Wilhelm like the puppet being directed by a necessity that he only believes he can influence. The only freedom he has is the freedom to do exactly what was planned for him, and yet he is still free to do it, since there is no one explicitly directing his movements other than shadowy figures who perennially emerge from street corners and from behind curtains to surreptitiously offer their suggestions.

Thus, at a certain point, the distinction between pedagogue and pupil is supposed to dissolve, or rather the former is supposed to be incorporated into the latter as a super-ego. Overshadowing everything else, it is the hauntological presence of the father that emerges as a response to the trauma of castration: the loss of the plenary space provided by Wilhelm’s grandfather’s art collection, which loss Wilhelm recalls as “the first sad days” of his life, where “one thing after the

---

5 Meister, 38
6 Meister, 38
7 Meister, 38
8 Meister, 19
The apparent permanence of the systematic space giving way to empty walls, is a castration that must be replaced by a series of new, substituting objects that must reciprocate his love absolutely so that the phenomenon cannot be repeated. The painting of the sick prince comes to substitute for the phallic mother (who loves Wilhelm, but cannot ex-press it entirely because of Old Meister, who stands as the immutable third object barring his unfettered access), is severed from him by Old Meister, thereby castrating him and leaving a traumatic lack of the phallic object. The course of the novel is an attempt to regain this object (already in the painting represented as impossible); as Wilhelm says: “How I pity an unhappy woman being joined to someone other than the one her heart felt worthy of her true, pure love!”), which takes place in the interstitial zone between trauma and the “true” love of Natalie. Here it is clear the way in which Wilhelm runs through various ersatz phaluses, ranging from actual people to objects signifying them in their physical absence, before regaining his lost object at the end of the novel, where past and present intertwine and the threshold is breached. It is no accident that the figure of the Amazon, the Lacanian object that is presented for the exotic end of desire, glimpsed obliquely through Wilhelm’s feverish fantasies, is only finally known at the precise point in which Wilhelm rediscovers his grandfather’s art collection. This is the point at which Wilhelm, and one is entirely unsure whether he means the father’s bride or the Amazon—but of course, one phalus is replaceable by another. The painting, it should be noted, is blank instances placed in the anteroom, the space where one passes to get somewhere else, and this somewhere else is the repository of the true object, the imaginary space beyond the real where the prince may kill his father and get the bride.

One cannot simply reduce the narrative to this with the flick of an arabesque. Many objects and ideas that we are presented with the mind with the phallic presence: the aristocracy, the grandfather’s house, the Teutonic knights, poetry and Natalie, but only the last of these may replace the mother. The fact that Felix begins to “weigh heavy on him” during all this is, additionally, indicative of the immutable presence of some third object, which is always dangerous close to preventing the pure bond between two objects to form. Felix’s refusal to let go of him is a sign of his new responsibility in the face of such a return to the pure ego-space of childhood. Prepared for disappointment, he is unwilling to let go of what he already has.

But of all objects that serve as substitutes for the lost mother-object, poetry and the theater are perhaps the most appealing, serving in a sense to create an interior object autonomous from the vicissitudes of external reality. Wilhelm’s very conception of the poetic life, which he presents as a for-itself existence divorced from any economic considerations, constituting a “fund of inner riches” that can only be given in the form of a pure gift, is an attempt to forego, like Epicetus, the need for libidinal energy invested in external objects, which under capitalist modes of production are especially difficult to fix in place. The poetic object acts, in the precise psychoanalytic sense, as a substitute for the love object. If one produces the very phaluses one desires then one has no need of the other. If external reality is liable to transform itself in spite of one’s efforts at forging immovable bonds with objects, autonomy from the field of objects is necessary as a defense mechanism to absorb potential damages from these external sources. An interior life becomes necessary; difference becomes pure potentiality. The subject is now as he is in himself, and can only be grasped obliquely through Wilhelm’s feverish fantasies, is only finally known at the precise point in which Wilhelm rediscovers his grandfather’s art collection. This is the point at which Wilhelm, and one is entirely unsure whether he means the father’s bride or the Amazon—but of course, one phalus is replaceable by another. The painting, it should be noted, is blank instances placed in the anteroom, the space where one passes to get somewhere else, and this somewhere else is the repository of the true object, the imaginary space beyond the real where the prince may kill his father and get the bride.

How wrong you are, my friend, in thinking that a work, the ex-press of which means to fill one’s whole soul, can possibly be produced in odd spots of snatched time. Oh no, a poet must live entirely for himself and in his beloved subjects! Endowed by heaven with a fund of inner riches, he must labor to increase this by living, happy and undisturbed, with his own treasure. No man can accept what he has not earned. Wilhelm’s refusal to let go of him is a sign of his new responsibility in the face of such a return to the pure ego-space of childhood prepared for disappointment, he is unwilling to let go of what he already has.

But of all objects that serve as substitutes for the lost mother-object, poetry and the theater are perhaps the most appealing, serving in a sense to create an interior object autonomous from the vicissitudes of external reality. Wilhelm’s very conception of the poetic life, which he presents as a for-itself existence divorced from any economic considerations, constituting a “fund of inner riches” that can only be given in the form of a pure gift, is an attempt to forego, like Epicetus, the need for libidinal energy invested in external objects, which under capitalist modes of production are especially difficult to fix in place. The poetic object acts, in the precise psychoanalytic sense, as a substitute for the love object. If one produces the very phaluses one desires then one has no need of the other. If external reality is liable to transform itself in spite of one’s efforts at forging immovable bonds with objects, autonomy from the field of objects is necessary as a defense mechanism to absorb potential damages from these external sources. An interior life becomes necessary; difference becomes pure potentiality. The subject is now as he is in himself, and can only be grasped obliquely through Wilhelm’s feverish fantasies, is only finally known at the precise point in which Wilhelm rediscovers his grandfather’s art collection. This is the point at which Wilhelm, and one is entirely unsure whether he means the father’s bride or the Amazon—but of course, one phalus is replaceable by another. The painting, it should be noted, is blank instances placed in the anteroom, the space where one passes to get somewhere else, and this somewhere else is the repository of the true object, the imaginary space beyond the real where the prince may kill his father and get the bride.

One cannot simply reduce the narrative to this with the flick of an arabesque. Many objects and ideas that we are presented with the mind with the phallic presence: the aristocracy, the grandfather’s house, the Teutonic knights, poetry and Natalie, but only the last of these may replace the mother. The fact that Felix begins to “weigh heavy on him” during all this is, additionally, indicative of the immutable presence of some third object, which is always dangerously close to preventing the pure bond between two objects to form. Felix’s refusal to let go of him is a sign of his new responsibility in the face of such a return to the pure ego-space of childhood. Prepared for disappointment, he is unwilling to let go of what he already has.
after fortune and pleasure, driven on relentlessly by money, effort and desire, but to what end? To the same state that the poet received by nature: to enjoyment of the world, the sense of being part of a community, harmonious coexistence with many different things that often seem irreconcilable with each other...Built like a bird to soar above the earth, nest in high trees, nourish himself from buds and fruits, moving easily from branch to branch—how can he at the same time be an ox pulling a plow, a hound trained to follow a scent, or a watchdog on a chain in a farmyard, barking to ward off intruders.\(^8\)

I needn't emphasize the paradox of this passage, which strikes me as nearly obscene in its willingness to give itself up to the reader. For an assertion of the self-sufficiency of art in relation to commerce, Wilhelm's cumbersome economic metaphors puncture his voluble discourse as the spectral remainder of his real inability to actually exist for himself, indeed of his unqualified inscription into an economic cycle that he presumes can be side-stepped as though it were a puddle. The ponderous signifiers—‘fund’, ‘riches’, ‘labor’, ‘treasure’—seem absurd: one does not escape the signifying chain-gang by merely aping the master's language. What is the commodity of the commodity, that Wilhelm is attempting to speak? What he is formulating is clearly not a system premised on material wealth or a set of relations with the other. Rather, it is a labor of the self, an attempt at building a “fund of inner riches” that cannot be robbed, lost or sacrificed. To live “entirely” for the self and “in” the subject is not a transaction, but is rather a pure gift, a gift that is the mere substratum of an absolute relation that lies outside of a rational calculus of ends. Towards the last stages of the novel, however, this for-itself existence—the Baudelairean albatross above the earth—is seen as increasingly impossible, at least for Wilhelm, whose artistic talent is questionable, and with the increasing quietude of the novel, from “Confessions of a Beautiful Soul” to the meetings with Therese, domesticity and physical labor are increasingly given their due. As the beautiful soul herself reminds us: “One should not pursue the cultivation of one’s moral life in isolation and seclusion\(^8\), and so the pravity goes from the freedom of the bird, an existence divorced entirely from earthly considerations, to a series of relations with the other, except that this other is always of the aristocratic mold, that is, deeply rooted to the patriarchal land. And as her uncle says: “he [man] will be unhappy at having to strive after something that he cannot combine with ordinary regular activity”\(^10\). Man, that is, must enter into an economic relation with the other: there can be no pure gift, and if man invests his libidinal capital, his surplus of being, into such ideal objects then he is likely to bear almost constant torment. What Lothario calls “economics in the broader sense”\(^10\) is precisely this domestic attachment to the home and to the land, the rational organization of life to shield oneself from its vicissitudes: the labor of the ox and not of the bird. It is not a hoarding of treasure, the obscene surplus that is never expended, but is rather an investment for the future. When finally leaving the theatre troupe for the last time, Wilhelm remarks: “I am leaving the theatre and I am associating myself with men whose company is bound to lead me into a life of firm, honest activity”. Goethe proceeds to complete the thought:

He inquired after his money and was surprised at himself for not having done so earlier. He did not know that people much concerned with their own inner life are apt to neglect external circumstances. This was the state in which he found himself: he seemed, for the first time now, to be aware that he needed external means to promote effective activity.\(^11\)

One cannot, in other words, live entirely for oneself but must enter into an economy with the other; one must, in the words of Therese, “find someone somewhere who sees eye to eye with us, someone with whom we can continue to commune in silence”.\(^12\) This other cannot be the feverish, unblemished object of fantasy, cannot be an Amazon, but must be a domestic, calm partner whose company...
we enjoy. Not the poetic object of pure love, she is the object of an economy between two people who see “eye to eye” and want to live with a minimum of trauma. Yet in the end, Wilhelm does indeed find his Amazon, his kingdom, his treasure, which he would not “exchange... for anything in the world”15. One could say, indeed, that he finds his phallos, his father’s bride. How do these two apparently contradictory thoughts develop within the same text? Naturally, from our first glimpses of her in the woods and then as a child in “Confessions of a Beautiful Soul”, is always presented as a pure giver, one who lives entirely for-the-other. She is described as always giving the proper amount, never more or less, without any consciousness of her charity. Perhaps the only way we can account for such a contradiction is through that final analogy with Saul, “the son of Kish, who went in search of his father’s asses, and found a kingdom”16. This is precisely the pedagogical function of the stranger within the narrative: to lead Wilhelm on a lengthy detour through the treacherous woods of youth so that he may find himself anew at the precise point at which he began his journey. It is only by virtue of such feverish mobility that the subject can arrive, as though into a sunny clearing by a brook, at what he should have been searching for all the while.

This unequivocal resolution of insurmountable difference may be one of the definitive aspects of the novel form as a whole, particularly the Bildungsroman (although Moretti distinguishes between novels in which ends are fixed and those that intentionally defer closure). Through a whirlwind of apparently disconnected events, the ego is formed as a byproduct of ‘modern’ experience in its fullest sense, that is, as a byproduct of its variety, of its apparent lack of specific, consciously organized direction. The subject of the Bildungsroman, like the culture to which it is attached, is permanently mobile, and will only become “normal” after a youth defined by antagonism to the father. For society to incorporate such beings there must be a secondary pedagogical system, another super-ego that acts in secret, which turns rebellion into the proper direction for self-realization and creative dynamism. Since youth, in order for modern society to continue its course, must be antagonistic—must incorporate antagonism into its very being—then society should attempt to direct such a rebellion as a puppeteer directs its puppets, and right when the subject becomes dissatisfied with his listless, formless existence, he must be initiated into the secrets of the performance and become, in other words, an adult—a full member of society.

Thus the subject is to be led astray, becomes acquainted with the trauma engendered by the loss of the object of desire, and finally settles with the right object after having sufficiently realized himself over the course of his aimless explorations. Indeed, one can only realize oneself with a little dose of aimlessness. If capitalism requires a ceaseless turnover of objects, and our effort as subject is to develop a stable bond with a specific object, than one should be especially prepared in “modern” life for traumatic losses of such objects. This is the purpose of the abbe’s pedagogical experiments, to allow the pupil to exercise himself as though free from external forces, while those forces are in fact entirely intact and leading him in error. Only such error will allow the subject to return to himself and become a full adult—a responsible, working member of an exchange society. Like a super-ego that says: “Enjoy yourself while you are young, explore, but you will see that your father may have been right all along”, it is a vindication of the comfort of civilization, and it teaches Wilhelm to settle down.

Works Cited


---

15 Meister, 373
16 Meister, 373

15 Meister, 373
16 Meister, 373

---

Works Cited