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Introduction

Goethe was the great master of the unexpected. We know from his autobiography what pleasure he took in practical jokes and disguises, the more elaborate the better. We also know from references in letters that getting the better of his readers was a crucial part of his enterprise: he once wrote that he would discontinue work on *Wilhelm Meister* immediately if he thought any of his readers could guess what would come on the following page. It is small wonder, then, that he was one of the most consistent and energetic innovators in European literature. The two works in this volume, *Conversations of German Refugees* and *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years*, are outstanding examples of Goethe's drive to innovate and to mystify his readers.

So far were these two works ahead of their time that they have occupied a marginal place in the canon of Goethe's major work. The *Conversations* has always been overshadowed by Goethe's other works of the same decade, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, *Hermann and Dorothea*, and *Faust, Part I*—his acknowledged masterpieces. The *Journeyman Years* was considered, except by occasional admirers like Hermann Broch, a hasty redaction of Goethe's left-overs, for which he had to find a place in print before his death, and as clear evidence for the poet's supposedly failing powers in the last decade of his life, the decade of *Faust, Part II* and of some of his greatest lyric poems. Only since World War II has the *Journeyman Years* been widely recognized as a major work and a novel equal in artistry, thematic significance and importance to Goethe's three earlier novels. So long as romanticism was understood to be a movement interested in naive simplicity and fairy tales, neither of these works was likely to be popular as a whole, although the "Fairy Tale" at the end of the *Conversations* spawned a whole tradition of "aesthetic fairy tales." But as we have come to realize that romantic simplicity reconciles complex political, social, ethical and epistemological concerns, we have learned to read these works on their own terms, and to see the *Journeyman Years*, at least, as paradigmatic for the period.

Although *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years* is the sequel to *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (vol. 9 in this edition), there are good

reasons to read it together with the *Conversations of German Refugees*, to which it also forms the sequel. Both works are cycles of novellas connected by a frame narrative with its own plot; indeed the plot of the *Conversations* is rather more clearly structured than that of the *Journeyman Years*, which is explicitly subtitled “novel.” Both works address similar themes and social issues, and do so by experimenting with fragmented narrations and narrative perspectives. Taken together, then, they illuminate the range of Goethe’s thinking and development in the area of prose narrative over the length of his mature career; they also delineate the range of possibilities open to romantic narrative in the first thirty years of the nineteenth century.

Each of these works was produced during a high point of Goethe’s career, the first in the decade following the French Revolution, the second in the last decade of his life. Upon his return from Italy in the late spring of 1789, Goethe gave up many of his public and private relationships, which he had largely outgrown during his eighteen-month absence, for the life of the spirit, and devoted the next five years to studying optics, Kant, Plato, Homer, art theory and history. Even as he accompanied the Duke of Weimar on the allied campaigns against the French in the summers of 1792 and 1793 Goethe claims to have directed most of his energy to science and art. With the exception of the *Roman Elegies* (see vol. 1 of this edition) no significant new poetic projects were initiated, though the revisions of *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* were begun. Toward the middle of the decade Goethe’s situation changed dramatically, as Weimar became for a time the intellectual center of the German nation. During the latter half of the decade Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, the Humboldts, the Schlegels, Tieck, Novalis, Brentano, Hölderlin, Kleist—essentially all the important German intellectuals of the romantic generation—either lived in or visited the tiny Duchy of Weimar, often as a result of Goethe’s own efforts. Most important of all was Goethe’s friendship with Friedrich Schiller, which began in 1794: for the first time since the early 1770s the poet had a close friend of equal intellectual stature and commitment with whom he could share ideas and aspirations. With Schiller Goethe discussed his final revisions of *Wilhelm Meister* and his plans for his other masterpieces of the decade, *Hermann and Dorothea* (see vol. 8 of this edition) and *Faust* (vol. 2). *Conversations of German Refugees* was the first product of this friendship, for it was Goethe’s first contribution to Schiller’s journal, *Die Horen*, where it appeared serially in 1794 and 1795. With this journal Schiller aspired, and Goethe increasingly along with him, to establish a literature that was classical in the sense that Greek literature of the fifth century was classical. In the Germany of the 1790s, such a literature had not only to speak both for and to its nation, but had indeed to found and

constitute that nation from amidst the turmoil precipitated by the revolution in France. Such is the context of the *Conversations*.

The *Journeyman Years* resulted from a much longer development, but it was completed under not entirely different circumstances. No sooner had Goethe completed the *Conversations* than he began planning a sequel to it, another cycle of novellas. At the same time he planned a sequel to *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* as well. Some of the novellas for the continuation of the *Conversations* were executed in the first decade of the nineteenth century; one so intrigued its author that it developed into a full-blown novel, *Elective Affinities* (see vol. 11 in this edition). At some point the two plans coalesced, for in 1821 Goethe published, without much fanfare, the first version of *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years*, which was, however, a cycle of novellas, and contained texts conceived for the sequel to the *Conversations*. 1821 falls in the middle of a period of withdrawal in Goethe's life rather like that of the early 1790s. Goethe's wife, Christiane, had died in 1816; in 1817 he gave up his last official function in the Duchy of Weimar, the directorship of the court theater. Most of his energy was going into working on his autobiography, ordering his papers, supervising the final edition of his complete works—that is, into putting the final touches on his image for posterity. But then around 1825 came a final creative period, which resulted in great poems, the “Novella” (see vol. 11 of this edition), most of the second part of *Faust*, and the final, much expanded, version of *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years*. This time there was no Schiller to catalyze the process, nor any cataclysm comparable to the French Revolution. Nevertheless it is clear that Goethe had no illusions as to the value or stability of the society that had succeeded the suppression of the revolution, and the *Journeyman Years* offers us his final views on that continuing crisis.

In both works the novellas appear to treat a variety of topics, but all of them are subsumed under the theme of individuals in their relationship to the social order. To be sure there are few plots that cannot be understood at least to some extent in the context of such a broad theme, but this aspect of the novellas is certainly the one emphasized by the frame in both works. Nature, for example, the other great theme of the romantics, never appears in its wild state to be admired or communed with, but only as a locus for social activities, as an object of scientific study, as the object of human exploitation or cultivation, or as the threat of chaos. And in this respect these cycles are in a tradition that extends back to Boccaccio's *Decameron* and beyond to *The Golden Ass* of Lucius Apuleius. Storytelling in Boccaccio takes place in an enclosed garden, a *hortus conclusus*, to which the storytellers have withdrawn to escape the plague (uncontrollable nature) raging in Florence. The problem they confront is the disintegra-

tion of their society; they deal with it by reconstituting a microcosm of that society within the protection of their enclosed garden. Having made and kept their new laws for a brief period, they return to Florence, not because the plague has ended, but because they are fortified by their renewed commitment to social order. Boccaccio's novellas, to be sure, at least the most memorable ones, seem to work against such order, but such tension between stories and the "reality" of the frame is the lifeblood of the cycle as a form. Goethe was to exploit the tension between different levels of fiction with increasing sophistication in his own two cycles.

The "natural event" that sparks the flight of the refugees in the *Conversations* is the French Revolution. Goethe's refugees are German aristocrats fleeing their estates on the west bank of the Rhine. When they arrive at another property they own across the river, they are in a sorry social state, teasing, aggravating, and, finally, mortally offending one another. Within their ranks they represent the range of possible political positions open to the German upper classes at the time, and also a range of moral stances, from the good manners of the baroness and the patience of the Abbé to the immaturity of Carl and Louisa. Thus they constitute a microcosm of society, and at this level the revolution is represented by the bad manners and lack of sociability within the group. They shut out this social threat not only with the walls of their estate, but also with the baroness's stricture against political discussion when all are present and with the Abbé's decision to tell them stories. The effectiveness of these "walls" is periodically tested by small catastrophes analogous to the large one raging across the river—the sound of a shot from within the house (a desk cracking, as it turns out), the fire on their aunt's estate nearby, Carl's insistence on the anarchic autonomy of the imagination. Although the cycle is open-ended and does not return its figures to their original society, the increasing civility of their discussions, the increasing sophistication of the stories told them by the Abbé and of their responses to them, and especially the improved responses of Louisa, offer some measure of their spiritual fortification.

There are two mechanisms at work to effect this social improvement, one associated with each of the dominant members of the group. The one associated with the baroness is renunciation, a central theme of the *Journeyman Years*, which carries the subtitle "The Renunciants." In the *Conversations* what must be renounced is, in effect, excessive preoccupation with oneself and one's own concerns—Louisa must stop talking about her absent fiancé; Carl's understanding of liberty as the right to say and do whatever one pleases is the antithesis of this concept. Renunciation is the basis of the good manners that restore order

to the baroness's circle. The Abbé's mechanism is telling stories. Except for the first evening, the only storyteller in the cycle is the Abbé, and while the stories of the others lack focus and deal with situations where renunciation might be called for but is not achieved, the Abbé's stories are highly focused presentations of successful renunciation. Like his more famous counterpart in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* the Abbé is an educator of his society. In this respect he plays the role to which Goethe and Schiller aspired in the ambitious program of *Die Horen*—as poets they were to lead the nation to new levels of civilization and culture, literature and art were to be the guarantors and generators of society.

The "Fairy Tale" at the end of the *Conversations* is the high point of the Abbé's educational and artistic efforts. The work has always been a great riddle in that it has not been possible to unlock its symbols, that is, to assign a particular significance to a particular figure that holds consistently throughout the tale. Nevertheless it is not hard to see in it an allegory of the restoration of society by the same mechanisms that work in the frame of the *Conversations*. The disorder of the society at the beginning is symbolized by the rushing river that separates the two halves of its world, by its buried kings, and by the enchantment which causes the princess to kill everything she touches. At the end the river is spanned by a magnificent bridge alive with travelers, the temple with its buried kings has risen to the light of day and the princess is united with her prince. All of this has resulted from the irrepressible sociability of some visiting will-o'-the-wisps and the green snake's decision at the crucial moment to sacrifice her identity as snake to become the reconciling bridge; here are the good manners and renunciation demanded by the baroness. The process is orchestrated by the old man with the lamp (a sly self-portrait of the Abbé and his transforming stories), who knows precisely what must be done but depends on all the others to cooperate. The tale summarizes the concerns of the cycle and simultaneously raises them to a higher, almost religious level.

"The Fairy Tale" is an allegory, in the most basic sense of that word; it describes a process which consistently represents another process distinct from itself. It is, as I said, an allegory of the process depicted in the frame of the cycle itself. But it is also important to recognize that the frame of the *Conversations* is an allegory in exactly the same sense. It depicts a response to the French Revolution in a microcosmic version of the German society being impacted by that revolution. In this respect miniature might be a better term than allegory, and this term may also help us to understand the discomfort readers have sometimes felt with the cycle. Surely there is something inadequate about "cultivate good manners" as a response to the terrors of the revolution. It is, indeed, a miniature, a trivial response. Curiously

enough, “The Fairy Tale” seems a less trivial response—obvious allegory distances the reader more effectively than does the miniaturization of this cycle: the frame is too realistic to be read in the allegorical mode that was probably intended. Goethe ran the same risk of trivializing miniaturization in *Hermann and Dorothea*, where again he presented a microcosmic version of the revolution with his band of refugees passing a small German town. But in *Hermann and Dorothea* the ironic use of Homeric language and forms achieves the narrative distance necessary to make us read the miniaturization properly as signifying something larger than itself.

With regard to the novellas themselves, this miniaturization was much more successful, for the *Conversations* established the novella as a genre in German literature. German narrative in the eighteenth century, such as it was, tended to be rambling. Before the *Conversations* the only tight, closed, small-scale narrative in the German tradition was Goethe’s own relatively short novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (see vol. 11 of this edition), but in the nineteenth century the novella was to be the preeminent genre. The parallel between the formal order and closure of the novella and the pervading concern for social order in the *Conversations* must not be overlooked. If the success of the miniaturization as a vehicle for meaning remains questionable in the frame, there can be no question as to the triumph of the formal miniaturization Goethe achieved in establishing the novella as a significant genre in Germany. In this context the *Conversations* can thus be seen as an experiment that was misunderstood by all those who seized exclusively on the “Fairy Tale,” a masterpiece, to be sure, but the cycle’s most conservative element.

There is nothing miniature about *Wilhelm Meister’s Journeyman Years*, despite the presence of both novellas and aphorisms in its fabric. And yet it would be hard to find another of Goethe’s works that continues the thematic and formal concerns of the *Conversations* as cogently as this last great novel. Despite the superficial difference in social conditions at the time of writing—Europe was politically at peace in the 1820s—Goethe was a sufficiently profound observer to realize that the full sequence of events set in motion by the revolution had not yet worked itself out. Indeed, the *Journeyman Years* sees the disorder caused by the Revolution as a much broader and profounder phenomenon than that envisioned in any of the works of the 1790s. The situation is no longer understood as a single cataclysm that can be represented in the image of a thunderstorm or a fire; it is a change in the pace of time itself, as the aphorisms insist. So fundamental a change necessitates, as Goethe correctly perceives, a thorough rethinking of all social institutions. The model for this in the novel is the rearrangement of all the social structures that had been carefully constructed in

Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship. At the end of that novel Wilhelm was betrothed to the ideal woman, Natalie, and had been initiated into the Society of the Tower, whose members were to disperse to different countries in order to minimize the impact of any future revolutions on the Society as a whole. At the beginning of the *Journeyman Years* Wilhelm's marriage to Natalie has been postponed into an indefinite future; Wilhelm has been required to part from her, and at the same time prevented from forming any new ties by an oath to the Society not to spend more than three days in any one place. The Society, in the meanwhile, is planning a new settlement in the American wilderness, a great utopian venture to cultivate and exploit the wealth of this hitherto untamed nature. No longer, as in the *Apprenticeship*, are its members to function autonomously, each as fully developed individuals, but each must develop a single skill to contribute to the unity of the whole. The new colony is a world of technocrats, where, we are told, administration is more important than justice, where there will be no libraries, and where the attitude of the authorities toward books remains problematic. This is hardly the sociable, cultivated world envisioned by the *Conversations*, where poets are to be legislators, nor is it the world of the *Apprenticeship*, where each individual is to cultivate himself to the fullest.

In such a world renunciation is as much a part of the problem as it is a solution. Far more must be renounced here than one's own bad habits or asocial tendencies. Wilhelm must renounce Natalie, the ideal that guided him, however inchoately, through his apprenticeship; he must renounce not only his theatrical aspirations, but now any value he attributed to his theatrical experience. He must renounce his aspirations to educate his countrymen and settle instead for the trade (not even profession) of surgeon, binding wounds and letting blood. At the end of the *Apprenticeship* he has solemnly undertaken the responsibility of educating his son Felix, and is still attempting to do so at the beginning of the *Journeyman Years*; but by the middle of the novel he deposits Felix in a boarding school, and the last contact shown with him is when Wilhelm lets his blood to save him from the consequences of a fall into the river: even family ties are reduced in this world to matters of professional activity. Renunciation dramatically chosen to achieve what the eighteenth century would have called virtuous ends can have bizarre consequences in the world of this novel, as novellas like "The Foolish Pilgrim," "Who Is the Traitor?" or "The Man of Fifty Years" readily show.

And yet, renunciation is not all bad. The first episode in the novel deals with the seemingly miraculous reappearance of the Holy Family in the world through which Wilhelm travels. The novel teems with images of rebirth and renewal, ending with Felix's recovery after almost

drowning; in the final tableau he and Wilhelm embrace. Renunciation and rebirth are inseparable in the *Journeyman Years*. The world of the novel is full of rigid structures that seem most inhospitable compared to those of Goethe's earlier work—not just the American utopia, but also the Pedagogic Province, where Felix is educated, and the realm of the saintly Makarie—but these are mostly presented as agents for good and for order. So positively are they presented, indeed, that it is easy to overlook the elements of irony and common sense that undermine the superlatively enthusiastic presentations. And then there are, finally, certain elements that resist the totalitarian structures of the novel. Felix and Hersilie refuse to renounce their incomprehensible passion that is mysteriously tied to the casket whose contents are never revealed. Their triangular relationship with Wilhelm remains unresolved, but maintains a profound dignity to the end of the novel, whereas the various love relationships mediated by Makarie degenerate into banality. Similarly the line between fiction and reality in the novel remains unresolvable. Some of the novellas are presented as discreet units, others are presented in pieces—often at a remove from one another—others run into the frame narrative or touch it in unexpected ways. By demonstrating the limits to our understanding and to our control of our passions and imagination, the novel preserves a realm beyond the reach of its oppressive social structures: this is the most important and positive aspect of renunciation.

Renunciation determines the unusual and difficult structure of the novel. *Conversations of German Refugees* had placed certain limits on interpretation of the “Fairy Tale” and had by its nature required its readers to draw comparisons among novellas and between novellas and frame. The *Journeyman Years*, however, makes much more complex demands on its readers, and at the same time elevates this demand into a central theme. As society is fragmented in this novel into many one-sided individuals, so too the world we confront is fragmented into many different versions of reality. The novellas present many different versions of renunciation; but the reasons for their presentation and their relation to the frame are often left unarticulated. The novel also includes two collections of aphorisms, which some scholars believe should no longer be printed with the novel at all. But it is precisely the aphorisms that offer a clue to this apparent confusion. Early in the novel Wilhelm visits a house where aphorisms are lettered in gold above all the doorways. There we learn that the value of aphorisms is that they can be understood in different ways, that unraveling their possible meanings provides food for thought. Understanding is to be found not in what an aphorism says, but in the act of interpretation. Knowledge can always be supplemented by reflection, whether metaphorical, as in the above example, or concrete, as when Lucidor in “Who

Is the Traitor?” comprehends the full extent of his happiness only when he sees the reflection of himself embracing his beloved in the mirror. This, too, is the sense of Wilhelm’s confusion in the opening chapters between the Joseph and Marie he meets and the sequence of paintings of the life of St. Joseph that the live Joseph proudly shows him. It is also the sense both of the multiple perspectives we are offered on particular stories as their characters move back and forth from novella to frame, and further of the pervasive narrative irony, which leaves us to understand such elements as the Pedagogic Province or Makarie both seriously and critically at the same time. Ultimately the validity of a particular perspective is not the issue: truth, or knowledge, such as it is, is ineffable, and our access to it is only through however many perspectives on it we can achieve.

In this context renunciation extends far beyond the social concerns of the *Conversations* to epistemology. Truth can only be known, indeed only *exists*, in its multiple manifestations and reflections. As a result art—the domain of the poet—takes on a more profound epistemological role as well. As we have seen, the society of the *Journeyman Years* leaves no room for the poet as legislator and civilizer. Instead, art has become a crucial provider of perspectives. From the paintings of the Holy Family in the first chapter to the anonymous authors of the various novellas to the budding artists in the Pedagogic Province, where religion is taught through pictures, to the sculptor-anatomist from whom Wilhelm learns his trade, this novel about the harsh practicalities of life in the nineteenth century cannot do without art, for its capacity to generate alternate perspectives, to be and to generate reflection, is the basis of all knowledge.

And if the artist is the generator of perspectives, so too is the reader. The model of reading offered in the novel is the discussion about aphorisms alluded to above. One cannot expect the plot of the novel to organize and relate the materials of the novel, for that would be to reduce the material of the novel to one perspective. The novellas have tight, organized plots, but they are set off within the novel as explicit fictions; where they issue into the novel, the plot is unresolved or treated with extreme irony. Wilhelm does little more in the novel than read and listen to stories; late in the novel he finally tells a story himself, one that is analogous to the others but does not embrace them. In this respect he embodies the true plot of the novel, which is the action of the reader as perceiving and reflecting consciousness. The formal complexity of the novel, then, and its apparent incoherence, understood as multiplicity of perspective, constitute its essential coherence. *Wilhelm Meister’s Journeyman Years* is an experiment in narrative form whose success could only be recognized in the wake of novels like *Ulysses* or *The Waves*.

One final point about the complexity of perspectives in the *Journeyman Years* involves the use of parody in the novel. Goethe always places himself in a tradition by alluding to, exploiting, rewriting, not uncommonly even burlesquing other texts. I use *parody* here to refer to all of these options. His normal practice was to use major authors from the tradition—Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides, Dante, Shakespeare, Calderon are typical examples—and to use one per work. *Faust* and the *Journeyman Years* are special among Goethe's works in the enormous number of other writers and texts parodied. The novel connects itself not only to *Conversations of German Refugees* and *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, but to many others in addition. "The Deranged Pilgrim" is a translation of an anonymous French novella; "Who Is the Traitor?" and "The Perilous Wager" parody works by August von Kotzebue, Goethe's popular contemporary. "The Nut-brown Maid" is based on a ballad from Bishop Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* and Matthew Prior's poem "Henry and Emma." The figure of the silent barber in Book Three and much of the material in "The New Melusine" comes from a fairy tale by J.K.A. Müsâus, a popular mid-century writer in Germany. The Pedagogic Province parodies the famous German educators Basedow and Campe in terms of their relation to Rousseau. The story of the drowned boy in Book Two evokes Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, and, finally, the aphorisms and much of the organization of the same story invoke Laurence Sterne. Goethe's attitude toward his various ancestors is largely sympathetic, even where there is substantial correction or travesty involved, as in the case of the Pedagogic Province. Toward Goldsmith and Sterne he is positively reverent, for he numbered these two among the handful of writers whom he considered to have influenced him most throughout his long career.

This is a diverse group of works in terms of quality, genre, and audience appealed to; what does connect them is their great popularity in the later eighteenth century, especially in the Germany of Goethe's early maturity. These works constitute, or perhaps represent, the milieu that produced *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* and the *Conversations of German Refugees* with their ideal of a human society grounded on the cooperation and goodwill of broadly educated individuals civilized by the efforts of the philosopher-poet. Like the occasional stubborn refusals to renounce, the goodwill with which these exponents of an earlier, more humane age are evoked contradicts the prevailing drive of the novel toward the practicality of the dawning industrial age. Above all these parodies bring into the novel a strong sense of nostalgia for the age whose sensibility and excessive focus on individual subjectivity Goethe himself had criticized so cogently in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. If subjectivity was a problem for the young Goethe,

now at the end of his life he sets a memorial to it, as an expression of regret, but also as a celebration of the age that discovered it as the irreducible core of human existence.

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