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978-0-521-14280-9 - The German Bildungsroman: Incest and Inheritance

Michael Minden

Excerpt

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## Introduction

Vom Vater hab' ich die Statur,  
Des Lebens ernstes Führen,  
Von Mütterchen die Frohnatur  
Und Lust zu fabulieren.

(Goethe)

Sei ein Mann und folge mir nicht nach.

(Werther)

Dichter will so gerne Knecht sein,  
Weil die Herrschaft draus entspringt.

(Westöstlicher Divan)

This is a study of the German *Bildungsroman* as a series of variations on Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795–1796). It offers a definition of the genre based on the peculiarities of the texts themselves, not on the idea of *Bildung*.<sup>1</sup>

The idea of *Bildung* – the development or formation of a young man – is basically linear. I shall argue that these novels are in fact circular. The answer to the question, 'Where is this journey of maturation and discovery leading?' is Novalis's 'immer nach Hause': the destination is always home.<sup>2</sup>

The circularity of this return has both a feminine and a masculine aspect. The thematic motifs in which these two guarantees of development are expressed in the *Bildungsroman* are incest and inheritance.

By 'incest' I mean generally a motif expressing the quintessence of desire, with its logical end in the collapse of all differences. It is not surprising that the desire of the masculine protagonists of the *Bildungsroman* should be embodied in women figures, who often

have a structural function as well as a thematic one. The most obvious example of this sort of structural function is the ending in marriage, a motif from which the *Bildungsroman* has deviated in a rich variety of ways, ever since its inception with Wieland's *Die Geschichte des Agathon* in 1767. Yet behind this basic masculine heterosexual determination there lies a fundamental orientation upon the mother. This is at its clearest in the *Lehrjahre* and Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802), but it has effects everywhere.

As for the masculine determination, 'inheritance', there is first a word to be said about the sort of construction of masculine identity that the *Bildungsroman* avoids.

In modern psychoanalysis and literary criticism (as the famous theory of Harold Bloom attests), rivalry is sometimes evoked as the essence of relations between men. For the influential post-Freudian psychoanalyst Lacan (deriving his idea from Hegel) rivalry is the matrix of the psyche.<sup>3</sup> Any rivalry model, however, will disturb the clear focus upon the individual to which the *Bildungsroman* is committed. For rivalry you need two individuals. The *Bildungsroman*, while certainly containing instances of rivalry, actually tends to avoid it as a structural principle. It is interesting how the catastrophe at the end of the first book of the *Lehrjahre* is precisely Wilhelm Meister's physical and mental breakdown at the discovery that he has a successful rival for the affections of Marianne. This catastrophe supplies the key to progression beyond the problems of subjectivity that had remained unresolved in Goethe's earlier novel, *Werther*. It is as though the model of development proposed in the *Lehrjahre* depends on the *refusal* of rivalry, and with it on the refusal of a certain heroic masculine form of establishing authority and meaning. The crisis at the end of the first book, and the regeneration at the start of the second, confirm how the *Bildungsroman* is seeking to define new forms of masculine authority.

Confirmation for this understanding of the genre, as subverting what were once received gender definitions, comes from the scholar credited with coining the term *Bildungsroman* in the first place.<sup>4</sup> Professor Karl Morgenstern, a rather belated *Aufklärer*, in a lecture given in 1810, was uneasy about the lack of moral rigour and masculine character displayed by the heroes of the novels for which he had just found a name.<sup>5</sup> He recognised that here was a

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new kind of hero and a kind of novel worthy of the advocacy of an academic aesthete like himself. Yet he nevertheless found the fact that Wilhelm Meister is represented with unalloyed sympathy, rather than framed within a judgement about his acts and achievements, somehow offensive to his sense of the manliness expected of a proper hero. He may have been a hero fit for a *novel*, but not a real hero. For Morgenstern, Wilhelm Meister was a character disconcertingly lacking in 'personal energy and distinct direction', and thus 'unmanly'.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, despite this significant redefinition of the masculine, there is also a fundamentally traditional, feudal, aspect to the way in which the continuity of masculine identity is guaranteed: the principle of primogeniture. The laws of inheritance guarantee the eldest son his name and power. The protagonists of these novels tend correspondingly to be the only children of their parents, and there is no example among them of a *younger* son. They inherit, materially, spiritually or both, from fathers and father figures. This is the masculine circularity which corresponds to the feminine one grounded in the love of the mother.

Much of the variation we observe within the unified model of the *Bildungsroman* is the result of the differing ways in which, in each work, the two circularities just described are related to one another. The decisive unifying factor for the model as a whole is not how they are linked, but *that* they are linked. Compatibility between the two circularities, between the feminine and the masculine dimensions, is constitutive of the model.

This explains the importance of the theme of androgyny in the genre which surfaces in the *Lehrjahre* and *Der Zauberberg* (1926). In the *Bildungsroman* in general the masculine protagonist is strongly marked by feminine traits. Thomas Mann, talking about artists, suggested: 'There is always something feminine in the essence of the beautiful. Look at the example of the artist, who has never been simply or brutally masculine (der nie und nirgends ein reiner und roher Mann gewesen ist).'<sup>7</sup>

Mann's application of the idea of androgyny to the sphere of art is not fortuitous. Terry Eagleton, in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, remarks aptly that the aesthetic is 'a fantasy of father and mother in one',<sup>8</sup> and the relation of incest and inheritance to the sphere of

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art and the aesthetic is indeed central to the *Bildungsroman*. This emerges most clearly when we look at two novels which, together, play a pivotal part in this book: *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802) and *Der Nachsommer* (1857). In these two texts the play, both enigmatic and urbane, made by Goethe with the combination of masculine and feminine is dramatically polarised. In the former the feminine predominates but enfolds within itself the masculine, while in the latter the converse happens. In Novalis and Stifter respectively the *Bildungsroman* themes of incest and inheritance emerge in their clearest forms.

Novalis's protagonist, in his incestuous journey towards the maternal source, is unambiguously a creative person, a poet. In Stifter's *Der Nachsommer* the protagonist is not a creative personality, but art plays no smaller a role than it does with Novalis. The difference is that in Stifter art is represented from the point of view of its products, not its source. These products are passed on from father to son. They imbue the ancient law of primogeniture with all the modern values of a Novalis. Historically, it took private collectors as well as original geniuses to create what modernity understands as art.<sup>9</sup>

The protagonists of Novalis and Stifter are extremes. The typical *Bildungsroman* hero does not know whether he is an artist or not. This may seem simply a character weakness, but it is thematically crucial. The combination of masculine and feminine attitudes to art is expressed in this *hesitation* in the realm of characterisation.

Incest and inheritance also have their expression on the level of narrative technique. The *Bildungsroman*, as we have said, relies upon the co-operation of these two principles. The hero, hesitant about his creativity, relies upon the confident offices of one in no such doubt: the narrator. To that extent, this is the configuration of autobiography, in which a mature and accomplished voice recounts the vicissitudes of the less complete person he once was. Yet the *Bildungsroman* enjoys a peculiar, though important, relationship with the genre of modern autobiography. The relation between them can be expressed by saying that the *Bildungsroman* is invariably *not quite* autobiographical. The clearest example of this is Gottfried Keller's *Der grüne Heinrich* (1854–1855, 1879–1880).

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The *Bildungsroman* proceeds by disowning personal experience, and making this the first step towards universalising it. Instead of seeking ways of making personal experience historically significant (as Goethe did in his own autobiography, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*) or asserting with all the force of a subjective revolution that personal experience is important *because* it is personal (as Rousseau did in his *Confessions*) the *Bildungsroman* makes the shortcomings of the individual – the very ‘false starts and wrong choices’ of the dictionary definition of the genre<sup>10</sup> – the driving force of its narratives. In the case of Goethe’s seminal novel the hero is ironically called *Meister* (master), while represented as perpetually making mistakes. Wilhelm is decentred, but only to become central again by virtue of his decentredness.

In the essay ‘Goethe und Tolstoy’ (1921) Thomas Mann writes as follows about the genesis of the *Bildungsroman*. He cites Goethe as saying somewhere that in Wilhelm Meister he sees his own ‘beloved image’ (‘geliebtes Ebenbild’). This relationship between author and protagonist, Mann explains, is not one of blank narcissism, but is informed by an urge to self-improvement and self-formation:

And precisely . . . this sense of one’s own ‘I’ as a duty to be performed, a moral, aesthetic and cultural commitment, is objectified in the hero of the autobiographical novel of formation and development (Bildungs- und Entwicklungsroman). It is embodied in a ‘thou’, in relation to whom the poetic ‘I’ assumes the role of guide, teacher, educator; identical with him, but at the same time superior to the degree that Goethe at one point refers to [Wilhelm] with paternal affection as ‘a poor dog’, a designation as full of feeling for himself as for his ‘other’.<sup>11</sup>

In the light of Mann’s remarks we can reformulate the co-operating principles of incest/inheritance, Novalis/Stifter, in terms of two types of authorship. In the character of the protagonist, in his ‘false starts and wrong moves’, there is an open-ended idea of *self*-authorship, an individual’s own attempts to realise his own potential. To represent a protagonist as striving to author *himself* is the positive reinterpretation Goethe and the others find for the psychological dilemma of Karl Philipp Moritz’s *Anton Reiser* (first three volumes 1785–1786, final volume 1790), the eponymous hero of which flounders in attempts to firm up an identity by misconceived

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acts of authorship, or by acting up a version of a self in the form of a dramatic role.

The other type of authorship is implied by the existence of the text itself, because the text is evidence of the act of authorship responsible for it. The thematic-formal closure of the artefact has its proper voice in the assured voice of the narrator. The first-person novels *Der Nachsommer* and *Der grüne Heinrich* do not, as one might be tempted to object, negate this model but provide highly instructive variations upon it.

These two kinds of author are not identified with one another. The writer of the text does not represent his own subjectivity in formal completion. That would be narcissism or autobiography or both. The link between the subject represented and the subject representing, which is the *raison d'être* of autobiography, remains, in the *Bildungsroman*, covert. The 'not quite' is an act of hiding, of veiling the link between the self-authoring hero, the completion of whose work lies in the future, and the author of the finished text, whose act of authorship is in the past. (Here again Novalis and Stifter respectively offer the purest examples.)

The *Bildungsroman*, in the form of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, came about at an historical juncture at which two complex issues were joined. The structure we have seen variously realised in terms of incest and inheritance, Novalis and Stifter, and disguised autobiography can also be seen in their terms. They are named in the title of Andrew Bowie's recent study of German philosophy from Kant to Nietzsche: *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*.<sup>12</sup> The argument of Bowie's book is that the development of what had come by the time of Kant's great critical philosophy (but not by him) to be called 'aesthetics', that is the part of philosophy dedicated to the theory of beauty, answered the question posed by subjectivity in the secularised world of post-Enlightenment Europe. Subjectivity posed a question for two reasons: first because in a post-theological environment the human subject is at once liberated and disoriented, and second, because the realm of subjectivity as the site of the free agency of reason needed to be defended against the modern scientific view which subordinates nature to the law of causality, and threatens to leave no place for moral self-determination.<sup>13</sup>

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Kant himself left the subject ‘divided between an autonomous – but impersonally rational – and an individual – but heteronomous – self’.<sup>14</sup> The former ‘transcendental’ subject has given encouragement to the modern myth of the fully self-present subject and hence to its deconstruction.<sup>15</sup> But the modern subject has to be thought of against the background of these *two* determinations, an abstract sovereign on one hand and, on the other, an impoverished slave to the senses. At once universal, as the seat and agent of reason (and thus freedom), and irredeemably partial.

It is precisely this *double* determination that is reflected in the *Bildungsroman*: the (secret) alliance between an assured narrative voice, equipped with general maxims – ‘Herr der Gegensätze’ (‘master of contradictions’), as Mann’s narrator puts it in *Der Zauberberg* – and the ‘poor dog’ of an empirical subject who has to make his way amid the vicissitudes of concrete circumstances. Similarly, the union of incest and inheritance, of Novalis and Stifter, in the *Bildungsroman* genre can be understood as a reflection of the attempt to unite in a single discourse the potentially infinite but perpetually partial subject and a form of objectification which does not negate it. This form is the privileged and special sort of non-instrumental objectification which modernity understands as art.

Bowie’s exposition of the role aesthetics plays in relation to the modern problems of subjectivity is therefore relevant to the literary context of the *Bildungsroman*. All the more so in light of the fact that two of the writers whose literary work features in this book, Hölderlin and Novalis, also occupied themselves in theory with the post-Kantian problem of the subject.

The philosophical context was set by Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who, in the wake of Kant, sought to do more than Kant had done to defend the human subject against the threat of objectification among the other ‘things’ of the causally determined world. Although Fichte’s system absolutises the notion of the subject in a way that subsequent thinkers have deemed flawed, it is nevertheless to him that we owe the still-valid insight ‘that reflection on the subject by the subject reveals a reality which will never exhaust itself in what could be known objectively’.<sup>16</sup>

For Fichte the way out of the philosophical impasse – that the I

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cannot know the I without at the same time attesting to the prior *possibility* of that knowledge (which it therefore does *not* know) – is to claim that we do nevertheless have access to the ground of subjectivity in the realisation in thought of the moral freedom which has its – unknowable – source within subjectivity. In positing an absolute subject as its own ground, a unification of knowing, being and doing, a pure self-realisation, philosophy is itself an act of self-realisation for human subjectivity.

Both Hölderlin and Novalis take up the challenge of giving an account of something – subjectivity – which they know will always resist having an account given of it. Yet they are not content with Fichte's *philosophical* resolution of the question. For Novalis, it is this very partialness which is a token of the wholeness against which the partialness *is* partial: 'we feel ourselves as a part and are precisely for that reason the whole'.<sup>17</sup> 'Instead of thinking that philosophy could reach the fundamental ground, the "initial impulse" of freedom that Fichte posits as the absolute beginning, philosophy must realise its own inherent failure to be complete.'<sup>18</sup> And when it is the site of the realisation of a failure, philosophy becomes very difficult to distinguish from poetry.

Hölderlin also resists Fichte's claim to be able in philosophy to go back to the originary self-founding act of subjectivity.<sup>19</sup> Instead he overcomes the formal aporias of the I's attempts to unify itself in the face of the division of self-consciousness by turning away from thought to action, in the quest for a form of true self-knowledge. The I must exercise 'its free spontaneity in the choice of an external object, which will reveal the I's "poetic individuality"'.<sup>20</sup> 'Reveal' has here the sense of furnishing the subject with a way of knowing itself via the detour through an external sphere which bears the marks of the subject, yet lies outside narcissistic circularity, enabling the subject 'to grasp what it would be like to realise its most fundamental self'.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, and like the subject itself, this external sphere or object demonstrates the fundamental indivisibility of subject and object. This sort of activity, in which the secret harmony of inner and outer is enacted, is *aesthetic* activity, the only free activity available to Man. Once more, in the case of Hölderlin, the struggle with the philosophically recalcitrant problem of how subjectivity can be known (i.e. know itself) leads



towards a form of knowing which is in fact doing, and that doing is aesthetic activity.

The philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, the thinker in whose work the idea of art assumed especially great importance,<sup>22</sup> brings together the systematic impulse of Fichte and the huge importance attached to art by Novalis and Hölderlin and produces a solution which is a philosophical version of the literary solution achieved by the *Lehrjahre*.<sup>23</sup> While cognitive philosophy can never show us the true nature of our subjectivity, can never turn upon its own knowing and know *it*, art can reveal to our intuition the way in which consciousness is part of nature because art is ‘the unity of conscious and unconscious activity’;<sup>24</sup> ‘the conscious intention of the artist coincides with the unconscious compulsion of the artist’s genius’.<sup>25</sup>

Schelling’s attempt to understand art as the point of convergence and mutual confirmation of human rational determination and human nature as unconscious genius is thus a close relative to the *Lehrjahre*, where an ‘unconscious’ hero (a hero whose consciousness always lags behind his actions) is in the process of authoring or producing himself, and a narrator assumes the conscious responsibility of giving an account of this significant indeterminateness within a finished product, the novel itself, of which he, the narrator, is understood as the author.

The development of the relation between subjectivity and aesthetics in the phase after Kant exhibits an increasing blurring of the distinction between literature and philosophy. While the *Lehrjahre* can be seen to be informed by the same impulses as informed Schelling, its status as a work of literature and not a system of ideas provides it and its cognate texts with possibilities less easily accessible to philosophy. If this study is able to make a contribution to the debate about modern subjectivity, it is because it takes seriously the particularities of these novels as literary texts, rather than as vehicles for the *idea* of Bildung.

The particular advantage literature has over philosophy is the possibility of a play with genre, and with its own form. What happens with the *Lehrjahre* is as follows. In the wake of Blanckenburg’s *Versuch über den Roman* (1774), the first German ‘theory of the novel’, and Wieland’s *Agathon*, Goethe’s novel played

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the decisive role in bringing the German novel under the jurisdiction of the aesthetic. This was a time in literary debate at which the novel was by no means assured of its status as serious literature. From then on, Goethe's adoption of the novel form supplied a reference point for those who wished to urge the aesthetic pedigree of the novel form.<sup>26</sup>

What Goethe did was to transform a popular form into an aesthetic artefact. This transformation is clear in the change from the early autobiographical, realistic and comic fragment, now known as the *Theatralische Sendung*, into the finished version of the novel, which universalises the particular experience it encloses. Readers have often complained about the artificiality of the *Lehrjahre* as opposed to the spontaneity of the *Sendung*. But this misses the point. Goethe gave a demonstration of how the aesthetic produces its effects: by enhancing artifice. By ironically disclosing its artificiality, acknowledging its limits, it produces an allegorical aura. It knows more than it can show. Individual experience does have universal significance, yet the rules for this consonance cannot be set down as knowledge, they can only be lived, just as a novel is never reducible to its 'ideas' and must be read with an eye to sensuous particularity as well as cognitive grasp. In practice, this meant that Goethe reinvented existing popular novel discourses, realism and fantasy, but with the quality of universality added.

The closure or evident artificiality of the novel is *at once* organically pleasing *and* points beyond itself to truths to which it has no immediate access. This is thematically displayed in the contrast between Mignon and Natalie, to which we shall return in the next chapter.

Hence a sense of infinite subjective potential – incest – can be played off against a closure or limit – inheritance – which it informs and transcends but does not disrupt. The infinite regress of any attempt to represent subjectivity can be halted by expressing the limitedness of all subjective experience, while preserving a sense of the unboundedness of subjectivity itself. This is the juxtaposition of 'Nacheinander' and 'Nebeneinander' of which Martin Swales speaks in his study of the *Bildungsroman*.<sup>27</sup> By embodying closure, the work of art gives something to be transcended. Without this limit it would not be possible to intimate the unlimited. Novalis cer-