

## CHAPTER I

*Rethinking the Bildungsroman*

For precisely where a concept's missing,  
 There a word presents itself in a timely way.<sup>1</sup>

## I.I

The original impetus to the following study was threefold. First, I felt uneasy with a prevailing critical attitude toward Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* novels: namely, that the *Apprenticeship* and the *Journeyman Years* remain ultimately irreconcilable with each other, and disunified and disjointed in themselves. Even though it exhibits outwardly all the features usually associated with a sequel – a parallel title, the reappearance of major characters, similar themes, and a continuous plot – *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years* has not been considered a true sequel to the *Apprenticeship*. The unity of the first and second parts of *Faust* has long since ceased to be questioned, yet critics who accept the unity of these “most incalculable productions”<sup>2</sup> as established are not prepared to grant the unity of the *Apprenticeship* and the *Journeyman Years*, even though the genesis of the latter pair is interrupted by a shorter hiatus than the genesis of *Faust*. Moreover, it was difficult to accept the critical consensus that a novel as profoundly influential as the *Apprenticeship*, the model for so many later writers, ultimately lacks unity, whereas Schiller and the Romantics, though finding much to criticize in the novel, did not doubt its aesthetic integrity. The *Journeyman Years*, on the other hand, has long been seen as a formless grab bag,<sup>3</sup> leading to the accusation that Goethe in his old age lacked the strength to unify the novel's disparate concerns – even though, again, an even later creation, the second part of *Faust*, has long since been cleared of the same charge.

The second impetus had to do with the conventional generic classification of the *Apprenticeship* as a bildungsroman. Here one is faced, first of all, with a direct corollary of the initial difficulty: the *Journeyman Years*,

2 Goethe and the Myth of the Bildungsroman

an apparent sequel to the novel long felt to be the archetypal bildungsroman, has virtually never been viewed as an exemplar of that same genre. Moreover, taking *Bildung* as the structuring principle of the *Apprenticeship* proves exceedingly problematic: Wilhelm does not undergo *Bildung* in any clearly defined or programmatic sense of the term (e.g. the “aesthetic education” leading to a harmonious development and integration of all his powers asserted by earlier interpreters of the novel),<sup>4</sup> while if one understands *Bildung* as mere unspecified development, the notion becomes so vague that few novels would *not* qualify as bildungsromane. One wonders whether the generic term “bildungsroman” has come to have very much meaning at all when applied to the *Apprenticeship*.

And the third impetus was perplexity regarding Goethe’s place within the history of the novel. How can one account for the nearly universal neglect of these masterpieces outside of degree programs in German literature? Goethe’s honorific assignment to the vanguard of a uniquely German novelistic tradition of the bildungsroman simultaneously places him *outside* the mainstream of the development of the novel. So strong is this tendency that even those who set out to bridge the gap end up widening it further. Marianne Hirsch’s study of the “Novel of Formation” (as she calls it) is a good example: in it she seeks to counter the tendency of the term “bildungsroman” by widening its definition to that of a “European, rather than a purely German genre” only to end, however, by sharply distinguishing the German novels from their French and English counterparts on the basis of their different orientations (p. 294). Even more disturbing in this regard is Jeffrey Sammons’s “Mystery of the Missing *Bildungsroman*,” which ends with the recommendation “when one encounters the assertion that the *Bildungsroman* is the characteristic and nationally peculiar genre of the nineteenth-century German novel . . . one should recognize the presence of a myth and assume the appropriate posture of reverence and skepticism” (p. 245), whereby one watches as the bildungsroman disappears from the central tradition of the German novel as well.

I.2

Few literary notions are as widely employed and at the same time as deeply problematic as the term “bildungsroman.” Thus, I propose to reexamine the status of the bildungsroman as a generic category by first tracing its historical reception and then submitting it to the litmus test of recent genre theory. Such an undertaking deserves a book-length study of its

own, but it seems to me that something of value can be accomplished even within the confines of a brief chapter.

Genre theory is of course an extremely vexed topic: as Fowler has well noted, “[m]uch genre criticism... has failed to describe individual works even plausibly” (p. 25), and from the outset one must face the possibility that such an attempt will manage only to shed dark upon the dark. Recent criticism has questioned many received notions regarding genre and even the validity of the concept as such. Yet, even if the genre *bildungsroman* is more problematic than most and the theoretical problems surrounding genre are generally intractable, I would argue that the interpretive process is inherently “generic” in and of itself<sup>6</sup> and that the problems of genre are thus unavoidable.

Before proceeding, however, we must face and dispatch four possible objections to the approach I shall take that arise out of genre theory. The first is the most fundamental, namely, the deep skepticism as regards the concept expressed by Derrida in his essay “La Loi du genre” (“The Law of Genre”). Derrida’s argument can be resolved into two main concerns, the first having to do with the aura of “authoritarianism” that surrounds the concept: “the elliptical reminder, yet all the more authoritative, of a law of ‘you must’ or ‘you must not.’ Of which everyone knows that the concept of *genre* resides or its value is constituted” (p. 177). The second stems from what Derrida sees as an inherent self-contradiction, a perverse dialectic of inclusion via a demarcation that amounts to exclusion, whereby genre becomes “a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitic economy” (pp. 179–181).

For anyone adopting such a position, the difficulties Derrida’s essay seeks to address are not surprising, since they are inherent in the concept of genre as such. However, one does not need to subscribe to a quasiplatonic notion of hypostatized categories, nor to equate genre with biological genus in order to resist such skepticism. Among others, Fowler has argued convincingly that genre is properly a matter of interpretation, not quasibiological taxonomy: “At any rate there is no doubt that genre primarily has to do with communication. It is an instrument not of classification or prescription, but of meaning” (p. 22). “We identify the genre to interpret the exemplar” (p. 38). Genre’s proper function is not prescriptive, but rather heuristic. The same argument will serve to answer Derrida’s second contention as well. Genre conventions are not an alien power that invades, pollutes, or preys upon the text: rather, they are the necessary precondition for any understanding; they are the informing “*langue*” that makes “*parole*” possible in the “radically de-contextualized commerce” of literature (Fowler, p. 22).

4 Goethe and the Myth of the Bildungsroman

The second possible objection is the converse of the first: a claim (such as Croce's) that there are no "genres," but only individual works. The approximate response to this second objection would again be the same: although its relationship to the texts themselves is merely heuristic, genre is nevertheless constitutive of our interpretive understanding and thus an essential moment in the hermeneutic process.<sup>6</sup>

The third potential objection represents a variation on the second – Todorov's claim that the "literary" is precisely that which breaks with conventions:

We don't recognize a text's right to count in history of literature, or that of science, unless it brings a change in the idea that we had up to now of one or the other activity. Texts that don't fulfill this condition pass automatically into another category: that of literature which is called "popular," "for the masses," something for school textbooks.<sup>7</sup>

But as Todorov is well aware, this is true only in a limited sense. Shakespeare's sonnets do not break the convention outright; they explore all its possibilities, thereby expanding it. If they merely broke the convention, they would not have been recognized as sonnets in the first place. Clearly there must be a recognizable norm before there can be innovation *within* a genre, which Todorov again admits.<sup>8</sup>

The fourth objection is the pragmatic argument that it does not matter how we define or use a literary term, so long as we all know roughly what we mean. In the case of the bildungsroman, such a pragmatic definition would amount to something like: "The late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German novel, and imitations thereof." The first problem with such an approach, in which literary terms function essentially as ostensive gestures, is that such an initial gesture would be impossible to make in the absence of clear criteria for selection. The second is that such gestures remain incapable of resolving disagreements. And this is precisely what has bedeviled the bildungsroman: Even a cursory glance at the state of the scholarship reveals a striking – perhaps even an unprecedented – lack of clarity and agreement as to both appropriate criteria and unambiguous exemplars. A different approach is needed.

### I.3

Among recent studies on genre, I find that Klaus Hempfer's recommends itself most highly for its rigorous and thorough treatment of the theoretical problems attendant upon the determination of genre (Fowler's more empirical treatment, which can only be called magisterial, will prove equally valuable in Section 1.4). Therefore, I propose that we follow

Hempfer's judicious prescription for a three-stage progression from "formation of a canon" to "structuring" to "differentiating" in our own recapitulation of attempts to define the bildungsroman.<sup>9</sup>

We cannot confront an unstructured list of potential texts "innocently" because, as Hempfer writes, "every new attempt at structuring and grouping [relies], besides the texts themselves, on the previously undertaken groupings as a reference point." Thus, it is necessary to begin with the historical reception of the genre: "Therefore the textual basis itself, the canon, can be best established through the aesthetics of reception" (p. 135). I would propose, moreover, that we extend this historical treatment initially to all three stages, thereby viewing the progression of scholarship on the bildungsroman as itself a kind of large metasubjective hermeneutical process. Only in this way can we gain a clear view of the problem in all of its ramifications.

Our first task is to establish a minimal consensual canon on the basis of the history of reception of our putative genre ("formation of the canon").<sup>10</sup> However, the term "bildungsroman," as it is widely understood, is so vague that one is immediately confronted with enormous problems. Michael Beddow begins his perceptive study by noting – rightly I think – that "[t]he term 'Bildungsroman' is often used to describe any novel which depicts the development of a single hero or heroine" (p. 1); the catch resulting from this nigh all-inclusive operational definition has been predictably immense. Applying this single criterion, precious few novels would *not* qualify as bildungsromane, and indeed few have escaped the assignation at one time or another.

However, the situation is even worse than Beddow concedes, for several important and influential studies of the genre (e.g. Gerhard and Stahl) have refused to respect even the initial qualifier ("novel") and thus trace the ancestry of the bildungsroman all the way back to Wolfram's *Parsifal*! Lothar Köhn (author of the standard report on research) begins with Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus* (usually included, of course, among the "canonical" picaresque novels). At the same time, the term is widely employed in describing even the latest contemporary fiction (e.g. the socialist bildungsroman). Thus, one is immediately defeated by the lack of clear differential criteria and distinct historical delimiters in the conventional understanding of the term.

Moreover, even if one chooses to dismiss these semantic and historical extrapolations as unfortunate and uncharacteristic excesses – insisting that *Bildung* be interpreted in strictly historical terms and one's investigation be limited to the eighteenth, nineteenth, and perhaps early twentieth centuries – overwhelming difficulties remain. In a recent study thus

6 Goethe and the Myth of the Bildungsroman

limited, and meant to update Lothar Köhn's standard report on research, Rolf Selbmann begins with the striking admission that he was unable to find any consensual "canon" at all:

Already in the first go at setting the themes, a remarkable observation had to be dealt with when applying the concept of the *Bildungsroman*, namely the fact that the term is established and universally accepted, although at the same time just about every *Bildungsroman* of the 18th and 19th century is controversial as to this generic description. Even worse: what's supposed to be a "proper" *Bildungsroman* is a question that has been answered totally differently for every novel and in every epoch.

If Selbmann's conclusions are true (and I think they are), such a paradox might give one pause. Conceded that all genres are inherently "metastable" (Colie, p. 30), that they "are continually undergoing metamorphosis" (Fowler, p. 23), and even, as Todorov has written, that every exemplar modifies the species (*Introduction*, p. 10), still, metamorphosis is not pure "Wechsel" (change); it requires some "Dauer" (continuity) as well. It takes at least two texts to make a genre.

Thus, I would submit that no consensus actually exists regarding even a minimal canon of the bildungsroman. But lest our investigation grind to an immediate halt, we must suspend our disbelief and assume a consensus that does not in fact obtain. In order to progress from "formation of a canon" to "structuring," let us adopt the short list of Wieland's *Agathon*, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Stifter's *Indian Summer*, Keller's *Green Henry*, and Mann's *The Magic Mountain* proposed by Beddow, who argues that "any account of what a Bildungsroman is that failed to encompass those five works as a very minimum would simply not be about the Bildungsroman at all."<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Beddow has prepared a fallback from even that minimal position: if nothing else, all critics must surely agree that *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* exemplifies the genre.<sup>12</sup>

However, if we review scholars' attempts to determine the elements that these texts share, what we find, again, is that the process simply breaks down. Instead of a clear list of criteria, what has gradually emerged is widespread skepticism regarding the very existence of the genre itself.<sup>13</sup> In place of the full rehearsal that is of course precluded by lack of space, let us continue our historical hermeneutic by considering a number of symptomatic studies and conclusions drawn by important scholars who have undertaken such a full review.

The earliest attempts at a definition of the bildungsroman already yield striking paradoxes and deep self-contradictions.<sup>14</sup> In his *Essay on the Novel* of 1774, Blanckenburg describes a kind of fiction that might be construed

as a bildungsroman, arguing that “the *education*, the *forming* of a character” must be the “established purpose” of every good novel (p. 321). Yet he confesses in the same breath, as it were, “Of such novels we have perhaps not more than two or three – perhaps even only one” (p. vii), by which he means Wieland’s *Agathon*, but only insofar as it successfully imitates Richardson and Fielding (neither of whom wrote bildungsromane) and Selbmann has rightly pointed out that the ideal novel Blanckenburg describes “does not exist yet at all” (p. 9). First to coin the term “bildungsroman” was Karl Morgenstern, in 1819; however, Morgenstern now argues that *every* good novel is a “bildungsroman.” This disturbing dialectic of everything and nothing is one we shall meet again. More confusing yet, Morgenstern puts forth as his prime exemplars the novels of Klingler, which nobody would now consider bildungsromane, but fails even to mention *Wilhelm Meister*!

Thus, the early reception of the bildungsroman is more than a little confused. The history of the genre in the nineteenth century has been summarized in a fine and widely noted article by Jeffrey Sammons, who arrives at a conclusion as striking as Selbmann’s confession quoted earlier: “I am obliged to report that, after what I regard as some reasonably conscientious inquiry and research, I have been unable to locate this celebrated genre in the nineteenth century” (p. 230), although he later allows one might be able, at the outside, to admit “*Wilhelm Meister* and maybe two and a half other examples” (p. 237).

One is *Indian Summer*, yet its inclusion is immediately retracted by the qualification that “it is a very eccentric novel; there is perhaps nothing else resembling it in European literature” (p. 236) – i.e. it is *sui generis*. Even a quick review of the scholarship on *Indian Summer* reveals an ongoing reticence to term it a “bildungsroman”: Neither Krüger’s study of 1906 nor Lukács’s of 1916 mentions the novel, Victor Lange dismisses the appellation, Rehm avoids it, and Emil Staiger has called for its exclusion from the “canon.”<sup>15</sup>

Sammons dispatches *Green Henry* with similar ease, calling it “a chronicle of wasted time,” asserting that “if ever a novel was marked by the absence of effective *Bildung*, it is this” and reminding us that a contemporary critic had written “perceptively” to Keller that it was a tragic *Bildung* (Sammons, pp. 236–237). Selbmann interprets the novel as a “*Bildungsroman*... ex negativo” (p. 134) with a “pedagogical conception formulated as a subjunctive” (p. 136) unfolding “in negativity” (p. 139). Jacobs terms it an “anti-developmental novel” (p. 181), a “*Bildungsroman* that stops short of its goal” (p. 182). Miles reads both *Indian Summer* and *Green Henry* as anti-bildungsromane.<sup>16</sup>

As for *The Magic Mountain*, Köhn's review of research barely mentions the novel, while Selbmann interprets it as the archetypal anti-bildungsroman (p. 157).<sup>17</sup> The conclusion of Jacobs's study provides telling, if unwilling, evidence that there is something profoundly wrong with our understanding of the genre, although Jacobs prefers to blame it on the novels themselves: having failed to find a group of novels that fit his criteria for *Bildung*, he declares the genre to be incomplete and unfulfilled!<sup>18</sup>

Still, it would seem that one final anchor to windward remained: *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. But even this ultimate certitude has steadily eroded, beginning with the faint questions posed by Jürgen Rausch's article of 1942.<sup>19</sup> Schlechta's argument of 1953 totally denying any development on Wilhelm's part

Recalling to mind in broad strokes the progress of the novel, and especially Wilhelm's development, then we can hardly resist the impression that both on the whole and also in countless details a kind of hidden mockery is being undertaken. He develops – that is for sure. But in a mysterious way he also becomes less and less: he loses color and contour, and every kind of definiteness. He also loses warmth and the ability to persuade. His form, his ability to sense and to express himself gets lost – we noticed that especially when here and there he falls back into his old tone. Out of a vital, unmistakable person we get almost a concept, an “ideal.” (p. 203)

was shrill enough to ignore perhaps, but Kurt May's blunt question of 1957 (“*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, ein Bildungsroman?*”) had to be faced, and his answer was equally blunt: “Countless interpreters have recognized in good faith a harmonic *Bildung* at the end of the *Apprenticeship* – but not Goethe himself” (p. 34). Hans Eichner's article of 1966 sought to chart the ironic undercurrents of the novel, and particularly its ending, again casting doubt upon the *Apprenticeship*'s conventional generic classification:

Wilhelm is not merely, and perhaps not even principally, the hero of a *Bildungsroman*. He is also the hero of a picaresque novel and the hero, if one may dare so extreme a characterization, of a realistic fairytale: he is Fortunate Hans. . . . It's perhaps not the right conclusion for a *Bildungsroman* in the sense of the usual definitions, but it is the right conclusion for the novel that Goethe actually wrote. (pp. 195–196)

By the time we reach Klaus Gille's standard *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of 1971, Eichner's skeptical relativization has become emphatic denial:

If we consider both of the last books of the novel, then we see that Wilhelm is still very far from Schiller's theoretically postulated “beautiful moral freedom.” To be sure, on entering the world of the Tower, Wilhelm gains insight into the senselessness of his theatrical career. He is declared saved



by the Society of the Tower, and he is released from his apprenticeship. And yet the work ends with Wilhelm's total resignation and insight into the meaninglessness of every attempt at *Bildung*. Two attempts to shape his life individually, the union with Theresa and his attempt to flee the realm of the Tower come to nothing, and at the end Wilhelm has gained nothing more for his *Bildung* than the knowledge: "I surrender completely to my friends and their guidance. . . . It is pointless to strive with one's own will in this world." (pp. 17–18)

Blessin notes in 1974 the deep contradictions of a bildungsroman "whose hero learns nothing" (p. 208), of a "novel of development, without in the end a cognitively comprehensible development taking place in the sense of a rising biography" (p. 209). Recently, Hartmut Steinecke has argued that we must view *Wilhelm Meister* as the prototype of a kind of novel "whose essential elements are conceived too narrowly with the designation 'Bildungsroman.'"<sup>20</sup>

The upshot of this history of reception in outline is, I believe, abundantly clear: within German scholarship at least (more on English scholarship later), all the supposedly indisputable exemplars of the genre, the traditional classification of *Wilhelm Meister* as a "bildungsroman," and indeed even the very existence of the genre itself have become the objects of widespread skepticism. Steinecke again puts it briefly and well: "The concept 'Bildungsroman' has its historical justification, but it does not characterize the phenomenon, but rather the interpretation of the phenomenon"<sup>21</sup> — i.e. it is a critical fiction.

The third and final stage in our historical hermeneutic would be to develop clear differential criteria on the basis of our restructured "canon." However, the textual basis has simply evaporated. Having come full circle in our historical hermeneutic, we have arrived precisely nowhere and can only extend to the genre as a whole Jeffrey Sammons's sardonic conclusion regarding its existence in the nineteenth century: "Doubtless there are many legends in literary history. I wonder, however, if there is another one so lacking in foundation and so misleading as the phantom of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*" (p. 243). Our historical review of the scholarship on the German "canon" has led not to a refined definition of the bildungsroman but rather to its dissolution, to a "phantom genre" (Sammons, p. 239).

Interpreters of English literature have meanwhile taken up the notion of the bildungsroman with a vengeance. I find this ironic, first of all, in that the historical evidence runs strongly *against* the German bildungsroman having been the direct inspiration for the nineteenth-century

English novel, as e.g. David DeLaura's study of "Goethe and the Fortunes of *Bildung* in Victorian England" has convincingly argued. Moreover, Jerome Buckley's "broad outlines of a typical Bildungsroman plot" (pp. 17–18) simply do not fit even the novels of our "minimal" German "canon."<sup>22</sup> Heather Dubrow has chosen the bildungsroman as one of the prime paradigm cases (indeed the very first example) in her book on genre, but again the specific criteria she offers fail to fit a single one of our "canonical" German novels: none "begins with the birth of the hero" (p. 2) and none "leaves a provincial town or the countryside for the city" (p. 112) – if anything, the progression is decidedly the reverse.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, if there is one thing on which recent studies of the German bildungsroman seem to agree, it is that they are not realistic in the way e.g. the great nineteenth-century English novels are. One might well suspect that the current use of the term "bildungsroman" in English criticism is not based upon a careful consideration either of the lines of actual historical influence or of the German novels that have been imported into the genealogy. Both can be termed "bildungsromane" only in a sense so vague as to be useless for interpretation, if not downright misleading. In the case of genres at a further remove, defined either in accordance with or in opposition to the bildungsroman, English or German, the same scruples apply of course a fortiori.<sup>24</sup>

And there we have the problem: if one takes *Bildung* in its strict and limited historical sense, then nothing is a bildungsroman – not even *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*; however, if one takes it in the loose sense, something like "development of the protagonist," then *everything* is a bildungsroman. Either horn of this dilemma alone would be sharp enough, but we have arrived at an even worse impasse and must face both: German departments having effectively rejected the strict definition and English departments having sallied forth to champion the vague. Can a critical term that applies simultaneously to everything and nothing have any explanatory value whatsoever?

#### I.4

We have seen that both the vague and the specific stalwarts of the interpretive tradition ("development" and *Bildung*) have led to insuperable problems when taken as the defining criteria. Admittedly this does not prove the nonexistence of the bildungsroman, but only that adequate criteria for its definition have yet to be found. Thus, we need somehow to