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Mastery, Secrecy, and Money  
in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*

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Money and a secret society hold sway over Goethe's protagonist in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. Their interplay is fascinating because Wilhelm is largely ignorant of how each influences the course of his journey. Central for my analysis is the revelation near the end of the novel that Wilhelm has been the object of continuous surveillance by the *Turmgesellschaft*. This brotherhood transcribes and shapes every detail of his life, yet the depiction of its clandestine intrigues does not substantiate its alleged position of omniscience. I will demonstrate that the implicit role of money in the text contributes to fulfilling the function credited to the secret society; for while Wilhelm is the object of covert observation and designs, he is also objectified and manipulated in the market framework. These parallels then serve as the foundation for my argument that money is a key factor in determining Wilhelm's ultimate relationship to the *Turmgesellschaft*.

Wilhelm is commodified at the outset by his lover Mariane, who weighs the value of her love for him against the material advantages offered by her other suitor, Norberg. Wilhelm soon resolves to set off and build a life based on his passion for the theater and Mariane, but he launches his quest under the aegis of trade and money. Since his family and friends want him to participate in the market economy, they arrange for him to take a business trip, during the course of which Wilhelm intends to create an existence apart from their world. However, his mission of personal and artistic fulfillment is governed by the definitive financial framework in which he operates. The narrator reports, "er erkannte den Wink eines leitenden Schicksals an diesen zusammentreffenden Umständen" (41; Book 1, Ch. 11), but instead of the *Schutzgeist* that Wilhelm envisions, the manipulative forces of money and the *Turmgesellschaft* shape the course of his journey.

Some of Wilhelm's greatest joy occurs at the beginning of Book II, when he finds himself among others who share his interest in theater. The desperate tone of his love affair in Book I gives way to an atmosphere of carefree flirtation, but, much like the secret society, the specter of money is present even in these times of naïve complacency. When Wilhelm undertakes a journey with his new acquaintances, Laertes and Philine, the narrator emphasizes the group's unsparing behavior. During the first leg of the coach ride, they hand out money freely, and on the return trip Philine's generosity is highlighted:

Drollig bis zur Ausgelassenheit, setzte sie ihre Freigebigkeit gegen die Armen auf dem Heimweg fort, indem sie zuletzt, da ihf und ihren Reisegefährten das Geld ausging, einem Mädchen ihren Strohhut und einem alten Weibe ihr Halstuch zum Schlage hinauswarf. (96; Book 2, Ch. 4)

Much as the companions' joy came forth initially through their charity, here the success of the outing is manifested in Philine's *Ausgelassenheit*. Her simultaneous loss of possessions and inhibitions establishes a correlation between items of value and feelings of happiness. The nature of this relationship, however, is ambiguous, for upon closer inspection cause and effect appear interchangeable. Philine's outward conduct may indeed reflect her emotions, but it is just as likely that giving to the poor *brings about* her exuberance. Georg Simmel describes just such a mode of existence in "Über Geiz, Verschwendung und Armut," where he shows how money has become an end rather than a means. It is through expenditure, he posits, and not hoarding, that money is enjoyed as an abstract good, separate from its intended function. This suggests that rather than acting according to how they feel, Wilhelm and his friends actually purchase good spirits through their squandering: they feel according to how they spend. Here and elsewhere in the novel, cash and material possessions govern Wilhelm's most intimate experiences.

This is especially evident in his relationship with Melina, a theater aficionado suffering harassment from his prospective in-laws. Having recently conducted a business transaction with the

latter, Wilhelm feels justified in intervening on Melina's behalf. This, however, leads to a continual series of obligations, because once Wilhelm assumes a social role grounded in monetary affairs, he remains bound within it. He manages initially to negotiate the legal obstacles preventing Melina's marriage, but where one might expect unconditional gratitude, Melina instead faults Wilhelm for failing to make arrangements for his livelihood. By exerting his influence in this sphere, Wilhelm inadvertently makes himself an economic instrument in the context of his relationship with Melina. The same repercussion attends Wilhelm's agreement to bankroll theater equipment for Melina in Book II, after which Melina relentlessly presses him to follow through with the purchase. That Wilhelm ultimately succumbs by objectifying Melina in return emphasizes money's growing impact on his subjectivity. He is caught at a moment when he is especially intent on pursuing Philine, and says to Melina, "Wenn ich Sie dadurch glücklich und zufrieden machen kann, so will ich mich nicht länger bedenken. Gehn Sie hin, machen Sie alles richtig" (137; Book 2, Ch. 12). This transaction resembles a bribe more than a loan made in good faith, for Wilhelm only meets Melina's demands when he decides to use financial leverage to satisfy his own interests. He relegates Melina's individuality by depicting his happiness as an economic function, and with the command "Gehn sie hin" reveals that he is using money to dispense with an obstacle rather than to reach an agreement with a peer.

It is ironic that theater contributes to drawing Wilhelm into a situation governed by economic parameters; for as a symbol of his freedom, theater stands opposed to the world of finance. Nevertheless, Wilhelm begins his romantic journey under the auspices of a business trip, and then, because of Melina's theatrical ambitions, is compelled to assign a cash value to his art. Furthermore, his first success at establishing himself in a theater community is adulterated from the outset by financial considerations. The troupe's engagement by the baron, a patron, comes across as desirable particularly because Melina secures favorable arrangements for the actors. The promise of money and sustenance creates the basis for a positive reaction to having found an audience, and the resulting joy is itself expressed through the filter of a cash mentality: "Sie machten sich schon zum voraus auf jene Rechnung lustig, und jedes hielt für

unschicklich, nur noch irgendeinen Groschen Geld in der Tasche zu behalten" (157; Book 3, Ch. 2). Here again, money is squandered not simply as an effect of happiness, but as an act comprising and creating it. In this case, such behavior precludes the possibility for expressions that might emerge out of artistic and personal satisfaction rather than greed.

The theatrical engagement on the baron's estate also draws Wilhelm back into the cycle of economic obligation that governs his relationship with Melina, as the latter hopes to reduce his debt to Wilhelm by negotiating favorable arrangements with the baron. This complicates Wilhelm's artistic motivations with considerations of achieving compensation for his investment in the enterprise. Furthermore, his relationship with the actors amplifies his objectification as an economic agent in his social relations. When the troupe's caravan is attacked by bandits and forfeits most of its possessions, Wilhelm is seriously injured in the struggle, yet the others are distressed only about their losses and not his condition. Despite his proven devotion to them, most of the group scorns him following the catastrophe. The imminent threat to his life fails to mitigate his peers' calculated assessment of him based solely on his capacity to promote their interests. Even more startling is how Wilhelm readily accepts their blame and, as if negotiating a contract, vows to compensate them for their losses. Marc Shell cites a similar conception of money and language from ancient Greek writer Athenaeus: "Why not pay him with a word of your own, as if you were exchanging money, as if every man were a mint of words and hence the center of an economy of abundance" (*Money* 44). Likewise, Wilhelm attempts with a promise to offset the debt he has incurred by no fault of his own, other than his capitulation to dehumanizing social pressures.

A series of interactions that occur while Wilhelm is still on the baron's estate also serve to undermine his selfhood. In terms of sexuality, his relationship with Mariane reappears in a polarized form; while she projected a lack on him, here he becomes the site of investment. When the troupe first arrives and is greeted with less hospitality than anticipated, Philine, who is permitted entrance into the castle, sends out a gift of fruit and sweets for Wilhelm. Closer inspection reveals this superficially generous act to be an instance

of sexual aggression expedited through economic means. Philine flaunts her advantage over Wilhelm by imposing a token of affection on him. She knows that he must accept the gift—in contrast to her prior advances which he often spurned—because the stranded company is in dire need of sustenance. Under a similar pretense, the countess bestows on Wilhelm a shell decorated with jewels and, emphasizing the sexual nature of the gesture, a lock of her hair. Both this gift and that from Philine are examples of coquettishness, which, as Georg Simmel notes, is not a means of attracting others, but rather a way of making others into a prize for oneself:

...dass ein Preis dafür gefordert wird, dass sein Erwerb nicht etwas Selbstverständliches, sondern nur mit Opfern und Mühen Gelingendes ist – das macht und unzählige Male erst das Ding reizvoll und begehrenswert. (Simmel, "Koketterie" 257)

Such motives govern the behavior of Philine and the countess towards Wilhelm, and their attentions, accordingly, are less than genuine. The countess incites his desire with a brief kiss and then abruptly sends him off, while Philine takes advantage of him when he is in a drunken stupor. In each case, Wilhelm unwittingly assumes the role of a plaything.

A gift from the baron further compromises Wilhelm's identity by catalyzing his allegiance to a monetary value system. When the baron offers him payment for his theater work, Wilhelm initially demurs. He tells the baron, "Es vernichtet gleichsam das wenige, was ich getan habe" (211; Book 4, Ch. 1), seemingly concerned that such compensation might taint his feeling of artistic achievement. Yet, when the baron refuses to remain indebted, the debate begins to resemble a polite formality. That Wilhelm couches his objection in the very terms he pretends to eschew is evident in his use of the word *vernichtet*. He pronounces his concern that the baron's offer would 'nullify' the sanctity of his accomplishment, but implies that it would 'cancel' the debt owed him for his efforts. The full extent of his insincerity becomes evident when the narrator reports, "Der Baron hatte kaum das Zimmer verlassen, als Wilhelm eifrig die Barschaft zählte..." (212; Book 4, Ch. 1). Wilhelm's interaction with

the baron is all theater, for at the moment when he acts reluctant to put a price on his art, he is actually performing to ensure his reward. His dissimulation then turns into self-estrangement as he examines his spoils: "Es schien, als ob ihm der Wert und die Würde des Goldes...ahnungsweise zum erstenmal entgegenblickten, als die schönen, blinkenden Stücke aus dem zierlichen Beutel hervorrollten" (Ibid.). Wilhelm yields his sovereignty to an abstract value system as the worship of money takes precedence over his work and ideals.

This process of alienation is further evident in Wilhelm's admiration of the aristocracy, the members of which he sees as possessing true self-determination. His mindset portends reification under modern capitalism, which instills the illusion that there is greater freedom among the upper classes by obscuring universal enslavement to the commodity form (Lukács, "Reification"). Such false consciousness informs Wilhelm's belief that through the theater he can surmount the limitations of bourgeois existence. This is problematic because he grounds his vision of freedom firmly in a class context:

Du siehst wohl, daß alles für mich nur auf dem Theater zu finden ist und daß ich mich in diesem einzigen Elemente nach Wunsch rühren und ausbilden kann. Auf dem Brettern erscheint der gebildete Mensch so gut persönlich in seinem Glanz als in den obern Klassen. (303; Book 5, Ch. 3)

The upper class, according to Georg Simmel, has held aesthetic attraction over time because it is like an island in the world and therefore comparable to an artwork. Its separate parts form a unified whole within a self-enclosed framework which the outside world cannot enter (*Soziologie* 827). Wilhelm admires the symbiosis of personal and class existence among the nobility and laments that the divergent ambitions of the bourgeoisie prohibit such cohesion. Still, he can hardly expect to shrug off his background while reinforcing it through the characteristic bourgeois pursuit of social advancement. He strives to emulate the aristocracy, yet at the same time adulates its members because they are above self-improvement. Wilhelm's growing self-alienation over the course of the narrative is evident in his evolving priorities, which by this point have come to

include money and adopting a class identity not his own.

It is significant that he fails to account for the power relations that let the nobility achieve harmony between group and individual interests. A reciprocal process empowers members by integrating them in a distinct class identity that subsumes varied personalities and makes differences into the symbols of a totally self-sufficient and delimited body (Simmel, *Soziologie* 822). Wilhelm's attraction to this class precipitates his vulnerability to the influence of the *Turmgesellschaft*, for, like the aristocracy, groups who practice secrecy build a wall against the outside world. Furthermore, the makeup of secret societies requires individuals to assume a predetermined role in which personal characteristics disappear (Simmel, *Soziologie* 453). Here, Wilhelm's desire to synthesize acting and noble grandeur culminates with him compromising his ideals in exchange for acceptance in an elite sect.

Beyond his attraction to the aristocratic makeup of the *Turmgesellschaft*, Wilhelm's proclivity for financial interaction also makes him receptive to the group's entreaties. The *Turmgesellschaft* prizes skill in worldly affairs and attempts to instill this value in Wilhelm. For example, the *Lehrbrief* he receives from the Abbé, one of the leaders, instructs him that "Der Geist, aus dem wir handeln, ist das Höchste" (519; Book 7, Ch. 9). Also, Wilhelm's friend Werner, a devotee of such principles, recruits him to oversee the progress of an estate purchase that he is financing jointly with the society. He tells Wilhelm, "es sieht doch aus, als wenn du, mit einiger Vernunft, in die menschlichen Unternehmungen eingreifen könntest. Deine neuen Freunde sollen gepriesen sein, da sie dich auf den rechten Weg gebracht haben" (525; Book 8, Ch. 1). While becoming involved in the enterprises of the *Turmgesellschaft*, Wilhelm simultaneously harbors romantic notions of starting a new life free from such concerns. Yet, in preparing to depart, he laments that he is perpetually unfulfilled, whereas "jeder andere, der nach irdischen Waren strebt, sie in den verschiedenen Himmelsgegenden oder wohl gar auf der Messe und dem Jahrmarkt anschaffen kann" (596; Book 8, Ch. 7). He deludes himself in imagining that he can break away from the society at this point, for he is clearly under the sway of its materialistic ideology.

Again, Wilhelm's mode of thought foreshadows the reified

consciousness that Lukács identifies as symptomatic of modern capitalism, but which is certainly embryonic in the early capitalism of the late eighteenth-century:

[Modern capitalism] integrates into its own system those forms of primitive capitalism that led to an isolated existence in pre-capitalist times...in the minds of people in bourgeois society they constitute the pure, authentic, unadulterated forms of capital. In them the relations between men that lie hidden in the immediate commodity relation... can be neither recognized nor even perceived. (93)

Accordingly, Wilhelm is ignorant not only of his involvement in a monetary matrix, but also of the loss of autonomy that accompanies his association with the *Turmgesellschaft*. Deliberate obscurity, according to Marc Shell, is a trait of tyranny, and he further contends that “visibility and invisibility are associated by some Greek thinkers with something at times believed to be more insidious than tyranny—namely, money” (Shell, *Economy* 31). These reflections recall Lukács’ conception of a hegemonic capitalist structure that perpetuates itself by remaining outside of consciousness. All of this indicates the tyrannous nature of the secret society, which employs invisibility in order to manipulate Wilhelm and foster his proto-capitalistic mentality. It is by revealing itself, however, that the *Turmgesellschaft* ultimately fixes its hold over him.

Reference to Michel Foucault’s investigation of ‘panopticism’ helps to resolve this apparent paradox. The police in eighteenth-century Paris carried out “permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible...and this unceasing observation had to be accumulated in a series of reports and registers” (214). The *Turmgesellschaft* employs the methods of this police apparatus, which Foucault cites as a key moment in “the formation of a disciplinary society...in this movement that stretches...to an indefinitely generalizable mechanism of ‘panopticism’” (215-16). The salient feature of the Panopticon, moreover, is that it controls prisoners through their *perception* of being under constant watch. It is therefore

revealing that Wilhelm capitulates to the secret society only after learning from the manuscript of his *Lehrjahre*, “daß er in so vielen Umständen seines Lebens, in denen er frei und im verborgenen zu handeln glaubte, beobachtet, ja sogar geleitet worden war” (530; Book 8, Ch. 1). Consequently, despite his resolution to leave, he yields to the Abbé’s wishes, saying, “Ich überlasse mich ganz meinen Freunden und ihrer Führung...es ist vergebens, in dieser Welt nach eigenem Willen zu streben. Was ich festzuhalten wünschte, muß ich fahrenlassen” (623; Book 8, Ch. 10). Regarding Goethe’s novel, Lukács concludes that the agents “of active life-domination” prevent a genuine synthesis between personal fulfillment and external social structures (“Synthesis” 141). More precisely, through the effects of money, class, and manipulation, the secret society subsumes Wilhelm’s ideals in its own designs.

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