

# *The Wanderer*

in 19th-Century German Literature

INTELLECTUAL HISTORY AND CULTURAL CRITICISM



Andrew Cusack

*The Wanderer in Nineteenth-Century German Literature*

*Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture*

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in Nineteenth-Century  
German Literature

Intellectual History and Cultural Criticism

Andrew Cusack

CAMDEN HOUSE  
Rochester, New York

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First published 2008  
by Camden House

Camden House is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Inc.  
668 Mt. Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620, USA  
[www.camden-house.com](http://www.camden-house.com)  
and of Boydell & Brewer Limited  
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK  
[www.boydellandbrewer.com](http://www.boydellandbrewer.com)

ISBN-13: 978-1-57113-386-1  
ISBN-10: 1-57113-386-0

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cusack, Andrew, 1969—

The wanderer in nineteenth-century German literature : intellectual history and cultural criticism / Andrew Cusack.

p. cm. —

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-57113-386-1 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-57113-386-0 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. German literature — 19th century — History and criticism.
2. Nomads in literature. I. Title.

PT363.N6C87 2008  
830.9'3526918—dc22

2008009729

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

This publication is printed on acid-free paper.  
Printed in the United States of America.

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*To the memory of my father, John Christopher Cusack.*

Caminante, son tus huellas  
el camino, y nada más;  
caminante, no hay camino,  
se hace camino al andar.

— Antonio Machado, *Proverbios y cantares*

[Wayfarer, it is your footprints  
That are the road, and nothing besides;  
Wayfarer, there is no road,  
But that made in the traveling.]

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## Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK IS THE RESULT OF research conducted at Trinity College Dublin between October 2003 and October 2006. I am grateful to the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences, who provided the funding that made the research, including a three-month stay in Göttingen, possible. I would like also to thank the University of Dublin, whose scholarship included the privilege of rooms on Trinity's magnificent campus.

The staff and graduate students at the Department of Germanic Studies all provided encouragement and advice at various times. They are too numerous to name individually, but I hope they will accept this expression of thanks, which, though general, is heartfelt. The following individuals and groups all contributed materially to the project and I want therefore to make special mention of them.

Eda Sagarra put me in touch with colleagues and gave generously of her time and hospitality. Her dedication to teaching and scholarship, especially (but not exclusively) on the German nineteenth century, is a source of inspiration not only to this writer, but also to an international community of Germanists.

I am most grateful to Jürgen Barkhoff for sharing his expertise in Romanticism and the *Goethezeit* and for providing a wealth of suggestions on research literature and theoretical texts. But it was in his capacity as reader, and thus as the interlocutor I kept in mind during the writing of this work, that he gave me the greatest assistance. His scholarly interest and unhesitating willingness to accompany the work through numerous drafts are greatly appreciated.

Gilbert Carr offered valuable help, and spurred me on to completion. In Cologne, Heide Streiter-Buscher responded generously to my enquiries about Fontane. The friendly and knowledgeable staff of the Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen and of the Library of Trinity College Dublin were always willing to answer my questions. For three years I was perhaps the best-known customer of Trinity's Inter-Library Loans office: their team tracked down German monographs and secondary literature with commendable efficiency.

At Camden House I had another learned reader and advisor in Jim Walker, the Editorial Director; he made me feel that his knowledge and experience were constantly at my disposal. His colleagues Katie Hurley (Managing Editor), Sue Smith (Production Manager), and Jane Best

(Production Editor) showed similarly impressive creative finesse and skill. Sue Innes was simply indispensable as a sharp-eyed and meticulous copy editor. At TCD, Tim Keefe helped prepare the illustrations for publication.

The Conference of University Teachers of German in Britain and Ireland generously provided financial assistance toward the costs of publishing the book.

Brenda Cusack and Brian Cusack, my mother and brother, were the source of essential moral support and encouragement throughout the various phases of research and writing. Their assistance has been no less valuable than that of my mentors. Brenda Cusack suggested Machado's lines as the epigraph to this book. And Brian Cusack provided a living example of a Romantic scientist of the kind I've tried to describe in chapter 2.

Dublin, February 2008

## Introduction

THE AIMS OF THE FOLLOWING STUDY are threefold: to identify a range of works of nineteenth-century German literature in which the wanderer motif is a significant element of composition, to enquire into the semantic function of the motif in those works, and to demonstrate how the motif creates links between literary and non-literary discourses. The focus will be on prose genres, and especially on the novel, since this can act as a highly effective integrator of elements from literary and non-literary discourses, lending it an unrivalled capacity to interpret the discursive totality of its own era.<sup>1</sup> Of course, it should be borne in mind that the novel is not restricted to an interpretive function but can itself participate in cultural change by acting as a vehicle for ideology.

The German nineteenth century that forms the frame of reference for this study is not as long as that proposed by David Blackbourn.<sup>2</sup> Its scope is defined by the discernible presence of the motif itself. Our century opens in 1795, the year in which the first three of the four volumes of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* appeared; and it closes in 1895, with the publication of Wilhelm Raabe's *Die Akten des Vogelsangs*. However, it soon becomes apparent that the wanderer motif is far more prevalent in the early part of the century, especially in what is often referred to as the *Goethezeit*, and indeed its prevalence in that era must in part be due to the influence of Goethe, in whose fictions the motif attains a unique functional range. By contrast, German literature in the latter part of the century, particularly from around 1850 onward, appears strikingly barren of what hitherto had been an important motif, a circumstance that this study will attempt to explain.

It is necessary to provide a definition of what we are to understand as a wanderer in the specific frame of reference of German literature. The English word is used throughout to stand for the German *Wanderer* as a convenience, though the English and German words have a different semantic range, as the definitions of the verbs *wandern* / *to wander* should clarify. First the Duden definition of the German verb:

wandern: 1. eine Wanderung (längerer Weg durch die Natur, den man zu Fuß zurücklegt), Wanderungen machen [. . .]. 2. ohne ein Ziel anzusteuern, gemächlich gehen; sich irgendwo ergehen [. . .]. 3. (nicht sesshaft, ohne festen Aufenthaltsort) umher-, von Ort zu Ort, zu einem entfernten Ziel ziehen [. . .].<sup>3</sup>

Compare the corresponding definition of the English cognate:

wander I. Intransitive senses. [. . .]. 1.a. Of persons or animals: To move hither and thither without fixed course or certain aim; to be (in motion) without control or direction; to roam, ramble, go idly or restlessly about; to have no fixed abode or station. [. . .]. II. Transitive senses. [. . .]. 5. To roam over, in, through (a place), to traverse in wandering.<sup>4</sup>

The sense of aimlessness or undirectedness, which is dominant in the intransitive senses of the English verb, is facultative in its German equivalent. The German verb *wandern* denotes traveling, primarily the action of walking, which may or may not be directed at a particular goal. In this respect it is closer to the transitive senses of its English cognate.

When I refer to wandering in the following, the word should be understood in all the senses conveyed by the German verb *wandern*, a semantic range covered by the transitive uses of the English verb *to wander*. That is to say, wandering will be used throughout to denote travel, frequently (but not exclusively) in the sense of a journey undertaken on foot, which may or may not be directed toward a particular goal, but also to refer to nomadism, those forms of existence distinct from the settled life. The wanderers that I have in mind are therefore the itinerant players, peddlers, journeymen, gypsies, and migrants who thronged the roads throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as the artists, scientists, explorers, and students who, from the early phase of Romanticism onward, also identified themselves as wanderers.

We now need to attempt to clarify the status of that literary element, the motif, that forms the object of this study. The French word *motif* was first used as an aesthetic term in the *Encyclopédie* of 1765, where it was used in musicology to denote a minimal melodic element. It came to be applied to the visual arts in the late eighteenth century. Goethe is credited with being the first to employ the term with regard to literature,<sup>5</sup> in which field it signifies a minimal unit of content: “Im Deutschen bezeichnet das Wort Motiv eine kleinere stoffliche Einheit, die zwar noch nicht einen ganzen Plot, eine Fabel umfaßt, aber doch bereits ein inhaltliches, situationsmäßiges Element darstellt.”<sup>6</sup> The following definition is, however, more revealing of the functional role of the literary motif, specifying it as: “[das] kleinste selbständige Inhalts-Einheit oder tradierbares intertextuelles Element eines literarischen Werkes.”<sup>7</sup> On this definition, the motif is not merely a minimal element of content; it is an element that is highly amenable to being transmitted from one literary work to another.

It is precisely the intertextual status of the literary motif and its ability to be transmitted diachronically that are of particular interest in this study, which is concerned with the ways in which the motif of the wanderer is implemented by different authors in their particular historical settings. The aim is not to replicate the collecting and inventorying of motifs, familiar to us from folk-literature studies from the Grimm brothers to Stith Thompson, or to revive the scientific positivism of Wilhelm Scherer, but

to attempt to relate concrete realizations of the motif to historical, aesthetic, and genre factors.

Remarkably few studies of the wanderer motif have been undertaken in the German literature of the nineteenth century, and the few that exist exhibit various shortcomings.<sup>8</sup> As late as 1999 Wolfgang Albrecht could remark of such efforts “Diese Ansätze sind weder für die sogenannte Goethezeit noch für spätere Perioden fortgeführt worden,” concluding: “Nähere Beachtung verlangen ebenfalls die Motive des Wanderns in Literatur und bildender Kunst.”<sup>9</sup> Both of the studies mentioned by Albrecht, to my knowledge the only surveys of the motif of the wanderer (more precisely, of wandering) in German literature, are hampered by their methodological approaches. Neither study seeks to relate the realization of the motif in the literary works to the extra-literary context, grounded as they are in a work-immanent approach. As a result, the manner in which the motif contributes to the historical specificity of the works goes unconsidered. Moreover, the studies are vitiated by their proneness to unsupported affirmations of the works discussed or of authorial genius.

The following study, by contrast, seeks to situate the motif of the wanderer in its historical specificity. This requires viewing the motif in a much wider context than previously. Skorna restricts his enquiry to a particular genre (the novel) and period (*Goethezeit*); Schmidlin is content to trace the motif of wandering in the oeuvre of a single author (Goethe). In principle, this study is interested in all literary works in a given period in which the wanderer motif is a significant element of composition. However, since some restriction of the field is necessary, the focus will be on prose narratives, especially the novel, for the reason given above.

It should have become clear from the foregoing that the study is interested in the historicity of the various realizations of the motif of the wanderer. The study is based on two guiding assumptions: first, that the motif is widely used, that it is in some way characteristic of a significant body of literary works in the nineteenth century. Second, I shall assume that the prominence of the motif can be explained with reference to changes in the material and intellectual conditions occurring during that period. To clarify what is meant by changes in material conditions one need only point to the new technologies of travel, especially the railway. These innovations, together with the new phenomenon of mass migration, undoubtedly changed the view of man and his possibilities. But the period also witnessed the emergence of a new episteme, what Foucault has identified as the advent of “man” as an object of such new disciplines as anthropology.<sup>10</sup> This turn of scientific attention to the processes of life gave rise to new cultural practices aimed at molding the human body. Among these we find a new form of pedestrianism, which Hans-Joachim Althaus terms “bürgerliches Freizeitwandern.”<sup>11</sup> This practice is a product of the late Enlightenment, but it is the literature of Romanticism that is primarily

responsible for popularizing it. What is significant about it is that it rests on a new understanding of the self as the object of knowledge and of ameliorative action. The political implications of the practice are clear: the technique of bourgeois wandering was aimed at maintaining the physical and mental condition, and hence the productivity, of the individual bourgeois subject.

A concern with the historicity of literary texts is characteristic of two closely related interpretive approaches: new historicism and cultural materialism. This study will draw on the hermeneutic resources of these models while trying to avoid some of their pitfalls, which I will discuss below. What these two approaches have in common is that they regard the culture in which literary texts are situated as a context. That is to say, they treat culture itself as a text, a paradigm associated in the field of cultural anthropology with its leading proponent, the ethnographer, Clifford Geertz. Geertz credits Max Weber, who sees man as inhabiting self-spun webs of significance, as his source; but French post-structuralism — Derrida's work on semiotics, Kristeva's on intertextuality — is the true fount of the current idea of culture as *texte général*.<sup>12</sup> For Geertz the only way for the ethnographer to get to grips with the complexities of a foreign (or any) culture is to employ the method that he calls "thick description." What this involves is a dense, layered hermeneutic writing that seeks to unravel the "structures of signification" in the cultural object under study. The key to this approach is acknowledging the distance that separates the interpreter, in his or her particular historical moment, from that object. This is, of course, an essentially literary mode of interpretation applied to new cultural objects. With the adoption of "thick description" as a method for the analysis of literary texts by new historicists and others, the wheel has turned full circle: a literary hermeneutic that had been appropriated by ethnographers has been rediscovered by literary scholars. This reimportation has transformed literary studies by expanding the range of objects to which its hermeneutic could be applied. Indeed, Neumann and Weigel claim that the semiotic model of culture — which implies that culture is readable — has gone some way to overcoming the crisis of confidence in literary studies, which can, after all, claim the skills of close reading as its stock-in-trade.<sup>13</sup>

The advantage of the culture-as-text model is that it puts texts (in the traditional sense) on the same footing for the purpose of interpretation as the cultural practices in which they are enmeshed. Because this model requires us to view all forms of cultural practice as bearing significance, we can show how they transmit meaning to, and receive meaning from, other cultural texts, such as literary works. We can show, for instance, how cultural "texts," such as the ritualized practices of journeymen, are appropriated and transformed in literature. Another advantage of this paradigm is that it allows us to view the human subject as a cultural construct, thereby

acknowledging that subjectivity is to some degree the product of a particular historical moment. To this extent the model represents an improvement on humanist essentialism, which appeals to some notionally invariant human nature. Oddly enough, some new historicists have claimed to experience the concept of man-as-artifact as oppressive. Stephen Greenblatt, for instance, once seemed to contemplate this revelation with a sense of despair. Near the end of his influential work *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* he writes: "In all my texts and documents there were, so far as I could tell, no moments of pure, unfettered subjectivity; indeed the human subject itself came to seem remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society."<sup>14</sup> But the news that we are culturally determined beings does not imply our essential unfreedom. Nor does it require that we renounce completely the notion of human universals, since what makes us human is arguably our very ability to assimilate culture — and our utter inability to survive without it.<sup>15</sup>

The value of new historicism and cultural materialism as critical methods lies in their recognition of the interpenetration of literary and non-literary discourses, an insight that has enabled critics to set up productive exchanges between literary and non-literary texts. There are, however, problems associated with both methods, problems that I will now seek to address. First, in their insistence on the textuality of culture, both new historicism and cultural materialism deny that the literary text has a privileged status; it is seen as just one more text among a plethora of others. It is a key tenet of new historicism that literary and non-literary texts "circulate inseparably."<sup>16</sup> Similarly, cultural materialists take the view that the literary text cannot be considered in isolation from other social practices.<sup>17</sup> The problem with the refusal to differentiate literary works from other texts lies in the failure to take account of the aesthetic moment in such texts. I will want to assert here that literary texts, as aesthetically formed artifacts, differ from others in respect of the multiplicity of meanings they are capable of bearing within them, a potential that accounts for such texts' resistance to paraphrase. This hard-to-define aesthetic quality is, moreover, one of the reasons why certain literary works prove very durable, surviving in very different historical conditions from the ones in which they were composed. (Canonical texts do not achieve their status merely because they have been selected by an authority, but also through selection by large numbers of readers.) Yet it is precisely the aesthetic dimension that practitioners of the new historically grounded methods have shied away from, perhaps out of a desire to distance themselves from the legacy and the methods of formalist criticism.<sup>18</sup>

One criticism that has been leveled at new historicism specifically is that, while its practitioners stress the textuality of culture, they are less keen to acknowledge the historicity of texts. Such criticism grew more intense with Greenblatt's decision to abandon the term "new historicism" in favor



of “cultural poetics” as a label for his own critical praxis.<sup>19</sup> This perception is due no doubt to the undeniable fact that most new historicist studies operate with a synchronic perspective. Their aim is generally to probe the texture of a particular historical period — the English Renaissance, for example — by reading those literary and non-literary texts that coexist in it and constitute its discourse. At the same time, new historicists emphasize the uniqueness of the period under study, its distinctness from the present. In this they follow the founding father of nineteenth-century historicism, Herder, who insists that each age must be understood on its own terms.<sup>20</sup> Taken to extremes, this emphasis on distinctiveness and separateness can make each historical age appear like a backwater, cut off from the flux of history, “out of the swing of the sea,” as it were. Yet there is nothing specific to new historicism, which is in any case a loose bundle of practices, that requires the interpreter to become mired in synchronicity. I will not want to take such a perspective here, where the task is to link changes in the function of the motif to historical change. Indeed, the study of a literary motif positively demands attention to the diachronic aspect, a point to which I will return presently.

This tendency toward synchronicity is connected with a prevailing view in new historicism, namely that literary works function in every historical period as instantiations of power. Although new historicists admit the possibility of subversion in literature, they maintain that it is inevitably co-opted by dominant power structures. They go so far as to claim that the dominant power structures of a society require the production of subversion in literature since this provides a justification for the exercise of power. Subversive moments in literature are seen as reinforcing the categories of the society by reproducing them. Here, too, I will part company with most new historicist critics and assert that aesthetic works can indeed form reservoirs of heterodox ideas, if only because their capacity for harboring multiple meanings means that, even if they are produced with the intention of validating dominant belief systems, they cannot always succeed in doing so. Cultural materialists, of course, maintain that literature can provide an effective locus of subversion and resistance to hegemonic ideologies. This latter view is to be preferred, not least because it is less dogmatic to claim that literature can, in certain circumstances, function as a locus of resistance than it is to insist that all manifestations of subversion in literature are contained as soon as they appear. Does rejecting the containment hypothesis<sup>21</sup> so characteristic of much new historicist writing then entail a turn to a cultural materialist approach? Not necessarily. Embracing cultural materialism comes at the price of opting in to a particular political program: the job of the cultural materialist critic is to unearth subversive moments in literature so that these can be applied in contemporary political practice. This commitment to producing subversive readings of literary texts seems unduly restrictive as an interpretive practice.

New historicism is a broad enough church to allow us to adopt its best features without reproducing some of its more questionable tendencies. This is clear enough from the looseness of Greenblatt's early definition of new historicism as a critical practice that "challenges the assumptions that guarantee a secure distinction between 'literary foreground' and 'political background,' or, more generally, between artistic production and other kinds of social production"<sup>22</sup> a definition with which the founder of cultural materialism, Greenblatt's sometime mentor, Raymond Williams, would surely have concurred.

The study of motifs is preeminently suited to demonstrating the historicity of literature. Because the motif is a schema, a semantic framework, it is capable of acquiring new meaning at different historical moments, while at the same time carrying over residual meanings from earlier periods. In this respect the literary motif is a trans-historical element that acts to bind distinct periods together. The motif is therefore not just a site of innovation but a vehicle for "cultural memory."<sup>23</sup> Its intertextuality is not confined to a particular synchronic space but operates along the time-axis, so motifs play a key part in transmitting meaning from the literature (and culture) of a particular age to another. As the motif undergoes successive reinterpretations, it accumulates potential significances, which then become available to the next generation of authors. In the *Lehrjahre*, for example, Goethe provides a new interpretation of the figure of the wanderer as a man who undergoes a particular kind of education, one that prepares him to become a functioning member of a modern society. This new association of the figure of the wanderer with the discourse of education proved highly productive, spawning other literary wanderers also embarked on the *Bildungsweg*. One thinks of the protagonists of *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen* and *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* as well as those of later variations on the theme of *Bildung*, such as Keller's *Der grüne Heinrich*.

On the face of it, the adoption of the culture-as-text paradigm is problematical, for it commits us to one of two available models of intertextuality, namely the global model of poststructuralism, which regards each and every text as forming part of a global intertext. The problem with this model, which effectively equates intertextuality with textuality plain and simple, is that it lacks the heuristic usefulness of the more restricted structuralist or hermeneutic model. This latter model restricts the term "intertextuality" to conscious, intentional, and marked references within a text to other texts. But, as Manfred Pfister argues, committing to one of these models does not require us to discard the other; rather, the phenomena that the restricted model seeks to grasp may be seen as striking instances of global intertextuality.<sup>24</sup> In an effort to mediate between these two models Pfister proposes a number of criteria for determining the intensity of intertextual references.<sup>25</sup> Pfister does not say so, but this scaling of

intertextuality enables us also to assert the privileged status of literary texts vis-à-vis other texts, for literary texts are capable of a degree of intertextual intensity not attainable by other text types.<sup>26</sup> Consider the criterion of auto-reflexivity: literary texts have a unique capacity not only to refer explicitly to pre-texts but also to reflect upon their own intertextuality and, more generally, on their own mode of representation. The same holds for the criterion of dialogicity: literary texts are unrivalled in their ability to isolate mythemes (significant elements of myth) and other ideological elements from their original contexts, to subject them to scrutiny, and to place them in dialogue with new contexts, thereby relativizing them.

At this point I will rehearse those aspects of the critical practices of new historicism and cultural materialism by which this study will be guided, and the tendencies it will seek to avoid:

- “thick description,” the use of a hermeneutic mode of writing that draws on a range of discursive sources in an effort to feel its way into a past era and evoke its texture.

- the idea that literary texts are embedded in wider discursive ensembles within which they can act as storehouses of social significance. They receive contemporary meaning from the discursive context but can also act as transmitters of uncontemporary meaning into that context. Motifs play an important part in keeping such uncontemporary meanings alive in literary discourse.

- the idea that subjectivity is to some degree constituted by the discursive ensemble of a given epoch.

- dissent from the new-historicist assertion that literary and non-literary texts “circulate inseparably” and the tendency to ignore the specific qualities of aesthetically formed texts.

- dissent from the new-historicist view that literature creates world-views and cements power relations rather than interrogating and reflecting critically upon them.

In conclusion it will be necessary to make a few remarks concerning the selection of the texts upon which this study is based. Apart from the matter of genre, two general principles guided this selection. First, it was considered desirable to get as even a distribution of materials across the nineteenth century as possible, in order to judge whether the motif underwent changes in function in this period. Second, the aim was to locate the motif in the broadest possible discursive context: to this end works were selected on the basis of their apparent affinity for certain discourses, among them Romantic aesthetics and *Naturphilosophie*, education/anthropology, nationality/cosmopolitanism, and social marginality. These categories have a purely heuristic status, the intention being to draw out and amplify as many different functional aspects of the motif as possible, and not to imply that individual poetic works need to be seen as belonging to one sphere of discourse or another.

Perhaps something needs to be said about the selection of the works themselves. The inclusion of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1796) and *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre oder die Entsagenden* (1821/29) needs no justification in a study of this nature: these two novels influenced as none other what has been called the "German tradition of self-cultivation,"<sup>27</sup> and in both the wanderer motif is intimately bound up with the theme of *Bildung*. The complex of wandering and education recurs in Tieck's *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen* (1798) and Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802), which deserve to be recognized as foundational texts for a generation of Romantic artists and scientists. Heine's *Harzreise* (1826) and Fontane's *Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg* (1861–81) are each in their own way concerned with the matter of "Vaterländische Wanderungen,"<sup>28</sup> domestic tourism used in the constitution of national identity. Heine ironizes the practice, questioning its complicity in a chauvinist strain of nationalism; Fontane affirms it as a means of recovering the values of the past. Büchner's *Lenz* (1839) contributes to political discourse in a more oblique manner, attacking the aesthetic norms that underpin bourgeois ideology. Four novels form the basis of the final chapter: the context for the first, Gotthelf's *Jakobs Wanderungen* (1846–47) is the pauperization crisis in the turbulent years prior to the March 1848 revolution. Like Heine's and (to some extent) Fontane's works, this novel represents an attempt to intervene directly in the contemporary political situation. Gotthelf's target readership is made up of politicized artisans, a highly mobile group, which the conservative author fears as a potential source of social revolution. Holtei's *Vagabunden* (1851) is torn between the desire to embrace the actor's life and an acute awareness of the stigma of its unbourgeois character: against its author's intentions the work reveals the normative pressures bearing down on those whose lives were at odds with a nascent ideology of the settled life. Finally, Raabe's *Abu Telfan* (1867) and *Die Akten des Vogelsangs* (1895) are included for their exemplary use of the wanderer motif as an intertextual element in narratives that question the prevailing ideologies of their day.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although the wanderer motif is a prominent element in lyric genres (one has only to think of Eichendorff or of Wilhelm Müller's *Winterreise*), its function in those genres arguably merits a separate study, one capable of doing justice to the specificities of lyric form. Nevertheless, instantiations of the motif in lyric poetry are occasionally referred to here in order to illustrate the motif's general literary value in a given period.

<sup>2</sup> David Blackbourn, *History of Germany, 1780–1918: The Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> *Duden: Das große Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, 6 vols. (Mannheim: Bibliographisches Institut, 1976–81), 6:2838.

<sup>4</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 20 vols. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989), 19:868–69.

<sup>5</sup> In *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1796). See Harald Fricke et al., eds., *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft*, 3rd ed., 3 vols. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997–2003), 2:638–43; here, 639; According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the earliest attested use of the term “motif” in English to refer to a literary work occurs in 1851.

<sup>6</sup> Elisabeth Frenzel, *Stoff- Motiv- und Symbolforschung*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1970), 28.

<sup>7</sup> Fricke, *Reallexikon*, 2:638.

<sup>8</sup> Bruno Schmidlin, *Das Motiv des Wanderns bei Goethe* (Ph.D. diss., University of Bern, 1953; repr., Winterthur, Switzerland: Keller, 1963). Hans-Jürgen Skorna, *Das Wandermotiv im Roman der Goethezeit* (Ph.D. diss., University of Cologne, 1961).

<sup>9</sup> Wolfgang Albrecht, “Kultur und Physiologie des Wanderns: Einleitende Vorüberlegungen eines Germanisten zur interdisziplinären Erforschung der deutschsprachigen Wanderliteratur,” in *Wanderzwang — Wanderlust: Formen der Raum und Sozialerfahrung zwischen Aufklärung und Frühindustrialisierung*, ed. Wolfgang Albrecht and Hans-Joachim Kertscher (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1999), 1–12; here, 11).

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 1994), 308–9.

<sup>11</sup> Hans-Joachim Althaus, “Bürgerliche Wanderlust: Anmerkungen zur Entstehung eines Kultur- und Bewegungsmusters,” in Albrecht and Kertscher, *Wanderzwang*, 25–43.

<sup>12</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 5. Julia Kristeva, *Sémeiotiké: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969). The term *texte général* from Jacques Derrida, “Avoir l’oreille de la philosophie,” in *Écarts: Quatre essais à propos de Jacques Derrida*, ed. Lucette Finas et al. (Paris: Fayard, 1973), 301–12; here, 310.

<sup>13</sup> Gerhard Neumann and Sigrid Weigel, eds., *Lesbarkeit der Kultur: Literaturwissenschaften zwischen Kulturtechnik und Ethnographie* (Munich: Fink, 2000), 9–16 (introduction).

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1980), 256.

<sup>15</sup> This is an argument made by Geertz, who asserts that the internalization of a particular culture (understood as a semiotic system) is the essential prerequisite for thought itself: “Human thinking is primarily an overt act conducted in terms of the objective materials of the common culture, and only secondarily a private matter” (*The Interpretation of Cultures*, 83).

<sup>16</sup> Harold Aram Veese, *The New Historicism Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 2.

<sup>17</sup> The view of Raymond Williams has defined the cultural materialist position: “We cannot separate literature and art from other kinds of social practice, in such

a way as to make them subject to quite special and distinct laws.” *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 44.

<sup>18</sup> Both new historicism and cultural materialism have been taken to task for getting away from the close reading of texts. For example, J. Hillis Miller has complained that new historicism is “an exhilarating experience of liberation from the obligation to read.” *Theory Now and Then* (Hemel Hempstead, UK: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 309–27; here, 313.

<sup>19</sup> See Richard Wilson and Richard Dutton, eds., *New Historicism and Renaissance Drama* (Harlow: Longman, 1992), 228, for their discussion of the concept of cultural poetics. Cultural poetics is the name given to New Historicist practice by Greenblatt after 1988. Many critics have seen this relabeling of the critical praxis as signaling a move toward formalism, a new tendency to hypostatize culture as an autonomous semiotic system. For Kiernan Ryan, editor of *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism: A Reader* (London: Arnold, 1996), xiv, this move “exchanges a stress on the historicity of texts for a concern with the textuality of culture.” John Brannigan, however, maintains that the change of name is not accompanied by any identifiable shifts in the critical praxis, thereby implying that a tendency to downplay the historicity of texts has always been a part of new historicist criticism. See *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (London: Macmillan, 1998), “Cultural Poetics: After the New Historicism?” 83–93.

<sup>20</sup> See Isaiah Berlin, “Herder and the Enlightenment,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (London: Pimlico, 1998), 359–435. From Herder, too, comes the gesture of “feeling oneself into” (*sich einfühlen*) a foreign culture or remote historical epoch by the act of interpretive empathy so characteristic of Geertz and other ethnographers (Berlin, “Herder and the Enlightenment,” 389).

<sup>21</sup> A hypothesis first formulated in Stephen Greenblatt’s 1981 essay “Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion; Henry IV and Henry V,” in *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. Jonathon Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, 2nd ed. (1985; repr., Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 1994), 18–47.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, “Introduction: The Forms of Power,” *Genre* 7 (1982): 3–6; here, 6.

<sup>23</sup> This term from Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, 5th ed. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2005). Assmann’s concept “cultural memory” is derived from Maurice Halbwachs’s theory of “mémoire collective,” which has as its main thesis that no memory is possible without recourse to those external frames of reference (Halbwachs: “cadres sociaux”) by which we fix and retrieve our remembrances (Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 34–48). Assmann builds on this thesis to assert the primacy of writing among these frames of reference as a source of social meaning.

<sup>24</sup> Manfred Pfister, “Konzepte der Intertextualität,” in *Intertextualität: Formen, Funktionen, anglistische Fallstudien*, ed. Ulrich Broich and Manfred Pfister (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1985), 1–30. Cautious adoption of the global model of intertextuality need not imply acceptance of poststructuralist theorems concerning the demise of the subject. For a rebuttal of postmodern attempts to deconstruct individual subjectivity see Manfred Frank, *Die Unhintergebarkeit von*

*Individualität: Reflexionen über Subjekt, Person und Individuum aus Anlaß ihrer "postmodernen" Toterklärung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986).

<sup>25</sup> The six criteria are: *referentiality*: the degree to which a text refers to and quotes from its pre-text and elaborates or comments upon it; *communicativity*: the degree of intentionality of the intertextual reference; *autoreflexivity*: the extent to which a text thematizes its own intertextuality; *structurality*: the extent to which a pre-text serves as the structural basis for a whole text; *selectivity*: the pointedness with which an element from the pre-text is referred to, and *dialogicity*, the semantic or ideological tension between the original and new contexts (Pfister, "Konzepte der Intertextualität," 25–30).

<sup>26</sup> Wolfgang Riedel warns of the dangers inherent in the "culture as text" paradigm, which tends to underestimate the autonomy of the literary text, reducing it to the level of a mere "document." Deploing the use of this metaphor, Riedel argues that literature is better regarded as a "commentary" on its proper culture, a role that its characteristic aesthetic and reflexive distance enables it to fulfill. Riedel, "Literarische Anthropologie: Eine Unterscheidung," in *Wahrnehmen und Handeln: Perspektiven einer Literaturanthropologie*, ed. Wolfgang Braungart, Klaus Ridder, and Friedmar Apel (Bielefeld, Germany: Aisthesis, 2004), 337–66, esp. 350–52.

<sup>27</sup> Walter Horace Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation: "Bildung" from Humboldt to Thomas Mann* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975).

<sup>28</sup> Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, *Deutsches Volkstum* (1810; repr. Leipzig: Reclam, n.d.), 249–53.



# 1: The Wanderer as the Subject of Education

## “Steile Gegenden” and “Umwege”: Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795–96)

### The Bildungsroman: An Obsolete Interpretive Model?

IN 1984 HANS-JÜRGEN SCHINGS PROPOSED reading *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* using the category of “Heilung” or “Genesung,” offering this as an alternative to what he called the “erstarre[t]e Modell *Bildung*.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the energies of Germanists in the post-1945 period were for a long time consumed in an inconclusive debate as to whether Goethe’s novel should really be called a *Bildungsroman*. The *Lehrjahre* has been regarded as the archetype of that genre since the term was first applied to it by the academic Karl Morgenstern.<sup>2</sup> It was to be expected that dissenting voices would make themselves heard just when the German tradition of self-cultivation appeared irreparably tarnished by the recent experience of totalitarianism. *Bildung* was seen as an institution deeply implicated in the beginnings of a modernity that had so recently come to a catastrophic end. Thus commentators like Karl Schlechta felt the need to separate Goethe from a compromised tradition and to portray him as a farseeing critic of the destructive tendencies within it. Similarly, in the 1970s a new generation of critics felt compelled to disavow the link between Wilhelm Meister and *Bildung*. Stefan Blessin’s reading of the novel as a document of bourgeois false-consciousness whose protagonist has “nichts gelernt” is characteristic of the ideology-driven criticism then prevalent.<sup>3</sup>

Doubtless the new readings helped to overcome the discipline’s one-sided fixation on the theme of education and cast new light on “die erstaunliche und unerhörte Mannigfaltigkeit”<sup>4</sup> of a work that had exerted an unparalleled influence on the German novel in the nineteenth century. They did not, however, succeed in overturning the dominant interpretive paradigm: rather, they enriched it. There remain compelling grounds for retaining that model. In the first place, many of the earliest and most incisive interpreters of the *Lehrjahre* — Schiller, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Christian Gottfried Körner — invoke the category of *Bildung* in reference to it, either explicitly or implicitly. Second, and this is significant for the following discussion, both the motif of a wandering protagonist and the major theme of education are taken up by those contemporary authors who had studied the work closely and were receptive to its influences: Ludwig Tieck



and Friedrich von Hardenberg. Moreover, the “anthropological turn” in the criticism of the work ushered in by Schings, with his emphasis on the themes of melancholia, suffering, and healing, by no means represents a break with the interpretive term *Bildung* but is eminently compatible with it. Schings’s most recent work has drawn on insights from the study of late Enlightenment anthropology to arrive at a fuller understanding of the discourse on education as it appears in the novel.<sup>5</sup>

It is this approach — reading *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* in the context of the contemporary discourse on anthropology — that will be taken here in an effort to shed light on the function of the wanderer motif and its connection with the theme of *Bildung*. The guiding concept of the reading, “anthropology,” should be understood as that philosophical discipline which came to prominence in a late phase of the Enlightenment — partly as an attempt to rehabilitate man’s sensual nature in the face of the earlier deification of reason by speculative philosophy. This was a discipline that sought to comprehend man as unity of body and soul, of nature and reason; that is to say, its primary focus was on man as a natural being.<sup>6</sup> It differs from idealistic or transcendental philosophy in that it regards both of these poles — however they are described — as equally important aspects of what it means to be human. As such it is concerned with human nature, with the physical being. We may take our warrant for such a reading from the words given to Wilhelm Meister — “der Mensch ist dem Menschen das Interessanteste und sollte ihn vielleicht ganz allein interessieren” — a paraphrase of Alexander Pope’s dictum: “The proper study of mankind is man.”<sup>7</sup>

### Wilhelm Meister as Pedestrian: The Body Language of Autonomy

In chapter 10 of the first book we hear for the first time that Wilhelm Meister, whom up to then we have known only as a “jungen, zärtlichen, unbefiederten Kaufmannssohn” (10), unremarkable save for his unrestrained enthusiasm for the theater, intends to set out on a “Wanderung in die Welt” (35). Although the journey relates to the pursuit of what he sees as his “Bestimmung zum Theater” — at the side of his actress lover Mariane — it is evident that no clear purpose is in view; instead of a plan of action we have a jumble of ideas, “ein Gemälde auf Nebelgrund.” Indeed the intention to depart seems to derive at least as much from a negative impulse — to escape — as it does from any will to self-realization. The youth desires “sich aus dem stockenden, schleppenden bürgerlichen Leben herauszureißen” (the note struck here recalls Thomas Mann’s remark about the *Lehrjahre* being the “Sublimierung des Abenteuer-Romans”): he wants to be rid, not only of the stuffy atmosphere of his father’s house, but also “von jeder angenehmen Erinnerung.”<sup>8</sup> This recurring desire to make a decisive break, to begin afresh, unencumbered by memories, will finally be revealed as folly by the Abbé.

At the outset, then, we have a youth on the verge of breaking with his past and casting off the pressures and responsibilities of his social station. A little later we learn something that puts a different complexion on the intended departure, namely that the initial impetus comes not from Wilhelm but from his father, who seeks to prepare his son for commercial life by sending him on a business trip. Because the youth sets out with an agenda that, however ill-defined, is radically different from that of his father, his journey carries within it the seeds of conflict. The unapproved pursuit of a theatrical career is a tacit rebellion (“unterlassene Revolte”); the son avoids confrontation with his father, pursuing his own ends by subterfuge.<sup>9</sup> For Stadler, the causes of the rebellion lie in the thwarted aesthetic ambitions of the youth: first Meister Senior deprives his son of an educational resource by selling off his own father’s collection of *objets d’art*, and later he communicates his disapproval both of the puppet theater and of the stage proper. Stadler’s reading is compelling because it establishes a link between the psychological dimension of the father-son conflict and the wider rebellion against patriarchy, including the French Revolution. It was against the backdrop of that trauma that the work to transform the fragmentary *Theatralische Sendung* into the *Lehrjahre* took place (1794–96). Although its setting in the previous decade allows it to avoid having to treat the trauma directly, the work is preoccupied with the consequences of that rupture.<sup>10</sup> We will return to that theme later, but for the moment it is necessary only to note that Wilhelm Meister’s surreptitious rebellion manifests itself not only in his inappropriate choice of career but also in the nomadic existence that this entails: the journey becomes a substitute for revolt: because he dare not change his circumstances by tackling his father, the youth opts for a change of place.<sup>11</sup> The option for an existence in the company of vagabond players is, in part, a flouting of bourgeois norms.

Wilhelm’s tacit rebellion is in part a refusal of behaviors appropriate to his social standing, a refusal that extends to the mode of travel itself. Resuming his travels after his separation from Mariane, Wilhelm sets out on horseback. As a member of Melina’s troupe, however, he becomes a pedestrian. The symbolic aspect of this new — and, for the 1780s, socially marked — mode of travel is apparent from the hero’s musings on the appropriate garb for a walker early in book 4:

Er fing nun an, über seine Kleidung nachzudenken. Er fand, daß ein Westchen, über das man im Notfall einen kurzen Mantel wüf, für einen Wanderer eine sehr angemessene Tracht sei. Lange gestrickte Beinkleider und ein Paar Schnürstiefeln schienen die wahre Tracht des Fußgängers. Dann verschaffte er sich eine schöne seidene Schärpe, die er zuerst unter dem Vorwande, den Leib warm zu halten, umband; dagegen befreite er seinen Hals von der Knechtschaft einer Binde. . . . Ein runder Hut mit einem bunten Bunde und einer großen Feder machte die Maskerade vollkommen. (210)

These reflections reveal a newly fledged actor's exaggerated concern with appearances, but, beyond this, the choice of clothing signals a rejection of traditional bourgeois forms. Both his mode of travel and his clothing are imbued with revolutionary symbolism, registered by the narrator: thus the wanderer frees his neck "von der Knechtschaft einer Binde." Naturally, his appearance and behavior are here presented in thoroughly ironical terms: the whole exercise is a "Maskerade," a form of playacting founded on self-deception. Pedestrianism had, however, in the context of the Enlightenment project, acquired a symbolic aspect. The upright bearing and independence of the walker were themselves emblems of the process of self-emancipation. For this reason, walking — a travel mode formerly regarded as inappropriate for the bourgeois — was then undergoing a revaluation, becoming a key symbolic activity of that social class. In the essay *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?* (1784), Kant makes use of the metaphor of pedestrian progress to signify the process of emancipation: "Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbst verschuldeten Unmündigkeit."<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere in the same essay, Kant makes reference to the fetters of dependency ("Fußschellen einer immerwährenden Unmündigkeit"). In the hands of Kant, the self-directed physical act of locomotion becomes a powerful symbol of the self-directed activity of thought and hence of the dictum "Bestimme dich aus dir selbst."<sup>13</sup>

For Herder (who had studied under Kant at Königsberg) the connection between man's upright stance and gait and his vocation to reason was more than merely symbolic: it was material. In the first volume of the *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (also published in 1784), Herder derives man's possession of reason from the anatomical fact of his upright gait. In doing so, he accepts a thesis first proposed by the French materialist philosopher Claude Adrien Helvétius in his *De l'esprit* (1758). Herder writes:

Mit dem aufgerichteten Gange wurde der Mensch ein Kunstgeschöpf; denn durch ihn, die erste und schwerste Kunst, die ein Mensch lernet, wird er eingeweiht, alle zu lernen und gleichsam eine lebendige Kunst zu werden. Siehe das Tier! Es hat zum Teil schon Finger wie der Mensch; nur sind sie hier in einen Huf, dort in eine Klaue oder ein ander Gebilde eingeschlossen und durch Schwielen verderbet. Durch die Bildung zum aufrechten Gange bekam der Mensch freie und künstliche Hände, Werkzeuge der feinsten Hantierungen und eines immerwährenden Tastens nach neuen klaren Ideen. Helvétius hat sofern recht, daß die Hand dem Menschen ein großes Hülfsmittel seiner Vernunft gewesen.<sup>14</sup>

Man is distinguished from the animals, according to the above, by his upright gait, an essential precondition for possessing hands capable of grasping and manipulating tools, but also for the free gaze with which he surveys his surroundings. Herder believes that this structural disposition to use tools is the source of man's superior intelligence. Of course, the